

BECKETT
Waiting for Godot

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CHAPTER 8

GODOT IN POLITICAL CONTEXT

A casualty of *Waiting for Godot's* classic status has been the *provocative* quality of the play, which seemed so important to Blin (see chapter 3). Too often a production will be mounted precisely because the play has become a *safe* bet, for both theatres and theatre-goers: theatre managers find it safe because the cast is small and the set undemanding; theatre-goers are safe in the knowledge that they are witnessing one of the great plays in the modern repertoire. And yet, despite its reassuring status as a modern classic, the play has not entirely lost its provocative quality, as is demonstrated by a number of cases where it has been performed in situations of political oppression. The quality that held the attention of the San Quentin prisoners – its ability to speak, like a parable, to their particular condition – has repeatedly appeared to lend the play special relevance in oppressive circumstances, such as South Africa under apartheid, Sarajevo under siege by Serbian forces, or Palestine under Israeli occupation.

THE PRODUCTION BY VASILJE POPOVIĆ, BELGRADE, 1956

Already in the 1950s the play had been banned or considered subversive by regimes as far apart as Catholic Ireland and the Eastern European Communist bloc. A representative example is that of the first Yugoslav production in Belgrade. The text was translated by Andreja Milićević at the suggestion of Dušan Matić, an important Yugoslav writer, who had seen Blin's production in 1953. He then showed it to the director Vasilje Popović, who persuaded Prerag Dinulović, artistic director of the Belgrade Drama Theatre, to allow

him to begin rehearsals in January 1954. Dinulović did not include an announcement of the production in the official repertoire of the theatre, however, being nervous of official reaction to a work which was considered 'decadent' by the Communist Party's writers' union, whose job it was to filter influences from the West. Within the theatre itself, opinion was sharply divided about whether the play should be staged.

When the day provisionally set aside for the first performance arrived, the management of the theatre were so nervous that they decided that the performance should go ahead but with no audience present: only employees of the theatre would be allowed into the auditorium. This provoked strong reactions from intellectuals, who gathered in front of the theatre to demonstrate and to protest against the decision. Although security guards had been posted at all entrances to the theatre, some members of the public managed to get in and hid behind the seats in the upper circle until they were spotted and thrown out. Others managed to gain entrance through a window which had been left open and to see the play through to the end. The general effect was to create the impression of a major artistic event taking place in Belgrade, and this in turn persuaded the management to ban all further performances. Their weakness may be explained, if not excused, by knowing that they depended for their livelihood on the approval of the government censor, and that they had recently been forced to withdraw Jean Anouilh's comedy *Le Bal des voleurs* (*Thieves' Carnival*) from the repertoire. The reason given was that Anouilh portrayed his thieves as nice, positive characters, with the result that real thieves who came to see the play would never desire to mend their ways.

But a momentum had built up around the production of *Godot* and the actors kept looking for a way to present the production to those who had not been lucky enough to get in to the one performance at the Belgrade Drama Theatre. In June an offer came from the painter Mica Popović to use his studio for a private performance with no officials present, and so the second performance

took place for an invited audience of about a hundred, mainly people from theatrical and literary circles. One writer who was present commented:

This banned *Godot* was and is the most exciting play I have ever attended. We were all afraid because we were doing something forbidden and we were all happy because we were able to watch something that, we felt then, would become part of our society and of our civilisation.¹

This performance again created much discussion and demand for more performances. The French Ambassador offered to make space for the performance in the Embassy (which, as 'French territory', fell outside the jurisdiction of the Belgrade authorities), but the director declined, feeling that it should be performed on a Yugoslav stage or not at all. He had to wait a further two years, until the pressures of the Cold War had eased a little and Yugoslavia's policy of opening itself to Western influences was more firmly established. The original production of *Waiting for Godot*, with the same director and actors, was sanctioned as the inaugural production for a new small-scale experimental theatre known as Atelier 212 (after its audience capacity of 212). It took place on 17 December 1956 with the following cast: Vladimir: Ljubivoje Tadić; Estragon: Bata Paskaljević; Lucky: Mica Tomić; Pozzo: Rade Marković; Boy: Ratislav Jović. It was the first production to take place in a country of the Eastern European bloc² and enjoyed considerable critical success. Over the following decades it was frequently revived with the same actors in the roles of Vladimir and Estragon.

THE PRODUCTION BY SUSAN SONTAG, SARAJEVO, 1993

The importance of the first Yugoslav production to the intellectuals of Belgrade was not so much located in the meaning of the play itself as in the way it stood for a tradition of experimental work in Western Europe where freedom of thought was guaranteed. But it would not

be true to suggest that any other experimental work might have served just as well, since *Godot's* central strategy of drawing its audience into the existential experience of waiting, and denying them a coherent plot, spoke eloquently to those early audiences of the absurdities and frustration of life under a totalitarian regime. Forty years later, Susan Sontag chose to direct a production of *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo for similar reasons: the play seemed to have special resonance for the inhabitants of a town going through the madness of so-called 'ethnic cleansing'. Her production, put on in Sarajevo in August 1993, at the height of the Serb bombardment of the city, poses with peculiar starkness the question of the political relevance that the play may acquire in special circumstances. This production has also been the subject of several articles by Beckett scholars on the play's relationship to political realities.³

Sontag chose to direct a play as an act of solidarity with the people of the besieged city: 'It was the only one of the three things I do – write, make films and direct in the theater – which yields something that would exist only in Sarajevo, that would be made and consumed there.'⁴ It was seen by her as an act of defiance against a world which appeared content to stand by and watch while all normal conditions of life were destroyed for the Sarajevans – indoors, their sources of electricity and water were cut off and they were subject to constant bombardment while outside there was the added danger of sniper fire. In these circumstances, to put on a theatre performance was to refuse to accept the brutal imposition of cruel conditions by Serbian soldiers. Her principal concern, in the light of this priority, was to involve as many of the local theatre professionals as possible. The siege of their city had brought normal theatre life to a standstill and so they were only too keen to become involved in the project. Despite the difficulties of getting to and from rehearsals each day, and despite their exhaustion from undernourishment and lack of sleep, the play gave them something to take their minds off the dreadful daily struggle for survival. Sontag therefore cast as much according to the actors' needs as to the requirements of the play.

In order to include the maximum number of performers, she decided to have three parallel couples of Vladimir/Estragon on stage: at the centre were two male actors, but these were 'flanked on the left side of the stage by two women and on the right by a woman and a man – three variations on the theme of the couple'.⁵ Her Pozzo was Ines Fančović, described by Sontag as 'a stout older woman wearing a large broad-brimmed black hat, who sat silently, imperiously, in the corner of the room', while her Lucky was Admir ('Atko') Glamočak, 'a gaunt, lithe man of thirty whom I'd admired as Death in *Alceste*'.⁶ The thinking behind Sontag's production was straightforwardly humanistic: she wanted the casting to be gender-blind on the grounds that the characters are representative figures and thus not limited to one gender or the other. Rehearsals were held in the dark in the absence of electricity, with candles and flashlights the only source of illumination. Many of the stage effects were almost invisible and it was hard for the actors to do 'something as simple as put on or take off their bowler hats at the same time'.⁷

Everything in Sontag's direction was devised to give added poignancy to the fact that the production was taking place in Sarajevo. She commented on Lucky's 'Think', for example: 'I wanted Atko to deliver Beckett's aria about divine apathy and indifference, about a heartless, petrifying world, as if it made perfect sense. Which it does, especially in Sarajevo.'⁸ Her reason for choosing *Godot* in the first place was that 'Beckett's play, written over forty years ago, seems written for and about Sarajevo.'⁹ Avoiding the tendency to perform the play in muted style, she chose to encourage performances that were 'full of anguish, of immense sadness, and toward the end, violence'.¹⁰ When the production opened for public performances they still had only candles to light the stage and so the audience huddled close to the stage on two rows of benches so as to be able to see something of what was going on. Only the first act of the play was performed and two performances were given, at 2 p.m. and at 4 p.m. – it was too dangerous for anyone, actors or audience, to be out at night. Sontag summed up the experience by saying, 'People ask me if Sarajevo ever

seemed to me unreal while I was there. The truth is . . . it seems the most real place in the world.'¹¹

Sontag's production cannot really be studied for its solutions to the staging problems thrown up by the play, since it was responding to the situation rather than to the play. For everyone concerned in this enterprise, *Godot* was a potent metaphor for the frustrations and hopelessness of their situation. In addition, the play seemed (to Sontag, at least) to be dealing with the stark realities of life reduced to the most fundamental problems of human survival. The significance of the production lay simply in the doing of it, not so much in the artistic solutions chosen. As a result of this, the most interesting questions raised by the production are not whether she was right to truncate the play or to cast female actors or to introduce two extra couples, but concern rather the nature of the play's relationship to political realities and the extent to which any given production may be made to mirror a particular political reality. This question of mirroring is taken up by Elin Diamond, who points out that Lacan published 'The Mirror Phase' in 1949, the same year that Beckett completed *Godot*.¹² She argues that all political activity is rooted in processes of mirroring and identification that produce potentially violent divisions between those who are 'like ourselves' and those who are 'other'. She points out that Pozzo establishes contact with Vladimir and Estragon by recognising them as human beings 'like himself' and that this assimilation persuades the couple to collude in the oppression of Lucky. And so, her argument concludes, it is clear that *Godot* constitutes a serious exploration of political behaviour, but equally clear that to apply one given allegorical interpretation (whether political or otherwise) is to misunderstand its peculiar power and to fall into thought patterns that are just like Pozzo's.

Lois Oppenheim, discussing the same production, gives guarded approval to Sontag's gesture of humanist solidarity, but also quotes the Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić commenting on interventions by Sontag and other intellectuals: 'I don't doubt their good intentions. All I say is that if attention and understanding alone could save Sarajevo,

then it would have been saved long ago.' This is perhaps to say no more than that art works seldom change the course of history, and it is abundantly clear that Beckett himself rejected the theories of *littérature engagée* (committed literature) that were widely discussed in the 1940s and 1950s, when *Godot* was written and first produced. The evidence for this is not only his deliberate 'vaguening' of the plot and characters, but also his repeated refusal even to enter into discussion about allegorical interpretations of the play. To give the play a specific political meaning, it is necessary to alter it, however subtly, and Beckett always insisted that both his words and his stage directions should be respected. An example of the kind of alterations that are needed survives in the form of notes on the play made by Bertolt Brecht. His copy of the play contains cuts and additions designed to anchor the play in concrete social relations. Beside Estragon, he noted 'ein Prolet' ('a proletarian'), beside Vladimir, 'ein Intellektuel' ('an intellectual'), beside Lucky, 'ein Esel als Polizist' ('a donkey as policeman') and beside Pozzo, 'ein Gutbesitzer' ('a landowner'). Brecht also spoke to his assistant, Manfred Wekwerth, of a plan to counterpoint the play's demonstration of the futile waiting imposed on people by the capitalist West with films made in contemporary China, showing the positive developments that could be made by a worker's state.¹³

THE PRODUCTION BY DONALD HOWARTH,
CAPE TOWN, 1980

The additional use of film would clearly have resulted in something quite different from Beckett's play, but Brecht's identification of the four main characters' social status has some validity. A similar classification has been at the root of some extremely successful productions, notably one in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1980, and another in Haifa, Israel, in 1984, though neither of these productions followed a Brechtian interpretation. The first, directed by Donald Howarth

for the Baxter Theatre, Cape Town, toured to America and England, and played at the Old Vic in London in February 1981. During the 1970s, at the request of anti-apartheid campaigners in South Africa, Beckett (like many other writers) had specified that his plays could be performed only in multiracial theatres. Cape Town was home to the Space, one of the few theatres which managed to maintain a consistent multiracial policy, and Donald Howarth had directed several plays with multiracial casts there before he was invited to mount *Waiting for Godot* at the university of Cape Town's Baxter Theatre. His key casting decision was to give the roles of Vladimir and Estragon to black actors and those of Pozzo and Lucky to whites. Vladimir and Estragon were played by John Kani and Winston Ntshona respectively, actors who had worked together for many years and who had created, together with Athol Fugard, two exceptionally powerful denunciations of the apartheid regime: *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island*. Bill Flynn, who played Pozzo, had also performed in a play by Fugard, *Hello and Goodbye*, and Peter Piccolo, although he had not worked with Fugard, had performed in the same theatres as the others, especially the Space in Cape Town and the Market Theatre in Johannesburg.

The simple fact of the casting, at the height of apartheid in South Africa, made a powerful statement about the relationships between black and white. Winston Ntshona played Estragon as a simple, unemployed worker, while John Kani gave Vladimir a much more intellectual air, carrying a large black Bible and wearing a pair of steel-framed spectacles. Pozzo was a bulky figure, dressed to suggest a Boer farmer, and Lucky was a frail, bent slave, treated with extreme contempt by his master. The setting was a sandy mound, with a spindly tree and a few reeds. It made no attempt to localise the play in South Africa, though it could easily have been taken to represent a dusty corner of one of the 'homelands' in which the apartheid government obliged black South Africans to reside. The main political thrust of the performance, insofar as it had one at all, came from the dignity, warmth and profound humanity revealed in the performances of Ntshona and Kani, in contrast to Pozzo's

grossness and the febleness of Lucky. Donald Howarth, the director, had realised that the play would not benefit from being overly localised when he had discussed it with Beckett before the start of rehearsals:

I asked Beckett why no traffic passed by on the road, not even a bicycle. Beckett tilted his head to one side. 'It isn't a road,' he said. 'It's a track on wasteland.' Silence. Then, smiling as though seeing the two friends in that place, he leaned back and said, 'They play a series of games. When one has ended, they start another.' His smile lingered.¹⁴

This was the approach taken by the cast and it resulted in a richly inventive production. The experience of watching it was like witnessing a performance of a well-known piece of music by outstanding players.

THE PRODUCTION BY ILAN RONEN, HAIFA, 1984

The South African production had enormous power and pathos, especially as it did *not* try to impose a political interpretation, force the sympathies of its audience or change Beckett's text in any way. The quality of the ensemble acting was outstanding, the interplay between Vladimir and Estragon, in particular, benefiting from the depth of the relationship between Kani and Ntshona and from their long experience of oppression. It may have been this production which gave Ilan Ronen the idea for his staging at the Haifa Municipal Theatre in November 1984. Ronen cast two outstanding Arab actors, Yussef Abu-Varda and Muhram Khoury, in the roles of Vladimir and Estragon, with Israeli actors Ilan Toren and Doron Tavory taking the roles of Pozzo and Lucky. The Haifa Municipal Theatre's general manager, Noam Semel, and its artistic director, Omry Nitzan, had set up an Arabic stage as part of the complex, with the aim of mounting plays in Arabic for Arab audiences in Haifa. Its first production had been Fugard's *The Island*, with Abu-Varda and Khoury

taking the roles created by Kani and Ntshona. Ronen described their qualities:

Yussef Abu-Varda, whom I chose to cast as Vladimir, has fine rhetorical talent, a strong stage presence, and a very expressive, intense political involvement. In contrast, Muhram Khoury, whom I cast as Estragon, is an actor with the rare comic sense of a sad clown. He is very intuitive, human and warm, moderate in his political stance, very down-to-earth.¹⁵

Ronen explained that he had decided from the outset to situate the play in the political context of Israel in 1984. This was some years before the start of the 'Intifada' popular uprising against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, and a time when 'the situation of the Palestinians was at its lowest ebb'.¹⁶ His vision of Vladimir and Estragon as Arabs in the state of Israel was prompted by a situation which he described as follows:

Nearly all the construction workers in Israel were Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza. Each day, in the early morning hours, they left their homes, travelling in convoys to the cities of Israel. There they sat and waited for contractors and foremen to hire them. This created an absurd situation in which the country, including the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, was being built almost exclusively by Palestinians under the rule of Israeli occupation.¹⁷

In order to situate his production within this context, Ronen used a bilingual translation of the play by Anton Shammas, part Arabic, part Hebrew. Vladimir and Estragon spoke Arabic to each other but Hebrew to Pozzo. Lucky was portrayed as an elderly Arab of the old generation, speaking literary Arabic, in contrast to the two construction workers whose language was the vernacular.¹⁸ Pozzo spoke only Hebrew, apart from a few curses and orders to Lucky, given in Arabic. The setting was a construction site, making the identity of Vladimir and Estragon as labourers waiting for a job quite explicit. Upstage centre stood a wire framework emerging from a cement base – it was clearly waiting for more cement to be added in order to form a pillar

supporting the next storey of a building under construction. Further downstage were scattered some building blocks. A pile of three of these downstage right became Estragon's seat, standing in for the stone of Beckett's production, just as the wire framework stood in for the tree. Their costumes were realistic garb for construction workers: dirt-stained, baggy work-trousers, with an old army coat and woollen hat for Estragon and an anorak and cloth hat for Vladimir with its brim turned up (in a style reminiscent of Harlequin, according to Ronen, but equally reminiscent of the hat worn by Winston Ntshona in the South African production). Pozzo, by contrast, wore a light linen suit, white shirt and shoes and a panama hat. Lucky, in addition to his white Arab skull cap, wore an old, dusty brown jacket and trousers and was burdened with a gigantic suitcase, a coat on a coat-hanger, a smart brief case (from which Pozzo took his picnic) and several tubular containers of the kind used for architects' drawings and building plans, which he never put down. The performances of Abu-Varda and Khoury (the actors playing Vladimir and Estragon) were full of details designed to remind audiences of the subservient condition of Israeli Arabs. When Vladimir gave Estragon the carrot, for example, he went into a 'stylized pantomime of an Arab waiter bearing a loaded coffee tray'.¹⁹ Similarly, when Pozzo lit his pipe there was a short pantomime sequence in which Pozzo searched vaguely for somewhere to drop his spent match and finally Estragon held out his boot like an ashtray for Pozzo's convenience. Such details were relished by the public, which made its appreciation felt through frequent outbursts of laughter. This production showed how the play *can* become a vehicle for successful clowning performances, especially when an additional tension is present (caused by the references to social inequalities keenly felt by the audience). The actors made much of the minimal means presented to them by Beckett. Early in the first act, for example, when Vladimir finally manages to get his boot off, there was a brisk clowning sequence in which Vladimir, standing behind the seated Estragon, tried to grab the boot, while Estragon juggled it from side to side beneath his raised knees so that Vladimir could

not get it. This was 'capped' a few moments later when Estragon got up and Vladimir made a triumphant pounce on the boot, only to be knocked backwards in horror by the smell.

Moments of clowning such as this recurred throughout the performance, but were always focused on objects of central importance to Vladimir and Estragon, such as boots and hats, and were then picked up again and elaborated on at later points in the action in such a way as to create echoes and reminders, albeit of a rather different kind from those achieved in Beckett's own production. By such means the actors achieved a very successfully physicalised performance style in which themes of the body emerged with great clarity, both individually and collectively. An example of the former was Vladimir's prostate: the actor made much of his inability to laugh without suffering terrible pain and repeatedly burst into uproarious laughter only to double up in agony. An example of strong visual impact in a collective realisation of a 'body theme' was the scene in Act II where they all fall in a heap: this was performed with a good sense of the grotesque and raised much laughter from the audience. The interdependence of Vladimir and Estragon came across vividly at various points, especially in the last stages of Act I when they are trying to hang themselves. This was played in three distinct phases. First they danced around one another as each tried to push the other into position so that he could hang himself; next, Estragon grasped Vladimir by the hand and tried to pull him towards the wire scaffold while Vladimir resisted, so that they ended up leaning at forty-five degrees away from each other until the words 'bough break', when Estragon let go and Vladimir fell to the ground; and finally, each lifted the other in order to test their respective weights on the discussion about which of them is the heavier.

The warmth and humour established through the interdependent clowning of Vladimir and Estragon meant that the moments of anguish were less thoroughly realised. Rather than appearing oppressed by the frustration of their situation and the longing for night to fall, their suffering emerged much more strongly in their relationship with

Pozzo. The actor portraying Pozzo carried a very realistic whip, which he flexed repeatedly. His first entry was made with tremendous force and noise, and he used the initial exchange of names to browbeat Vladimir and Estragon, building to a climax of outrage on the words 'on my land', which clearly carried enormous force in the Arab-Israeli context. He continued to behave towards them with extreme condescension and his treatment of Lucky was brutally violent. After Lucky's 'Think', when his hat is finally removed and he collapses on the ground, 'Pozzo goes wild, brutally kicking Lucky in the shin and yelling in Arabic, "Get up, you pig!" while Gogo, the Arab construction worker, begs him to leave his fellow Arab alone, whimpering in Hebrew, "You'll kill him."' This scene, Ronen recalls, was one of those most often cited by critics who claimed that his production was insulting to the Israeli community.²⁰ However, the overall political meaning to emerge from this production was humanist rather than revolutionary. For Ronen, the political drift was encapsulated in the second act, when all four characters fall in a heap and then, after much uncertainty, help one another up again: 'The suggestion here seems to be that the two people are dependent on each other, for better or worse.'²¹

The production caused a furious public debate and several right-wing members of the Knesset called for it to be banned. Perhaps because of this, Shoshana Weitz decided to conduct an audience survey of those attending the performances. The survey covered three plays in the season's repertoire, all of which related to the socio-political reality in Israel in 1984/5. They were *The Optimist*, a monologue based on a story by the Israeli Arab author Emil Habibi and dealing directly with the personal and national identity of Israeli Arabs, *Freedom of the City* by Brian Friel and *Waiting for Godot*. The inclusion of Beckett's play in a repertoire dealing explicitly with political oppression must have affected audiences' perception of its meaning, especially since Anton Shammas' translation included occasional references to local political realities. The audience survey was devised with several aims, one of which was to gauge the influence of audience members' socio-political circumstances on their response, and especially on their

way of interpreting the play: would they see it as referring to the relations between Arabs and Israelis, or would they understand the play on a more abstract, poetic level? Three separate groups of viewers were surveyed: Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs and Palestinian Arabs. The study found that both groups of Arab spectators clearly perceived Pozzo as exploiter and oppressor of the other characters and related the situation of Vladimir and Estragon to their own circumstances, whereas the Jewish spectators described Vladimir, Estragon and Pozzo as 'any-ones' and the location as an abstract, generalised space.²² What this important and carefully organised audience survey seems to demonstrate is that, even in a production so clearly slanted towards the depiction of socio-political realities, audience responses are always highly selective, mirroring the preoccupations which they bring with them to the theatre. But the enthusiastic responses of Arab audience members also demonstrate that Beckett's play can speak powerfully to those who are conscious of being oppressed, as it did to the San Quentin prisoners.

THE PRODUCTION BY JOEL JOUANNEAU, NANTERRE, 1991

One final example is worth considering because it attempted to raise similar socio-political concerns within a Western democracy. In 1991 Joël Jouanneau directed a production of *En attendant Godot* at the Théâtre des Amandiers, Nanterre. Nanterre is a rather dispiriting suburb to the west of Paris, a ghetto of cheap high-rise housing which seems more than just a few miles from the luxury of central Paris. The theatre's first director, Patrice Chéreau, had given it a reputation for presenting new, often harsh political work: it was here that the early productions of plays by Koltès had taken place. Jouanneau, like Chéreau, was determined to continue to present work which would address the lives of working-class people, especially the young. His starting point for *Godot* was watching a boy in a train station aimlessly kicking an empty can for hours on end. This image seemed to him

to sum up the experience of waiting when one was young, unemployed and had nothing to hope for. The set for his production, designed by Jacques Gabel, presented an urban wasteland with an abandoned electrical plant, which lit up with some small green light-bulbs (in place of the leaves) in the second act. Vladimir and Estragon were street dwellers. Jouanneau was quite explicit about this, explaining that he did not want to show a generalised picture of humanity but to give his characters clearly localised, specific qualities: 'restituer l'image de la dérive d'êtres exclus dans la France des années 90' ('to restore the image of drifters, of people excluded from the France of the 1990s').²³ Pozzo and Lucky were presented as cynical bourgeois exploiter and naive immigrant worker.

A further peculiarity of Jouanneau's interpretation was his conviction that the text suggested a difference of ages between Vladimir and Estragon: he saw Vladimir as older, more experienced, a kind of 'older brother' to Estragon, and the play as 'l'histoire d'une initiation à l'attente' ('the story of an initiation into waiting').²⁴ The casting reflected this: David Warrilow, an experienced Beckett actor, played Vladimir, wearing an old-fashioned *bleu de travail* (workman's overall), whereas Estragon was played by Philippe Demarle, an actor in his twenties, wearing aggressively contemporary clothes: a rollneck jersey, braces, military-looking trousers, Doc Martins and a shaven skull – the skinhead look. The bowler hats were jettisoned, having too much the flavour, for Jouanneau, of 'metaphysical clowns', and instead both characters wore woollen hats. Large cuts were made in the text, and opportunities to update it were taken: in the sequence of insults in Act II, for example, the actors improvised their own in keeping with the street language of 1991.

Reactions to this interpretation were predictably varied. *Le Monde* described it as extraordinarily beautiful, whereas *Libération* called it rather 'distant', and complained that Beckett's special quality of anguished comedy was absent.²⁵ To some extent these differences of opinion could be reduced to the difference between those who like their classics updated and those who do not. But it is important to

distinguish between the interpretation of the director and designer – the wasteland setting – and those of the actors. More striking than the urban setting, in some ways, was the decision to cast actors of two different generations in the roles of Vladimir and Estragon. The young Philippe Demarle's performance as Estragon was nervous, violent, full of aggressive energy, whereas David Warrilow as Vladimir had a quality of serenity, almost of wisdom. This altered the whole balance of the play's central passages. The two could still be seen to depend on one another, but in a very different way from the symbiosis envisaged by Beckett. The critics who wrote about the production saw this relationship less in terms of a social or political comment than as a way of bridging the theatrical generation gap between the men of the 1950s, the years in which the play saw the light of day, and the youth of the 1990s, for whom the concept of 'waiting' was no longer overlaid with wartime memories but had other connotations altogether.

OTHER PRODUCTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURAL STRUGGLE

The theatrical self-awareness of Beckett's drama, in other words, proved stronger than the attempt to give it a localised allegorical meaning. An example of a production which attempted to give the play a metaphorical meaning directly related to cultural struggle took place at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, Quebec, in January 1992. Where Beckett's stage direction suggests a 'no man's land', the director André Brassard and his designer Stéphane Roy gave it the specific quality of a *cultural* no man's land. In place of the tree and the stone there was a coat-stand and a piano. Estragon, instead of collapsing on his stone, would collapse on the piano stool, and would play it from time to time. While Vladimir and Estragon were costumed to look like contemporary Québécois down-and-outs (or perhaps street entertainers), Pozzo entered in a golden coach pulled by Lucky

and wore a magnificent eighteenth-century wig, ruff, frock-coat and breeches, representing the 'prince of culture' defending the French Academic tradition. Lucky was costumed like a medieval king's jester. The interpretation was clear:

Brassard was playing with politico-cultural disputes by making Beckett's characters into popular performers waiting for the arrival of 'culture' . . . Traditional French culture was shown as decadent and associated with the culture of the Québec bourgeoisie . . . Brassard's actors, poor, alienated, on an abandoned stage, were waiting, like the Québécois, for the key to their destiny: Godot?²⁶

Dressed up in the trappings of the cultural debate in Canada (that is, about whether French-speaking Canadians should defer to the traditions of mainland France or try to establish a new Francophone culture of their own), this production was using the powerful metaphor of Godot in similar ways to other, more politicised productions. The great strength of the Godot metaphor for all such productions is precisely its lack of definition. It can stand not for any old thing but for a great many things – different possible solutions to problems which appear insoluble. It strikes a particular chord with audiences in totalitarian regimes where the population is constantly being encouraged to have patience while their leaders construct the promised land. This may explain why the most rigidly controlled regimes were the ones which banned it for longest. In Eastern Europe it was performed (though not without difficulties, as we have seen) in Yugoslavia, also in Poland and Hungary, but not at all in East Germany, in Romania or in Bulgaria until the collapse of the Soviet union in the late 1980s.²⁷ In China it was similarly regarded as highly dangerous, especially when Gao Xingjian (the winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 2000) wrote a play inspired by *Waiting for Godot* entitled *The Bus-Stop* (*Chezhan*, performed at the People's Art Theatre of Beijing in 1983). This play shows a group of people gathering to catch a bus from their distant suburb to the big city. They keep hoping that the bus will come, but it never does, and in the end they realise they have

wasted years in waiting – they would have done better to walk. The author specifies that the play must be performed in the round, so that everyone in the audience becomes implicated in the experience of fruitless waiting.²⁸ Three years after its production *The Bus-Stop* was denounced as 'the most pernicious play put on since the birth of the People's Republic'.²⁹

Part of the hostility of the Chinese authorities stemmed from the fact that everyone who saw it understood it as carrying a reference to Beckett's play, which was not officially available in China but which is nevertheless known in intellectual circles. The fact is that Godot has become a global symbol, recognised all over the world, though loaded with different meanings according to time, place and political circumstances. The word 'Godot' appears in all sorts of unlikely contexts whenever a cartoonist, commentator or broadcaster needs to appeal to his public's sense of the frustrations of waiting for a promised salvation which fails to materialise. This survey of productions of the play demonstrates that Beckett's work retains, at least potentially, the provocative quality picked out by Roger Blin. It continues to make tyrannical or totalitarian regimes uneasy and speaks on behalf of the dispossessed. At the same time, it resists precisely focused political interpretations which attempt to reduce it to an allegorical statement about one particular situation. As Jonathan Kalb has written: 'Beckett's plays often prove stronger than attempts to politicize them.'³⁰ Because *Waiting for Godot* thrives on ambiguity, the circumstances in which it is played *can* have an enriching effect, but never in a straightforwardly allegorical way. Just as the text achieves its effects, like poetry, by building up layers of meaning and association, so a production will be enhanced by taking place in circumstances where Vladimir and Estragon's plight resonates, for the audience, with things they feel to be profoundly true in their own lives.

account of this process is included in a recent doctoral thesis by Antje Diedrich: “The stage is not a different country, but an extension of the bathroom”: George Tabori’s theatre practice as an investigation into the relationship between art and life’, PhD thesis, Liverpool John Moores University (2000).

37. Kalb, *Beckett in Performance*, p. 92. The subway tunnel is a reference to JoAnne Akaliti’s much contested production of *Endgame*.
38. Samuel Beckett, ‘Three Dialogues’ in *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1965), p. 103.
39. Cobi Bordewijk, ‘The Integrity of the Playtext: Disputed Performances of *Waiting for Godot*’ in Marius Buning, Sjeff Houppermans and Danièle de Ruyter, eds., *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, vol. 1: 1970–1989 (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1992), p. 147.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
41. This is the agency which acts on behalf of all French authors, tracing its origins back to the eighteenth century.
42. Bordewijk, ‘The Integrity of the Playtext’, p. 152.
43. Mariko Hori Tanako, ‘Special Features of Beckett Performances in Japan’ in Lois Oppenheim and Marius Buning, eds., *Beckett On and On . . .* (New Jersey, London and Ontario: Associated University Presses, 1996), p. 230.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
46. Low-class Sumo wrestlers find themselves reduced to being semi-slaves to their patrons. I am grateful to Mika Sato for her help in understanding the version broadcast on Japanese television.
47. Junko Matoba, ‘*Waiting for Godot* in Tokyo’, *The Beckett Circle (Tokyo) Newsletter*, Spring 1995, p. 3.
48. Xerxes Mehta, ‘Ghosts’ in Oppenheim, ed., *Directing Beckett*, p. 179.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

8. *Godot* in political context

1. I am indebted to Dina Djurović for her research on this production. The quotation, and much of the information, comes from a book by Felix Pašić, *Kako smo Ćekali Godoa Kad su Cvetale Tikue* (Belgrade: Vepar Press, 1992).

2. It was quickly followed, on 25 January 1957, by the first Polish production at the Współczesny theatre in Warsaw. At the same time, the Polish text was published in one of the first issues of *Dialog*, a journal which became an influential channel for making Western dramatic work known in Poland.
3. See, for example, Elin Diamond, ‘Re: Blau, Butler, Beckett and the Politics of Seeming’, *Drama Review* 44:4 (T168, 2000), pp. 31–43, and Lois Oppenheim, ‘Playing with Beckett’s Plays: On Sontag in Sarajevo and Other Directorial Infidelities’, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 4:2 (Spring 1995), pp. 25–46.
4. Susan Sontag, ‘Godot Comes to Sarajevo’, *New York Review of Books*, 21 October 1993, p. 52.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
12. Diamond, ‘Re: Blau, Butler, Beckett and the Politics of Seeming’, p. 40.
13. See Klaus Volker, ed., *Beckett in Berlin* (Berlin: Hentrich, Frölich und Kaufmann, 1985), p. 48.
14. Donald Howarth, from the programme for the performance at the Old Vic Theatre, 17 February 1981. Beckett said the same thing to his actors during rehearsals for the Schiller-Theater production; see chapter 6, p. 133.
15. Ilan Ronen, ‘*Waiting for Godot* as Political Theatre’ in Oppenheim, ed., *Directing Beckett*, p. 240.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. Ronen notes that he was approached by Doron Tavory, ‘a Jewish actor considered to be the star of the Haifa Municipal Theatre’, who wanted to play Lucky, both for the challenge of the monologue and in order to express his political solidarity with the suffering imposed on the Arabs. His mastery of the literary Arabic of Lucky’s ‘Think’ was such that ‘even Arab spectators were convinced that they were

- watching an Arab actor'. Ronen, 'Waiting for Godot as Political Theatre', p. 244.
19. Dan Urian, *The Arab in Israeli Drama and Theatre* (London: Harwood, 1999), p. 91.
 20. Ronen, 'Waiting for Godot as Political Theatre', p. 246.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
 22. Shoshana Weitz, 'Mr Godot will not come today' in Hannah Scolnicov and Peter Holland, eds., *The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 186–98.
 23. Joël Jouanneau, 'Non pas l'Homme, mais cet Homme' in Lallias and Arnault, eds., *Théâtre Aujourd'hui*, p. 38.
 24. *Ibid.*
 25. Colette Godard in *Le Monde*, 9 February 1991; Mathilde la Bardonnie in *Libération*, 11 February 1991.
 26. Ginette Hébert, 'Entre l'arbre et la patère: le doigt de Brassard', *Jeu* 64 (1992), p. 18 (my translation).
 27. The first East German performance was in 1987 and the first Bulgarian performance in 1988. See Werner Huber, 'Godot, Gorba and Glasnost: Beckett in East Germany' in Marius Buning and Lois Oppenheim, eds., *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, vol. II: *Beckett in the 1990s* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 49–57. I am indebted to Anna Ganév for information about the performance in Bulgaria, given by the Theatre of the National Army, and seen by Bulgarians as an important moment in the re-conquest of freedom.
 28. For an analysis of this play, see Harry H. Kuoshu, 'Will Godot Come by Bus or through a Trace? Discussion of a Chinese Absurdist Play', *Modern Drama* 41 (1998), pp. 461–73.
 29. Quoted by François Hauter, 'Gao, méconnu en son pays', *Le Figaro*, 14/15 October 2000, p. 34.
 30. Kalb, *Beckett in Performance*, p. 252.

9. Productions at the end of the twentieth century

1. See chapter 2, note 6.
2. In interviews given at the time of his production, Peter Hall made a point of expressing his disgust that the publishers had not yet brought out an affordable edition of this text.

3. In an interview with Eric Prince, Hall said: 'Having lived with this text now over a period of rehearsal I now know why he did everything he did [meaning the cuts and changes made in the text by Beckett]. You can feel it and understand it. This is a ruthless professional theatre practitioner looking at his own work and saying: that I need, that I do not need; that works, that does not; that needs clarification. It is tight as a drum. It is a wonderful text. It has a Mozartian simplicity and clarity.' Eric Prince, 'Forty Years On: Peter Hall's Godot', *Journal of Beckett Studies* 8:2 (Spring 1999), p. 53.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
5. Goodwin, John, ed., *Peter Hall's Diaries: The Story of a Dramatic Battle* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983), p. 230. Hall went so far as to write: 'It is a masterpiece . . . It revived my shaken faith in the theatre.'
6. Prince, 'Forty Years On', p. 54.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 55–6.
8. This is mentioned by almost all the reviewers.
9. Prince, 'Forty Years On', p. 48.
10. Timed at the Barbican on 2 September 1999. In a discussion with the audience after the performance on 2 September, Asmus claimed that this was quicker than the same production when adapted to (American) English for the San Quentin Drama Workshop in 1984, when it had run for fifteen minutes longer.
11. In the following analysis, the reader should assume that unless otherwise stated the details of Asmus' production were the same as in Beckett's production.
12. See McMillan and Knowlson, eds., *The Theatrical Notebooks*, pp. 332–43.
13. See, in addition to works by Knowlson already cited, 'Beckett as Director: The Manuscript Production Notebooks and Critical Interpretation', *Modern Drama* 30:4 (December 1987), pp. 451–65.
14. For a discussion of Beckett in relation to Artaud, see Kalb, *Beckett in Performance*, pp. 146–9.
15. 'Une fois la toute puissance de l'action et la psychologie battue en brèche, l'émergence de la "scène" et de son langage spécifique – refoulés du "théâtre occidental", dès l'origine, selon Artaud – devient possible. Ce langage physique, lié à l'espace et à toute la matérialité de la scène (corps, objets, mouvements, sons, lumières . . .) devient premier, originaire.'