

Waiting for Godot appears at Nazareth with Dublin cast



Waiting for Godot cast members (l. to r.) Chris O'Neill (Vladimir), John Dunne (Lucky), Johnny Murphy (Estragon) and Vincent O'Neill (Pozzo) wage a desperate tug-of-war immediately following Lucky's famous monologue, a stream-of-consciousness homage

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

to James Joyce. Not pictured is Liam Everett (the Boy). Remaining performances will be Thursday, Nov. 14, 8 p.m.; Saturday, Nov. 16, 2 p.m.; and Sunday, Nov. 17, 8 p.m.

By Emily Morrison

From the moment the lights go up on the starkly furnished Nazareth Arts Center stage, one set of "couplings" after another unfolds. Audiences at this week's special Rochester staging of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* have found themselves confronted with a stirring amalgam of interdependent "characters," of vibrant sound and resonating silence, of faith and despair, of the comic dichotomy of the music-hall duologue and the tragic stasis of the human condition in microcosm, of the disparate halves of the human soul.

The 30th anniversary English-language revival of *Godot*, this extraordinary and unexpected gift from the Dublin stage had been slated originally for production in New York City. However, a problem developed over who held the professional rights to produce the play in New York, and the artistic director of the Irish Arts Center (Jim Sheridan, whose brother, Peter, director of the production, wrote the acclaimed drama *Diary of A Hunger Strike*) called Rochester producer John F. Everett a month ago with exciting news.

Everett, who has locally produced Sean O'Casey's *Bedtime Story* and John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and *Well of the Saints*, was told that, if he could find a theater and provide publicity, the *Godot* company would be willing to bring a part of the original New York run to Rochester. The plan came off without a hitch, and the Irish cast (by special arrangement with the Irish Arts Center of New York City and Oscar Productions of Dublin) is currently appearing on Nazareth's lower auditorium stage in a production that runs from November 9-17. After Sunday night's final performance at 8 p.m., they'll return to New York to present Beckett's *Endgame* in place of *Godot*.

"This is a play in which nothing happens, no one comes, no one goes, and yet it's an incredible evening of theater," offers Everett, a professed lover of Irish theater. His assessment of Beckett's ground-breaking 1952 masterpiece perhaps best summarizes the timeless appeal of a dramatic work that essentially stares eternity in the face and challenges us to arrive at our own conclusions.

Godot offers a rich dramatic stew of literary and biblical allusions, linguistic

concoctions and word plays, and probable thematic references to religion, politics, existentialism or its nihilistic flip side, and what veteran Irish stage actor Johnny Murphy (Estragon) refers to as "the universal human condition." Imagine that you see a parallel in the play to the political confrontation between Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland, and Murphy will counter with an enaging shrug. "Perhaps," he allows, in an Irish lilt that sounds positively exotic to jaded American ears. "Everything's in it; anything's in it."

The ongoing debate as to what Beckett intended to convey is perhaps as eternal as the protagonists' open-ended waiting game, yet the play's multiple layers of thematic significance are leavened considerably by the delightful verbal "music" of this "Irish-language" production. Sheridan gets a good bit of mileage out of his cast's comedic gifts, as well as the almost kinetic poetry of their verbal exchanges. Although Beckett wrote the play in French and translated it himself into English, it fully merits this compelling and brilliantly choreographed reading in the Nobel Prize-winning playwright's native "tongue."

"To appreciate the excitement that the current production generated (earlier this year) among Irish audiences, you have to remember that Samuel Beckett, regardless of what language he writes in, is no less a Dublin native than Joyce or Yeats or Synge or indeed his own late friend, Brendan Behan," says Everett.

As Dublin critic John Finegan wrote in the Evening Herald when Peter Sheridan's version of *Godot* opened at the Focus Theatre, "*Godot* returned this week to where it rightfully belongs — a small theater equipped with a small stage." Sheridan's unexpected Nazareth reprise fully recaptures the music-hall magic of the original production.

"All of Beckett's plays were actually written for a small theater," explains John Everett. "This cast is doing *Godot* in Dublin stage-hall fashion. They use the authentic Dublin accent," adds Everett, who feels the music of the language provides an element of humor not often so delightfully evident in straight English-language interpretations. "A lot of people take Beckett seriously, and only seriously," he points out. "This cast

plays *Godot* as a tragicomedy."

The full impact of the language can only be appreciated, according to Everett, by those attending a live performance; simply reading the play to oneself, he insists, will not suffice. "The linguistic rhythm of the play is based on the Irish, and particularly Dublin-Irish, music-hall patter between Vladimir and Estragon," says Everett. "Musicians love this play because of its rhythms. It's something you can't 'hear' on the printed page."

Children, as well, love *Godot*, says Everett, who arranged, for Tuesday night's performance, for a signed accompaniment by interpreters from Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), as well as a mime performance Wednesday afternoon for NTID students by Vincent O'Neill (Pozzo), a member of Marcel Marceau's touring company. "The music and the actions on stage are such that an audience member can enjoy the rhythm and the movement without language," Everett adds.

The powerful interplay between words and silence is as dynamic in this production as the visual counterpoint of light and shadow, and the drama's apparent links with the resonating silence of mime or the mobile stillnesses of dance are surely not coincidental. Although O'Neill (who will assume the title role of Hamlet in an upcoming adaptation by Marceau) points out that the play is predominantly verbal, he concedes that it contains integral aspects of mime movement and characterization.

"Pozzo's character possibly verges on mime-like characterization, more than the others," O'Neill allows. "The rhythmical use of the body in a Beckett play is very close to a basic mime technique. The feeling you observe of silence resonating, a physical stillness, a live static quality, the sense of tableau, is very akin to mime."

Vincent's brother, Chris O'Neill (Vladimir), a versatile stage, television, and film actor, agrees. "Beckett actually asks (in the script) for pauses," he observes. "He even differentiates between a pause and a silence. The lighting will often make the difference."

"Beckett's text is so refined," Vincent concurs, "that there's an orchestration of sound and silence in the dialogue, and the

rhythm of the dialogue leading up to a pause. It's like Beethoven's Fifth (Symphony)," he adds, illustrating his point with a baritone rendition of the famous first movement's opening passage. "Unless there's a motivation for the pause, it falls flat."

As for any comparison between Beckett's pair of Dublin tramps, Vladimir and Estragon (in this production, the "Irish translation" from the original French tramps), and Chaplinesque figures from silent cinema, the resemblance apparently isn't imaginary. "Supposedly, (Beckett) has a trunk filled with photographs of Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, and Buster Keaton. I don't know how anyone got near it, because (Beckett's) such a private man, but someone supposedly saw it," says Johnny Murphy (who can also be seen tonight in a BBC production of Shane Connaughton's *The Cause for Liberty*, a play about "an ordinary family man" arrested and interrogated for singing a rebel song in an English pub).

"Any director tackling *Godot* would be well-advised to keep Chaplin in mind the whole time," adds Vincent O'Neill. "Beckett has issued a statement on that. There are offshoots of silent cinema in *Godot* — particularly the sequence with the hats. Beckett actually lives three streets from Rue Charlot, Charlie Chaplin's street (in Paris).

"I met Beckett in Paris, in the street, and we had a chat," continues O'Neill, whose chance encounter underscored the reclusive playwright's noted reserve. "He was a lovely man, extremely gentle, but incredibly cautious," O'Neill observes. "It was incredible to meet him, because he looks like one of his own characters."

An onstage interview with the four Dublin actors after their November 6 rehearsal at Nazareth naturally digressed onto the topic of the play's religious and perceived political overtones. Certainly, Murphy allowed, there are religious connotations. "*Waiting for Godot* — waiting for God?" he suggested, referring to the obvious usage of the French diminutive. "There's death, and then where do you go?"

Estragon, as Chris O'Neill points out, compares himself to Christ at one important juncture in the first act, and the play contains frequent references to the two thieves who were crucified with Christ (one saved and the

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