

# Gambit Weekly

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Waiting for Godeaux  
By [Dalt Wonk](#)



Photo by Donn Young and Courtesy of Creative Time

Estragon (J. Kyle Manzay) and Vladimir (Wendell Pierce) wait for Godot in the Lower Ninth Ward.

What would Samuel Beckett have made of this? *Waiting for Godot* outdoors in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. The audience, survivors of a great natural cataclysm, watched as his hobos waited in vain for some ray of hope to fall on them. *Godot* is a melancholy, bitter though often funny, argument for the hopelessness of the human condition. Yet, this audience " who was in much the same situation as Vladimir and Estragon not that long ago " watched the bleak tale with rapt attention and rose for a standing ovation at the end.

It was artistic director Paul Chan who first realized that the weed-choked fields of the lower Ninth Ward were a ready-made set for Beckett's 1954 morality tale. How, after all, was one to make sense of this sort of random destruction? Where were the former residents to turn for help? A witty

friend of mine, with these questions in mind, twisted the title into 'Waiting for the Dough.'

Beckett's play, however, runs deeper. He wasn't addressing government incompetence or the plight of two hobos. He was using Vladimir and Estragon as symbolic representatives of us all. He was speaking about himself as much as anyone else. Beckett was living in Paris when he wrote *Godot*. Presented in a café theatre, it caught on with the intelligentsia. The set is described as: a country road, a tree, evening. That sort of uncompromising lack of specific reality pushes the meaning " if there is one " toward the symbolic. When someone complained about this paucity of details, Beckett breezily replied that everything else was Ibsen.

No synopsis of the play can do it justice. It has been famously characterized as a play where nothing happens " twice. That's not exactly true, but what happens tends to be small, perplexing interchanges of a somewhat surreal nature. Furthermore, the nothingness is precisely the point. Beckett's sense of despair is that we wander around and wait in a void. No meaning. No goal. No salvation. In fact, when one hobo mentions 'our Savior.' The other responds quizzically, 'our what?'

Part of the humor and madness of the void is uncertainty. What happened the moment before is uncertain. What is happening now is uncertain. For instance, are the hobos even waiting in the right place? Panic threatens at every turn because of this confusion. One of the curious things is that we in the audience, while distanced from the chaos the hobos live in, feel the uncomfortable breeze of uncertainty pass us in some of these exchanges. Perhaps, our laughter is not as superior as we would like to think. Perhaps, it's the laughter of recognition.

'What do we do now?'" asks one hobo.

'Wait,' replies the other.

'Yes, but while waiting.'

'What about hanging ourselves.' The nihilistic inspiration stands no chance until a further inducement is added. 'It will give us an erection.'

Creative Time, a New York-based nonprofit, and the Classical Theatre of Harlem produced this site-specific *Godot*. Actually, it's as site-unspecific as any other *Godot* but benefits from the world-as-stage magic that must have given a special resonance to Greek drama in outdoor amphitheatres. The fate of such creatures 'between heaven and earth' becomes hauntingly real under a sky full of stars, and when one of the characters says 'listen' and we hear the reverberating silence of night.

The two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are on stage during the entire play. Wendell Pierce (Vladimir) and J. Kyle Manzay (Estragon) in their battered bowler hats and grimy sports coats were a delight. They brought to life the squabbling, unsentimentalized friendship of two down-and-out lost souls with a mischievous energy. In fact, that friendship and mischievous energy are about as close as we get to a positive element in Beckett's existential hell.

The waiting is interrupted by a visitation from Pozzo and Lucky. They seem to symbolize power, class and the way of the world. Pozzo (T. Ryder Smith) is dressed in a white suit and has a siren as well as a loud speaker so he can flip into police mode. Lucky (Mark McLaughlin) is his bearer or perhaps his slave. Pozzo bullies Lucky and demands complete obedience. In the end, he takes Lucky off to the fair to sell him. Smith and McLaughlin gave crackerjack performances as these intertwined eccentrics. Tony Felix and Michael Pepp ably filled out the cast, alternating as the boy. Christopher McElroen directed this memorable evening of theater " in which the levees, a lonely stretch of road and the ghosts of houses past played supporting roles.