

modern theatre guides

Samuel Beckett's  
**Waiting for  
Godot**



MARK TAYLOR-BATTY AND  
JULIETTE TAYLOR-BATTY

  
continuum

**Samuel Beckett's**  
***Waiting for Godot***

## Continuum Modern Theatre Guides

Continuum modern theatre guides offer concise, accessible and informed introductions to the key plays of modern times. Each book is carefully structured to offer a systematic study of the play in its biographical, historical, social and political context, an in-depth study of the text, an overview of the work's production history including screen adaptations, and practical workshopping exercises. They also include a timeline and suggestions for further reading which highlight key critical approaches.

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**Mark Taylor-Batty and Juliette Taylor-Batty**

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# General Preface

## ***Continuum Modern Theatre Guides***

Volumes in the series Continuum Modern Theatre Guides offer concise and informed introductions to the key plays of modern times. Each book takes a close look at one particular play's dramaturgical qualities and then at its various theatrical manifestations. The books are carefully structured to offer a systematic study of the play in its biographical, historical, social and political context, followed by an in-depth study of the text and a chapter which outlines the work's production history, examining both the original productions of the play and subsequent major stage interpretations. Where relevant, screen adaptations will also be analysed. There then follows a chapter dedicated to workshopping the play, based on suggested group exercises. Also included are a timeline and suggestions for further reading.

Each book covers:

- Background and context
- Analysis of the play
- Production history
- Workshopping exercises

The aim is to provide accessible introductions to modern plays for students in both Theatre/Performance Studies and English, as well as for informed general readers. The series includes up-to-date



coverage of a broad range of key plays, with summaries of important critical approaches and the intellectual debates that have illuminated the meaning of the work and made a significant contribution to our broader cultural life. They will enable readers to develop their understanding of playwrights and theatre-makers, as well as inspiring them to broaden their studies.

The Editors:

Steve Barfield, Janelle Reinelt,  
Graham Saunders and Aleks Sierz  
March 2008

# 1 Background and Context

## Beckett before *Godot*

*Waiting for Godot* was written in Paris, in French, between 9 October 1948 and 29 January 1949. Its forty-two-year-old author, Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906–89), was an Irish writer who had taken up permanent residence in the French capital over a decade earlier. Beckett rewrote the play in English in 1953, after its first French production, and assisted in the German translation, which he later refashioned for his own Berlin production of the play in 1975. The play was one of the most influential European dramas of the post-war period. When it first made its appearance on the French stage, one critic referred to its impact as ‘knocking the dust off the theatre’<sup>1</sup> and another recognized it as ‘a profoundly original work’ (Lemarchand 1953). Two years later in London it was received as a play that ‘jettisons everything by which we recognise theatre’ (Tynan 1955) and was later lauded, perhaps with a certain excessive enthusiasm, as ‘the laugh hit of two continents’ when it opened in Florida, USA, in 1956 (Knowlson 1997, 420). Its rapid success, rising from its impoverished premiere in a small Parisian fringe theatre to international mainstream venues in only a few years, is some indication of how refreshing it was for the theatrical establishment of its time. For its first director, Roger Blin, one of the play’s attractions was the confrontational stance that the play adopted in the face of established notions of what made good theatre. He knew the play ‘was going to raze to the earth three quarters of the theatre’ and this

provocation was as attractive to him as its lyrical beauty and thematic appeal (Knapp 1967, 123). This book aims to explain why the play is so important in the history of modern theatre and seeks to examine its key features and the themes it explores.

As a young man, Beckett seemed set on course for a respectable academic career. Having achieved a first-class degree in modern languages (French and Italian) from Trinity College, Dublin in 1927, he worked briefly as a tutor of French and English at Campbell College, Belfast, and then as a *Lecteur d'Anglais* at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. In 1930, he took up a post as Lecturer in French back in Dublin at Trinity, though he was to resign the position two years later, disillusioned with teaching and determined to pursue his ambition to become a writer. His interest in creative writing, his urge to express his experience of the world, had begun during his years as a scholar, and his first published writings – a short story, 'Assumption' (1929) and a poem *Whoroscope* (1930) – appeared concurrently with his first critical essays 'Dante . . . Bruno. . . Vico. . . Joyce' (1929) and *Proust* (1930). These essays display a keen, youthful erudition and pronounce an allegiance with the principles of an attitude to literature and art that was to be known as modernism: an early twentieth-century break with established literary and artistic traditions in favour of radical forms of experimentation and innovation, as exemplified by the novels of James Joyce.

Beckett had met Joyce in Paris in 1928, and became part of the great Irish author's social circle. He helped him with some research for the work in progress that was to become *Finnegans Wake*, and would, for example, read materials aloud to Joyce, whose eyesight was weak and who appreciated such assistance. Beckett wrote 'Dante. . . Bruno. . . Vico. . . Joyce' at the older writer's suggestion, and in his analysis of Joyce's use of language there are the first suggestions of an artistic credo that he himself would adopt, albeit to far different literary ends. In the essay he wrote of how, in

Joyce, 'form *is* content, content *is* form' (Beckett 1983, 27), in other words the alliance of what is being expressed is dependent upon and interlinked with the manner in which it is expressed. This is something that was later to be symptomatic of his own writing.

Beckett wrote his first extended work of fiction, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, between 1931 and 1932, though it was to remain unpublished until after his death. Between 1932 and his eventual decision to establish himself in the French capital in 1937, Beckett circulated between Paris, London and Dublin, with a brief sojourn in Germany. He found attitudes in his native Ireland parochial and small-minded compared to his experiences abroad, and was to be irritated by prudish critical responses to his work there. An interconnected collection of prose stories, which contained reworked extracts from *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, was published in 1934 under the risqué title *More Pricks Than Kicks*, wittily referencing the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 26: 14). This, and much of the content of the work, met with the disgust of the Irish censors. During this period, he took on pieces of translation work, and pursued his intellectual interests in art, visiting numerous galleries while in Germany. He also wrote his novel *Murphy* which, after forty-two rejections, was eventually published in 1938. The struggle to eke out any sort of living as a writer was neatly captured in something of an in-joke in *Waiting for Godot* when Vladimir tells Estragon that 'You should have been a poet' and Estragon responds by pointing to the ragged state of his clothing and replying 'I was [. . .] Isn't that obvious?' (12).

When war broke out across Europe in September 1939, Beckett was visiting his mother in Ireland. Though possessing a passport from a neutral country, he returned to France the day after it entered the conflict and eventually became involved in the Resistance movement, operating as a compiler and translator of reports of German military movements. His cell was eventually infiltrated in 1942 by the German authorities, and his friends consequently arrested by

the Gestapo. He fled with his partner Suzanne Deschevaux-Desmesnil (whom he was to marry in 1961) safely to pass the rest of the war in the secluded village of Roussillon in Vaucluse, forty miles north of Marseilles. Here he worked for a local farmer, named Bonnelly, whose name was to appear in the French text of *Waiting for Godot*, which also located the farmer in Roussillon in the Vaucluse (Beckett 1952, 86). None of the proper nouns were retained in the English text, in which Vladimir can neither remember the name of the man nor the village, and the reference to the Vaucluse was replaced by the 'Macon country'. The reference to the remarkable deep ochre colour of the soil there is, however, kept ('down there everything is red') (62).

In Roussillon, Beckett once again became involved in the Resistance. He assisted in hiding armaments and participated in sorties under the cloak of night to assist in the arms supply chain, sometimes waiting in ditches ready to use force, if necessary, in planned ambushes. Beckett's experiences with the French resistance and his status as exile and refugee are in part captured in *Waiting for Godot*. Resistance liaisons involved rendezvous with unnamed figures whose actual appearances were far from guaranteed, and which might be postponed by ambiguous, anonymous messengers. The purpose or results of interventions were often unknowable and unquantifiable. The risk of violence was commonplace, as was the possibility of having to bear witness to the ill-treatment of others. The experience of 1939–44 was one of waiting for an uncertain future liberation, passing the time in frugal surroundings for days on end with little in the way of intellectual or physical nourishment. All these things form the thematic substance of Beckett's key play. In their escape to Roussillon, Beckett and Suzanne walked long distances by night and slept during daylight in haystacks and ditches. The image of a mutually dependent couple, disoriented and bereft of social context, able to both irritate and console one another, uncertain of their future, alternately clutching at straws of