

BECKETT FESTIVAL

*The Barbican
Centre, London.*

BECKETT'S *Waiting For Godot*, a play in which, famously, nothing really happens, is not to all tastes.

But the majority of the audience at the Barbican Centre for the opening of the Beckett Festival from Dublin's Gate Theatre, were captivated.

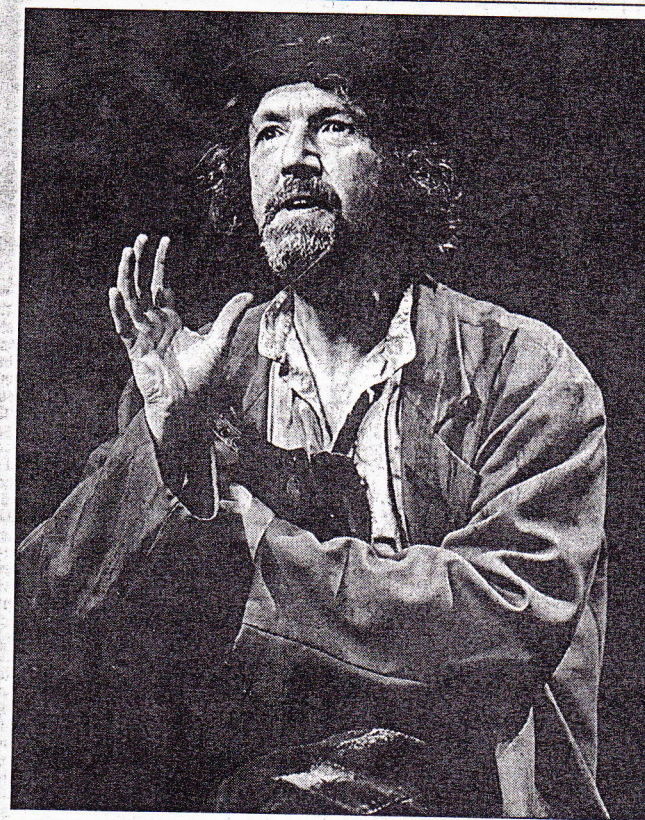
On the face of it, examining the 'plot' itself, it is hard to see why. Two tramps with unknown pasts are waiting on a bleak and lonely country road for a mysterious character called Godot. The expected encounter provides their trivial existences with some meaning even if they don't know who Godot is or why they are waiting. So why are we entertained?

The play stands or falls on the actors' ability to bring out the musical rhythms of Beckett's language and his eccentric humour and this was a performance full of perfectly timed exchanges in which gesture and silence were used to full effect.

After one particularly absurd and fruitless exchange, there was a long pause and Barry McGovern, as Vladimir, said: "This is getting really insignificant." The timing made the audience laugh uproariously.

One of Beckett's passions was the elegant chamber music of Schubert and his plays are structured like music with constantly repeating refrains such as "nothing to be done" and "we're waiting for Godot".

Perhaps the best sequence, combining this beauty of language with absurdist humour is when Lucky, the aged, decrepit, bowed slave of the land-owning Pozzo, suddenly bursts into life with a



WAITING FOR GODOT: Nothing much happening.

monologue on all things philosophical — Stephen Brennan performed it brilliantly, at breakneck speed, then shrunk back into silence. Like music.

Alan Stanford was amusingly pompous as Pozzo, the slightly fascistic, theatrical character who chanches upon Vladimir and Estragon and tries to impress with his declaiming manner and self-important pronouncements.

Johnny Murphy was outstanding as Estragon, perfectly encapsulating his self-pity, childlike need for companionship and unworldliness. Hearing his Irish accent made one aware of the play's inherent Irishness — of the illogical nature of much of the dialogues — reminiscent of Lawrence Sterne or Flann O'Brien.

Pozzo says: "I don't seem to be able to depart."

Vladimir: "You're going the wrong way."

Pozzo: "I need a running start."

So what does it all mean? Millions of words have been written trying to figure that one out — but, perhaps, one exchange, following a series of meandering discussions, sums it up.

Vladimir: "That passed the time."

Estragon: "It would have passed anyway."

Vladimir: "Yes, but not so rapidly."

Life is meaningless in a Godless world — the only defence is to see the absurdity of the human condition and to laugh at ourselves as embodied in Beckett's immortal tramps.

■ Beckett Festival is at The Barbican Centre until September 18. Tel: 0171 638 8891.

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