



# *Waiting for Godot*



## Study Guide

*Waiting for Godot*

*by Samuel Beckett*

Directed by Aoife Spillane-Hinks

### Cast

Vladimir: James FitzGerald

Estragon: Martin Giles

Pozzo: Alan Stanford

Lucky: Ken Bolden

Also featuring:

Elliot Pullen and Shay Freund as A Boy

Scenic design by Alan Stanford

Costume design by Alan Stanford

Lighting design by Cindy Limauro

Study Guide Prepared by Kristen L. Olson, Ph.D.

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Pittsburgh Irish & Classical Theatre (PICT) is one of 40 professional theater companies selected to participate in *Shakespeare for a New Generation*, a national program of the National Endowment for the Arts in cooperation with Arts Midwest, bringing the finest productions of Shakespeare to thousands of middle and high school students in communities across the United States. This is the eleventh year of *Shakespeare in American Communities*, the largest tour of Shakespeare educational productions in American history.

Greeting to Teachers:

Our aim in assembling this guide is to help you integrate your class' experience of the PICT production with your existing classroom activities. PICT's "3 ACTS" program combines Pre-Performance Activities, Attendance at the Student Matinees, and Post-Performance Activities including assessment of student writing. PICT's goal with our "3 ACTS" approach is to encourage students in the analysis and interpretation of great literature, providing students another audience for their writing, and teachers additional support for multiple educational initiatives. In addition to the English class, *Waiting for Godot* has cross-curricular implications in, psychology, philosophy & religious studies, theatre arts, and social studies.

We offer these suggestions to supplement your own vision in the classroom. We encourage you to freely adapt any of the exercises offered here to fit your particular needs and those of your students.

We also invite you to send your students' writing to us for feedback. Each student will receive a personal response to his or her written work. We do not give grades, leaving that to your discretion. These essays make a nice contribution to a student's personal writing portfolio!

All suggested writing activities are founded on the PA Core Standards in English Language Arts and take into account the Literacy Framework of Pennsylvania as well as the guidelines as proffered by the National Council of Teachers of English. The PA Core Standards include:

- 1.2 Reading Informational Text
- 1.3 Reading Literature
- 1.4 Writing
- 1.5 Speaking and Listening

We're delighted to have you join us this season.

## Characters

*Waiting for Godot* is a small ensemble piece, though with five actors it has one of Beckett's larger casts. The two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, briefly encounter two other characters, Pozzo and Lucky, and a young boy. Though Godot is mentioned, he does not physically appear in the play.

*Vladimir*, a traveller. In many ways, Vladimir is treated by others as the dominant figure. He is looked to for answers, and the other characters follow his behavioral cues. He is called "Didi" by Estragon, a nickname indicating their friendship, and he is called "Mr. Albert" by the boy.

*Estragon*, Vladimir's friend. Vladimir's equal in many ways, Estragon nevertheless relies on Vladimir for support. He is especially forgetful, needing constant reminding of the simple events of the day. He has a nickname, too: Vladimir calls him "Gogo."

*Pozzo*, a bombastic personality. Pozzo encounters Vladimir and Estragon while he is passing by their waiting spot.

*Lucky*, Pozzo's slave. Lucky carries Pozzo's possessions: his stool and bags. He is ordered around mercilessly by Pozzo.

*A Boy*. A boy appears at the end of each act to inform Vladimir that Godot will not be arriving.

*Godot*. The figure for whom Vladimir and Estragon wait. He is talked about, but does not physically appear in the play.

## Plot Summary

### Act 1

Two tramps named Vladimir and Estragon meet on an empty road, by a tree. Estragon's foot is sore, so he sits down to remove his boot. He has trouble, and explains his physical weakness by saying that he was beaten the evening before.

The two men vaguely recall that they are supposed to meet a man named Godot, who will answer a question. They do not seem to know Godot, and they do not remember the question. Estragon nods off, having grown tired while waiting, but Vladimir gets lonely and wakes him. Since there is nothing to do, they talk. All they have to talk about are the things around them: the tree and having to wait. Having exhausted those topics, they bring up their past. We learn that they are broke and homeless, travelling from place to place. They eat a carrot and turnip they are carrying. Frustrated by the wait and their troubles, they contemplate hanging themselves from the tree but worry that something might go wrong. They continue eating what's left of the carrot. Vladimir and Estragon hear a calamity that scares them, and two other people appear. Pozzo is being pulled along at the end of a long rope by his slave Lucky. Lucky also carries a stool and all their baggage. Pozzo is pompous and bombastic, even cruel, and orders Lucky around. He rudely eats chicken and drinks wine in front of everyone. When the exhausted Lucky drifts off to sleep, Pozzo wakes him by tugging on the rope, which is around Lucky's neck. Vladimir and Estragon hungrily snatch up the chicken bones Pozzo casts on the ground. Pozzo complains about Lucky, saying that he plans to get rid of him soon because Lucky is old and pathetic. Lucky starts to cry, but when Estragon tries to comfort him, Lucky kicks him. Pozzo commands Lucky to perform for their amusement. Lucky dances and tells philosophical jokes. Everyone is annoyed. To quiet Lucky, Vladimir steals his hat and stomps on it. They scuffle and complain about how bad everyone smells. Pozzo decides it is time to go, and he and Lucky depart. Vladimir and Estragon resume waiting. A boy enters and informs them that Godot will not be coming today, and that they will have to wait until tomorrow to meet him.

### Act II

The next day, the same events begin again. This time, Estragon's boots are on the stage, and the tree has a few leaves. Vladimir and Estragon begin waiting again, though Estragon seems not to remember what happened the previous day. Vladimir reminds him of the scuffle with the others and the scraps of bone he enjoyed eating. The wait resumes. Bored, they play with Lucky's hat. Pozzo and Lucky re-appear, though Pozzo is now blind. Lucky still pulls Pozzo by the same rope, though it is shorter now. After another scuffle, Pozzo claims that the four have never met, and that Lucky cannot speak. They leave abruptly.

Evening falls and the moon rises. A boy enters, claiming he is a different boy from the one who came yesterday, though the message is the same: Godot will not come today. Vladimir and Estragon try to hang themselves from the tree, but their attempt is unsuccessful. They decide to come back the next day with a good rope, planning to hang themselves if Godot does not arrive. They get up to depart, but do not leave the stage.

*"Nothing to be done."*

### **General Writing Prompts**

What would you do if you had to wait somewhere without your cell phone?

How would you fill the time?

What would you do if you had to wait for something and you were with another person?

What if you were with two other people? In what ways would the experience be different?

Would you rather be marooned on a desert island alone or with someone?

### **Play-Specific Writing Prompts**

What cues in the play indicate that Vladimir and Estragon are friends?

Is Pozzo a bully?

What does Pozzo get from Lucky?

What does Lucky get from Pozzo?

Do they need each other?

*"A country road. A tree. Evening."*

### **Pre-performance writing prompts**

The set for *Waiting for Godot* is specific. It is minimal, the only components being "A country road" and "A tree," and there is also "a low mound," on which Estragon is seated in the opening scene. This is not much to work with, but there could be many variations to these few elements.

Think through the different options for shaping a minimalist set:

#### **Set Design:**

What would the tree look like?

Would it have a light trunk? A dark trunk? A colored trunk?

Would it be realistic, looking like a real tree? Would it be representational, like a pole, for example?

Would it be big? Small?

How does changing the size of the tree in relation to the characters affect the mood onstage?

Draw the tree that you have in mind.

#### **Lighting Design:**

How would you light the production?

Would the setting be predominantly dark or light?

Would the tones be black-and-white? Would you use colors? Which colors?

Would the light change or stay the same throughout the production?

How do those choices affect the mood of the play?

### **Post-Performance Writing Prompts:**

Describe the set used in the PICT production of *Waiting for Godot*.

How was it like what you expected?

How was it different from what you expected?

What did the choices made about the set add to the performance?

*"Well that passed the time."  
"It would have passed in any case."*

### In-Class Activity: Waiting

What is the point of waiting? Is it only made important by the arrival of the awaited event or action? Is time spent waiting meaningful, or is it wasted? Is it nothing? This activity draws students' attention to the main focus in the play, and Beckett's exploration of the meaningfulness of human action and experience.

Divide the class in half on separate sides of the room. For one half of the group, place students in smaller groups of two or three people. The groups will be told they must wait for five minutes. For the other half of the class, likewise create small groups of two or three students who will wait for the five-minute period. These groups, however, will also have a student (or a team of students) watching them during the waiting period.

When time has expired, have students write responses to the prompts below, then ask groups to compare their responses. In particular, examine whether the groups that were watched behaved differently from the groups that were not. The exercise can be used to lead into a discussion of purpose: does it matter if Godot is coming? Does it matter if Godot is watching? Does it matter if they only think Godot is coming? If they only think he is watching? Etc.

### Post-Activity Writing Prompts

#### Waiters:

What did you do?

How did you feel?

What were you thinking about?

What did you notice?

#### Watchers:

What did the people you were watching do?

What were you thinking?

What did you notice that you didn't expect to?

### Outside-of-Class Activity

What do people do to fill the time while they are waiting?

Observe people waiting for something. What do you notice them doing?

Observe a different situation where people are waiting. Are there similarities from situation to situation? Are there differences?



*"All the same."*

### **In-Class Activity: Routines and Rituals**

Waiting can produce anticipation and excitement. It can also produce uncertainty, making us feel anxious. Sometimes, this anxiety is channeled into routines or rituals that provide a sense of control. Something as simple as a schedule can mediate this uncertainty.

Preparational activities can fill the time building up to an event: we may prepare a ceremony before observing an important moment. Baseball players are notorious for creating these routines: "Boston Red Sox former third baseman Wade Boggs ate chicken before every game and took exactly 150 groundballs during infield practice" (<http://mentalfloss.com/article/22196/top-10-baseball-player-rituals>).

In small groups, ask students to brainstorm their own experience of routines or rituals in their families, or at school:

#### Questions for groups to discuss

How does your family prepare for an important holiday?

What routines do you recognize from the school day?

Do you greet your friends in the same way every day? What changes? What stays the same?

Do you use the same text message comment frequently?

Do you check Facebook, email, etc. at the same time every day? In the same order?

#### Writing Prompt

What seems like a "ritual" in the play?

What actions are repeated? Do the characters take comfort in them?

### In-Class Activity: Endings

The concluding lines of *Waiting for Godot* read as follows:

**ESTRAGON:**

I can't go on like this.

**VLADIMIR:**

That's what you think.

**ESTRAGON:**

If we parted? That might be better for us.

**VLADIMIR:**

We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. *[Pause.]* Unless Godot comes.

**ESTRAGON:**

And if he comes?

**VLADIMIR:**

We'll be saved.

*Vladimir takes off his hat (Lucky's), peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, knocks on the crown, puts it on again.*

**ESTRAGON:**

Well? Shall we go?

**VLADIMIR:**

Pull on your trousers.

**ESTRAGON:**

What?

**VLADIMIR:**

Pull on your trousers.

**ESTRAGON:**

You want me to pull off my trousers?

**VLADIMIR:**

Pull ON your trousers.

**ESTRAGON:**

*[realizing his trousers are down]* True. *[He pulls up his trousers.]*

**VLADIMIR:**

Well? Shall we go?

**ESTRAGON:**

Yes, let's go.

*They do not move.*

*Curtain.*

How would the play be different if the ending were changed?

#### Activity:

Divide students into groups, and ask each group to write an alternative ending to the play.

Each group should explain how the new ending would change the rest of the play, as a whole.

Each group should also report back about the discussion they had as they determined a consensus about what the new ending would be.

### **In-Class Performance-Based Activity: Understanding Pairs**

The cast of *Waiting for Godot* consists mainly of two pairs of people that depend deeply on each other. Though they can never fully know what the other is thinking or feeling, characters can be quite closely in sync. These relationships are central to the action of the play – in many respects, they *are* the thematic content of play, as well.

This activity is based on a standard acting class warm-up exercise that draws students' attention to the physical relationship of performers to one another on stage by allowing students to experience that dynamic directly.

To begin the activity, students divide into pairs scattered around the open space of the classroom.

Without speaking, the two students face each other, one student moving in slow motion and the other student following each action as if he/she is a reflection in a mirror.

The main performer should not try to outwit or out-move the mirroring performer, but should move as smoothly as possible so that his/her partner can follow as closely as possible, sustaining the moving mirror as long as the pair can.

Students then switch roles of leader and mirrorer.

This exercise is most often used to help actors maintain awareness of each other while on stage so that they move in concert while performing, rather than becoming absorbed in their own part or performance.

This exercise translates the abstract power dynamics in a relationship into a tangible experience. It is a concrete dynamic that students can experience as well as observe and discuss.

#### **Writing Prompts:**

Was this exercise easy or difficult? Why?

Did the exercise get easier or more difficult as you practiced it a few times?

Was there a point at which you felt like you could anticipate your partner's movements?

After viewing the PICT performance, discuss the physical relationship between the characters in important scenes, particularly the ones with physical humor, such as the hat exchange. How in sync are the characters? Do they seem to know what each other is thinking? What are the limitations of this insight?

*"It's not the same thing."*

**Extended Activity: Imitation: The Sincerest form of Flattery**

The impact of *Waiting for Godot* is wide and lasting. There are many versions of it performed every year in many languages. Sometimes, it is parodied. A good parody has much in common with the original, or else it isn't funny. Watch the following parodies of *Waiting for Godot*, and reflect on the writing prompts below them.

Monsterpiece Theater: A Sesame Street "Classic"

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzHMxIuVs\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzHMxIuVs_Y)  
(Video with full introduction.)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksL\\_7WrhWOc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksL_7WrhWOc)  
(Video without introduction, but better sound quality.)



Writing Prompts:

What does Grover say is the point of waiting?

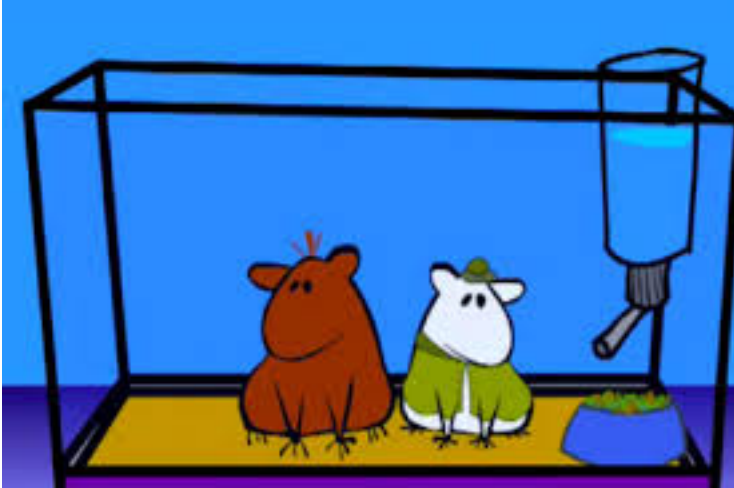
What frightens the monsters about the possibility of their friend not coming?

Does this version capture any of the main themes of Beckett's play? How?

## Guinea Pig Theatre

This version could be considered a pantomime performance of the play:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WzYgFA1mkg>



### Writing Prompts:

What elements are gained or lost without dialog?

How do we know that the guinea pig Estragon and Vladimir are friends?

Does this version capture any of the main themes of Beckett's play? How?

### A Godot of Your Own

Perform, storyboard, or animate your own parody of *Waiting for Godot*.

### Writing Prompt

What elements of the play were the most important to keep in your parody version? Why?

**Sources:**

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot/En Attendant Godot: tragicomedy in two acts, a bilingual edition translated from the French text by the author.* (New York: Grove Press, 1954).

Children's Television Workshop. "Monsterpiece Theater: Waiting for Elmo."  
<[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzHMxIuVs\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzHMxIuVs_Y)>;  
<[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksL\\_7WrhWOC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksL_7WrhWOC)>.

Christopher Grotke and Lise Le Page, "Guinea Pig Theater: Waiting for Godot."  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WzYgFA1mkg>>.