

## Why are we still waiting for Godot?

So why are we still waiting for Godot? How has Samuel Beckett's play grown from a tiny avant garde performance in Paris to become part of the West End theatre coach party circuit?



*Godot's 60th: The University of Reading archive shows the first night Pic: Roger Pic*

It's 60 years since Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* received its premiere in the Theatre de Babylone in Paris.

The first public performance, in its original French form of *En attendant Godot*, drew an audience of high-brow Parisians, taking in the latest experimental theatre.

"All the thousands who claimed they were there could never have been at the premiere. There weren't enough seats," says James Knowlson, Beckett's friend and official biographer.

They also couldn't have realised that this play, beginning its shoestring-budget run on 5 January 1953, was going to be seen as one of the pivotal moments in modern drama.

### **International appeal**

So why has *Waiting for Godot* proved so durable? How has Beckett's work outlasted the other iconoclasts and angry young writers of the 1950s and 1960s?

"I would suggest the answer lies in its ambiguities. So much is suggested rather than explicitly stated," says Prof Knowlson.

"People can read into it what they want to read into it."

This openness to interpretation has helped the play to avoid becoming dated, he says. For a play that's about the passing of time, it's curiously timeless.

It asks all the big philosophical questions - about life and death and the uncertain purpose of what goes on in between - but in a way that isn't limited to a particular place or era.

And the play has acquired a remarkable record for being performed in very different international settings. No disaster or civil strife is complete without its own Godot.

It was performed in Sarajevo under siege in the 1990s, in South Africa it was seen as a critique of apartheid and in the wake of Hurricane Katrina a performance in New Orleans was seen as an emblem of the city's wait for recovery.

Inmates in San Quentin prison in California saw it as their own story in a famous production in the late 1950s.

Prof Knowlson's friendship with Beckett has also created a rich and unexpected legacy for his university, the University of Reading, which now holds the biggest archive of Beckett-related material in the world.

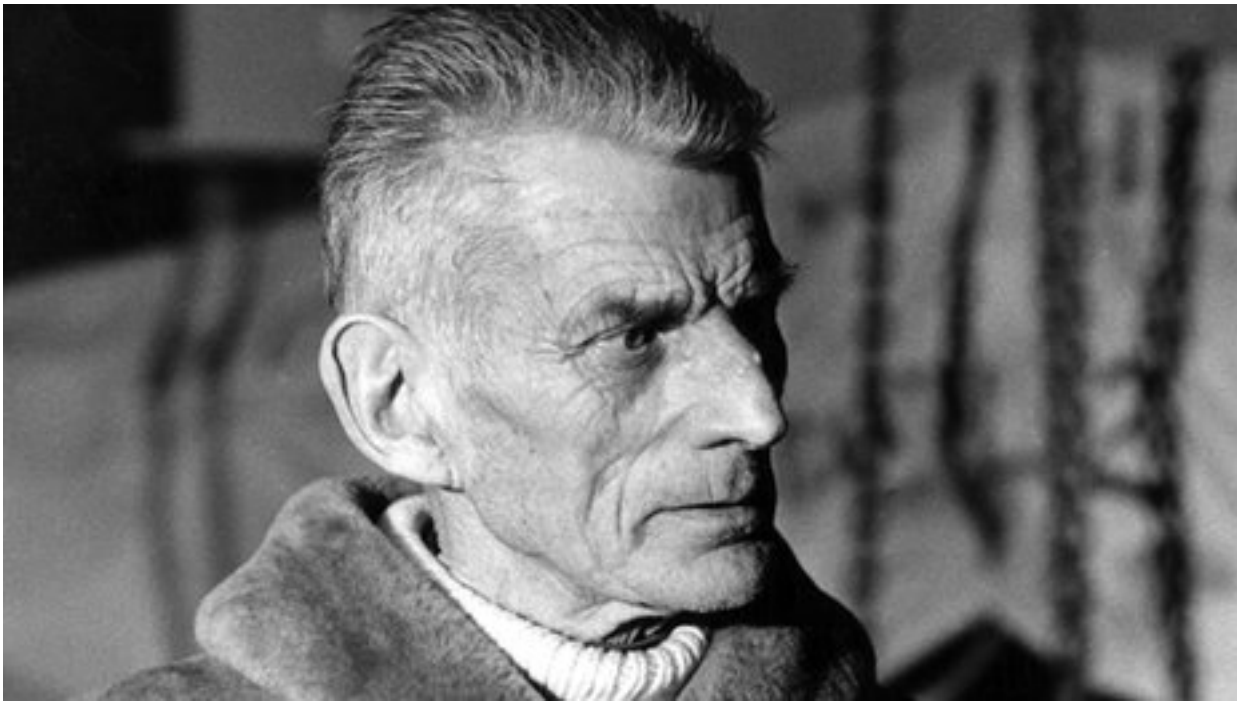
From the early 1970s, the playwright began giving manuscripts and notes to Prof Knowlson, stuffed into bags, boxes and suitcases. And this Beckett International Foundation has grown to become the definitive European collection for researchers.

"He adopted us," says Prof Knowlson - although the attention-shunning writer was never persuaded to visit the archive in person.

As *Waiting for Godot* reaches its 60th anniversary, the university has artefacts and pictures from the original performances.

### **'Something extraordinary'**

It's also a reminder of how easily the play might not have happened at all.



*Samuel Beckett at the BBC recording a series of his plays in 1977*

There were no famous faces or big funders to back the play. Instead it depended on the actor and director Roger Blin to hustle for cash and a venue - and once it had begun it relied on word of mouth for survival.

None of the original cast are still alive - and the theatre itself shut down a few years after staging Beckett's play.

In an interview with French television in the 1960s, Roger Blin suggested the initial power of the play. When Beckett showed him the script: "I said to myself: This is something extraordinary and it must be put on."

Another playwright who was enlisted in the search for funding fervently promised Blin: "I will defend this play to the death."

It was still proving controversial when the first English version of the play was performed two years later in London, directed by a 24-year-old Peter Hall.

Harold Pinter, also then in his twenties, saw Beckett as the the "most courageous, remorseless writer going", while reviewer Bernard Levin described *Waiting for Godot* as "a remarkable piece of twaddle".

### **Not a 'miserabilist'**

Prof Knowlson is himself now one of the most important living links with Beckett.

He could be very convivial, very witty, very good company, with a great sense of humour”

And he recognises that the continuing interest in Beckett's writing is wrapped up in the fascination with the enigmatic character of the author. His photogenic alienation has become a kind of literary brand.

But Prof Knowlson argues against the view of Beckett as a "miserabilist".

"He could be very convivial, very witty, very good company, with a great sense of humour.

"But there was an element of depression and despair that was part of his life, particularly after the war when he was deeply involved in writing the novels."

He says that Beckett's idea of a happy Christmas would have been a solitary occasion.

"He would have been preferably on his own and writing. He hated that kind of thing."

The underlying humour is also part of the continuing appeal of *Waiting for Godot*, he argues. It's often a peculiarly bleak comedy of resistance, but the thread of humour is always there to lighten the gloom.

It's now a commonplace to see *Waiting for Godot* described as one of the most important plays of the 20th Century - with its reputation gathering momentum rather than fading away.

The kind of movie actors who would have reached the career point of wanting to be in *King Lear* now want to shuffle across the stage in *Godot*.

### **Design conscious**

A key reason for this growing resonance with audiences, Prof Knowlson says, is the visual appeal. Beckett's strong images appeal to a design-conscious, visually-literate culture.

"They have this strong visual element. I've become much more conscious of the filmic quality."

# ...GODOT

*deux actes de*  
SAMUEL BECKETT

*avec, par ordre d'entrée en scène,*  
LUCIEN RAIMBOURG - PIERRE LATOUR  
JEAN MARTIN - ROGER BLIN  
SERGE LECOINTE

*mise en scène de*  
ROGER BLIN

THÉÂTRE DE BABYLONE

38 BOULEVARD RASPAIL - BAB. 34-05

*A handbill advertising the first run of Waiting for Godot*

Prof Knowlson says that he increasingly believes there is a direct link between the plays and Beckett's interest in painting.

"He was passionately involved in painting, not just that he loved to be with painters, but he was a real expert on 17th Century Dutch painting."

"He knew these pictures so well, he was so engrossed in these scenes. It seems to me that these pictures are really echoed in Waiting for Godot."

Beckett's life was changed by the success of Godot - the international impact of the play helped him to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

His publisher John Calder also recalled how the enigmatic Godot could haunt his creator.

He recounted how he had once met an anxious Beckett getting off a flight at Heathrow airport. When the plane doors had closed on the runway in Paris, Beckett had heard the loudspeaker announcing: "Captain Godot welcomes you on board."

"I wondered if my destiny had caught up with me at last," Beckett had told his publisher.

*The Beckett International Foundation at the University of Reading will hold a series of seminars on Samuel Beckett and Waiting for Godot in April 2013.*

Sean Coughlan - BBC News Education