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Godot Has Arrived

Adam Leipzig · Friday, March 23rd, 2012

Every generation waits for its *Godot*; ours has arrived in the Mark Taper Forum's mesmerizing new production. Clear as glass and sharp as shards, this *Godot* is alternately tender and severe, compassionately embracing its characters even as they are surrounded by an endless road, night and nothingness.

Samuel Beckett wrote the first drafts of *Waiting for Godot* in 1948, as Europe recovered from the Second World War and looked ahead to an uncertain future (the play was first performed in Paris in 1953). Today, the play is no less vital, and our future no more known.

You may think you have seen *Godot* before, but you haven't. Under Michael Arabian's sure direction, the play moves with pace and energy, and without any of the pretentious affect of every other staging I've attended. I felt as thought I was hearing the words for the first time, and understanding them as easily as I understand everyday conversation.

Barry McGovern's Vladimir and Alan Mandell's Estragon are perfectly matched, fundamentally different, funny and touching. McGovern stands erect as Vladimir, his head often tilted at an angle, as if he is trying to puzzle out the pieces of existence while still being certain he must keep the appointment he's made. He holds himself, and Estragon, together, covering for his yawning loneliness with movement and energy. McGovern delivers his lines with such effortless grace that it's hard to imagine anyone would find the play confusing.

Estragon is unlike Vladimir in many ways; for him, everything takes effort. He cannot bear to stand, much less walk – he moves gingerly, with tentative awareness that the ground beneath him is unforgiving. Mandell portrays Estragon with sagging weariness coupled with a perpetual amazement at the world around him – a world he may or may not have seen the day before. Mandell has never been better in any role.

When Pozzo enters, the tension tightens, and the dynamics of power and loss become more concrete. James Cromwell plays Pozzo with effortless aristocracy; his cruelty and torture of his servant, Lucky, is threatening and severe. Cromwell commands the stage as he commands the other characters, and his presence is striking – tall frame, shaved head, pomposity masking the need for approval.

Lucky's monologue is the centerpiece of the first act, an actor's tour-de-force. Yet in Hugo Armstrong's sensitive handling of the character, Lucky is both strong and weak. Armstrong makes a compelling actor's choice, using the words "quaquaqua" – tossed aside by others who have assayed the role – to motivate his body to straighten itself. Then Lucky's monologue breaks free with a previously-unheard lucidity. It is a mark of the sophistication of this production that the other characters really listen to what Lucky says, even as it becomes painful, and the audience

listens too.

LJ Benet, as the Boy who appears at the end of each act, supplies just the right glimpse of a world outside. He seems innocent, but perhaps knows more than he lets on.

John Iacovelli's pure scenic design grows from the characters' necessity. It is supported in perfect collaboration with Brain Gale's lighting and scenic projections, which offer clouds, road and a rising moon with mysterious simplicity. Christopher Acebo's well-worn costumes provide the clues we need for each of the characters, and provide an appropriately startling contrast with Pozzo's aristocratic, tailored brown suit – setting him up for his inevitable decline.

This production feels at home on the Taper's thrust stage, which has confounded so many plays and confused so many directors. But then, this production feels at home, period. Like an old tale told once again, but spoken with new lips and heard with new ears, this is the *Godot* we have all been waiting for.

Waiting for Godot plays at the *Mark Taper Forum* in Los Angeles through April 22.

Image: Alan Mandell, James Cromwell and Barry McGovern in Waiting for Godot. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

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