

Katalin Gyürky

Off we go again

About the show *Expecting Godot*

At the end of September 2024, the career of István Szabó K. as a director arrived at his third adaptation of *Godot*. By staging Samuel Beckett's legend of waiting, the Jászai Mari Prize-winning director maps and tracks the changes in the world and in his view of the world every ten years: what one could—or could not—hope for two decades ago, and ten years later, and what might—or might not—give reason for optimism in the present situation, viewed from the here and now.

The difference between the director's three adaptations of *Godot* so far, and the continuous change in his horizon of expectation (of himself, of theatre-making and of the world) related to this, is perhaps most evident in the current modification of the title of the production. For while his 2004 and 2014 productions of Beckett's drama, retaining the title of the original Hungarian translation of the play, *Godot-ra várva* (*Waiting for Godot*), emphasized waiting for something—focusing on the pointlessness of it and the inevitability of being destroyed while waiting—the current production at the Csokonai National Theatre, based on the title of the recent translation of Beckett's work, focuses on waiting for someone. *Godot-t várva* (*Expecting Godot*)—reads the title, amplifying the allegory of God in the drama, which can be interpreted in so many ways, a longing for the redemption or *restitutio* expected/expectable from the person of Godot.

In light of this, the set becomes extremely evocative: using the visual elements of Beckett's own *Godot* production, which he staged only once, István Szabó K. and set designer Ianis Vasilatos envisioned the Beckettian barren landscape on the audience's right, on top of a piano, with a tree jutting out of it, a tree on which Jesus was once crucified with the two criminals. The positioning of two small human-like figures on the piano, approaching the tree, may already lead us to the association that Estragon and Vladimir, who appear in the meantime, are perhaps the doppelgangers or successors of these two criminals. One of whom—as the important message of Vladimir, played by Zoltan Seress, is heard in the show—according to a certain Gospel source, was saved...

The fact that the Beckettian interior is not positioned in the centre, but to the side, indicates that the director has placed at least as much, if not more emphasis on the path that Vladimir and Estragon—and in other respects, Pozzo and Lucky—must/should take to gain redemption and mercy than on the elements of the set. Yet the uncertainty of the fulfilment of divine *restitution*



Picture 1. Árpád Bakota and Zoltán Seress at the press rehearsal of the production *Godot-t várva* (Expecting Godot) at the Csokonai National Theatre on 25 September 2024, directed by István Szabó K. (Photo: Theater.hu – Béla Ilovsky)

is also demonstrated by the texts and diagrams written by the actors on the black wall surrounding the stage during the play, the centrepiece of which is a drawing imitating a hangman's game.

When the two criminals (?), travellers / highwaymen (?), Estragon and Vladimir, lament at the very beginning of the play about whether they should hang themselves on the tree if Godot does not come and about who should hang himself first, the "GodøT" inscription on the wall becomes a symbol of the postponement of their decision until the end of the play: if they hang themselves prematurely and do not wait for Godot to arrive, it is no good, and if they do not hang themselves, it is no good either, because in Beckett's world, man, created in the image and likeness of God (see the syllable 'Go' in Estragon's nickname, Gogo, and the 'D' in Vladimir's nickname, Didi, implying that their names reflect their nature as God's creatures), is exposed to the elusiveness of time. In conjunction with this, man is also exposed to a lack of linearity, to the uncertainty of the present and the future as such, including the coming of Godot.

The indefinability of the present and the future is already indicated at the beginning of the play by the dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon: Zoltán Seress' Estragon convinces Vladimir, played by Árpád Bakota, talking about the day of Godot's coming: "He said Saturday. I think. I must have made a note of it." To this Estragon rebuts, "But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? Or Monday? Or Friday?"

But if there is nothing to provide a clue as to the present day, or the present hour, or the present minute, the only option for the two figures heading for the tree is to hold on to the past. In keeping with their habitus—see Vladimir's educated wit, and his counterpart and complement, the ignorant instinctive Estragon's "attitude"—they sometimes have flashbacks to an episode they perhaps experienced once (or more times) in the history of humanity they represent. In this directorial concept, the impression is that the first act of Beckett's drama is a continuation of an unwritten Act Zero, in which what was once lived and experienced is resurfacing here and now in the form of fragments of memories and reminiscences.

In order to evoke these, to give a sense of *déjà vu* on stage, the director and the actors playing the two characters make adequate use of the props indicated by the author's instructions in Beckett's drama. The hat is especially important for Vladimir; as if without wearing it—as it happens in the second act—the

character, who is prone to philosophizing and pondering, were not only be incapable of thinking, but could not reach—so to speak, could not extend to—the ethereal heights to which his thoughts aspire. In contrast, his complementary companion, the instinctive Estragon, is constantly having trouble with his shoes. His earthbound nature, the satisfaction of his material needs, the suppression of his hunger and his desire to sleep are further reinforced by the presence or absence of his footwear, i.e., his “ground-grasping” accessory. As a result of their unlikeness, the quality of their memories and even their ability to remember are also different. While the idealist Vladimir, who is inclined to abstraction and still enthusiastic and hopeful about ideals, can recall certain fragments of history he once experienced, such as the time he pulled Estragon out of the Seine, or certain mythical events—see his reflections on the two criminals—his travel companion, who can only think in material terms, is only reminded by the *Holy Scripture* of satisfying his physical needs: “I remember the maps of the Holy Land. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty.” But most of the time, Gogo cannot think of anything in response to Didi’s questions, because, compared to his partner, he is even less or not at all capable of remembering. As a victim of collective and individual memory loss, he cannot even remember how long he has been unhappy.

In István Szabó K.’s remarkably coherent staging, elaborated to the finest detail, the difference in the remembering abilities of the two travellers/highwaymen—who are actually “on the road (highway men)” because of their being stuck on the road, condemned to be stranded—also determines the performance of the actors who embody them: while Vladimir’s contemplative, philosophical attitude is perfectly reflected in Seress’s extremely strong scenic presence, seasoned with humanistic elements, often with empathy and neighbourly love for Estragon, the “clown theme” so important in Beckett’s drama, and the *clown* character of the two figures, can be detected mainly in Bakota’s acting, interspersed with elements of movement theatre. The difference between the two thus engenders a higher quality of “clowning”: instead of tacky clown jokes, they produce more burlesque-like elements, scenes peppered with a Buster Keaton-type of humour, where Vladimir’s contemplation “cools down” Estragon’s similarly ephemeral clownish optimism.

Yet time does not pass, but rather goes round in circles, which is illustrated in Szabó K.’s adaptation by the behaviour of the two other characters, the Pozzo-Lucky duo, also intended to represent certain types of people, arriving

perpendicular to the horizontal axis of Vladimir-Estragon. They are the embodiment of the master-slave relationship, of the superior-subordinate order that has been inherent in the nature of man from time immemorial, and they also signal by their constant return to the stage: no, no one should expect that beyond the perpetual cycle of days and nights, there will be any progress on any level, especially not by constantly ending up in the same place. Csaba Sorbán's finicky master Pozzo leads the servant Lucky, impressively portrayed by Hunor Pál, carrying all sorts of trinkets, suitcases and chairs. In Vladimir's eyes, with their "transformation" upon their re-arrival, and in Estragon's eyes, with their sameness or even unrecognizability, the two represent not only humanity in a perpetual, cyclical state of re-generation—for one of the most powerful sentences in the play confronts us with the notion that "women give birth astride of a grave"—but also further reinforce the mythical circularity of time, i.e., the futility of waiting, of hoping for a possible divine *restitution*. And this is true even if each time they depart, they say goodbye with the phrase "God bless



Picture 2. Árpád Bakota, Csaba Sorbán and Zoltán Seress at the press rehearsal of the production *Godot-t várva* (Expecting Godot) at the Csokonai National Theatre on 25 September 2024, directed by István Szabó K. (Photo: Theater.hu – Béla Ilvoszky)

you,” which becomes extremely bizarre in this milieu. So much so that at one point it even occurs to Vladimir that he has actually slept through the human suffering that surfaces here through flashes of memory—for example, in Szabó K.’s production, the Holocaust, evoked through the looming image of “a billion dead”, “a mountain of corpses”, along with a gas chamber-like set piece that at one point spews out shoes—and if he has slept through it, he is not worthy of redemption.

Yet, the quintessence of being unworthy of mercy is Pozzo, who, in the first act, in Csaba Sorbán’s impressive performance, represented a Lord degenerated into a male prostitute, superior to all, especially Lucky—see the similarity between the names Godot and Pozzo, underpinned by the dialogue upon their arrival: “POZZO: I present myself: Pozzo. VLADIMIR: No way. ESTRAGON: He said Godot. VLADIMIR: No way.” The same effect is achieved by the vertical addition of Pozzo’s name to the inscription “GodøT.” However, by the second act, Pozzo has become blind and vulnerable. And as a blind man, he “does not know the concept of time,” which is why the following monologue bursts out of him in Sorbán’s heartbreakingly simple, unadorned performance: “Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It’s abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?” And since he has no idea whether time is advancing or has stalled, he now cries for mercy, timeless and clumsy.

His increasingly desperate cries, however, also reflect the “attitude” of Vladimir and Estragon, which has somewhat changed by the second act. This can happen because while in Szabó K.’s direction the first act is a continuation of a previous, unwritten act—Act Zero—the second act, following Beckett’s intent, becomes a mirror image of the first, only a much darker one. For while in the first act the criminals were only themselves, in the second one they start to play “Pozzo-and-Lucky”. This intersection of the two human axes, the horizontal and the vertical, thus also demonstrates at the level of “human matter”: there is nothing new under the sun, we keep repeating the same traits cyclically, but in ever lower forms. This is reflected in, Vladimir and Estragon’s, the two Good Samaritans’ becoming Merciless Samaritans as they hesitate over the matter of helping Pozzo, who has fallen to the ground.

But that is not the only indication. When Vladimir, having got rid of his own hat, puts Lucky's hat on his head—a hat that in the first act made the servant a half-thinking being between animal and human, and in which Hunor Pál enthralled the audience with a seemingly unutterable, incoherent monologue, at the same time tormenting his (Lucky's) master and the characters on the road listening to him—this hat proves insufficient for him as a means of making him to think. In its possession he cannot continue—we feel—not only to think but also to exist, to be. And yet he cries, 'Off we go again,' when suddenly the child (Márton Sinka), Godot's messenger appears again—for the second time, almost in a circular fashion—symbolizing the hope of redemption. But as much as the arrival of the young character of Beckett's play seems promising, it is equally unnerving. For the Boy's typical answer to Vladimir's questions about the person of Godot, about his coming, about the circumstances of his existence alongside Godot is, "I don't know, Sir."

I don't know who Godot is, I don't know if he will ever come, I don't know if I am Cain or Abel, or the two criminals, one of whom may have been saved, or Christ, waiting to be resurrected after the crucifixion. Or like this, as *ecce homo*, as a condensed way of being, everything and everyone together? Most probably the latter but, seeing the helpless immobility of Beckett's characters portrayed by the four actors, and given Godot's continued absence, we can only hope for the mercy of even having any knowledge about it.

Godot-t várva (Expecting Godot). Production of the Csokonai National Theatre – Debrecen

Opening night: September 27, 2024

Directed by István Szabó K.

Translated by former ELTE students of French, led by Ágnes Horváth

Played by Zoltán Seress Jászai Mari Award winner, Árpád Bakota Jászai Mari Award winner, Csaba Sorbán, Hunor Pál, Márton Milán Sinka

Costume Designer: Florina Belinda Vasilatos

Set designer: Ianis Vasilatos

Prompter: Adrienn Góz

Stage manager: Fruzsina Nagy