Waiting for Godot Teaching Tips

Graley Herren  
Xavier University

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Recommended Citation
Herren, Graley, "Waiting for Godot Teaching Tips" (2020). Faculty Scholarship. 591.  
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WAITING FOR GODOT BY
SAMUEL BECKETT
Graley Herren, Xavier University

IN BRIEF
Performing the politics of adaptation.

PURPOSE
This exercise shows how political contexts impact the performance and reception of Waiting for Godot. Students examine two case studies: 1993 Sarajevo and 2007 New Orleans. Both productions used Godot to comment upon tensions in their communities at the time of performance. Students consider how the play both invites and resists such appropriations.

PREPARATION
This exercise can be more or less labor-intensive, depending on whether or not the instructor wants to use it as an exercise for teaching research and oral presentation. At the very least, preparation involves reading Godot. On the heavier end, students may research the two productions and report their findings to the class. On the lighter end, the instructor may prepare a lecture on this background information or deliver that information as a reading assignment.

MATERIALS
None.

Nuts and Bolts

1 Either through advance readings, instructor lecture, or student research/report, provide background on the Bosnian War as context for
appreciating the 1993 Sarajevo production and on Hurricane Katrina as context for appreciating the 2007 New Orleans production.

2 Identify and discuss specific creative decisions made by director Susan Sontag designed to accommodate the special needs of her war-ravaged performers and audience. Consider why Sontag selected this play for performance and how she accentuated certain moments and passages as commentary on the Bosnian War and the international response (or lack thereof). Analyze the motives and impact of Sontag’s substantial cuts and significant departures from *Godot* as written by Beckett.

3 Identify and discuss specific creative decisions made by producer Paul Chan and director Christopher McElroen designed to contribute to the rebuilding efforts in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Consider the impact of these environmental performances of *Godot* at a crossroads in the decimated Lower Ninth Ward and on the porch of a destroyed house in Gentilly. Look at specific moments and passages that take on new meaning in this environment. Examine the production’s implied commentary on the Bush administration’s response (or lack thereof) to the post-Katrina crisis. Survey various audience responses to these shows.

4 Highlight the historical conditions from which Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot*, emphasizing his role in the French Resistance and his time on the run from the Gestapo during the Second World War.

5 Guide students to look for moments in *Godot* that potentially reveal the author’s or characters’ political principles. Look for moments that could be read as delivering political critiques. Look for moments that resist appropriation for specific political causes. Try to figure out why this play has such enduring appeal in times and places of political strife.

**Reflection**

I like this exercise because it introduces students to the historically and politically specific contexts in which performances take place. As teachers of dramatic literature, we often look for ways of emphasizing the performative dimensions of texts we teach. But what often gets overlooked in those discussions is the fact that there are reasons why certain plays are selected for productions at certain places and times. Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* has frequently been staged with turmoil raging outside the theater. This exercise attempts to figure out why that is. This exercise also reminds students that producers, directors, performers, and audiences don’t always check their preoccupations in the lobby along with their coats. They bring their lives into the auditorium with them, and they take the play they’ve just seen back out into the world as they leave. As bizarre and otherworldly as *Godot* can seem to undergraduates encountering it for the first time, I hope that this exercise helps convince them that this play is very much a by-product of and a comment upon life as it is really lived outside the theater.