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BLURRING THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN ONSTAGE AND ONLINE

THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC HAS KEPT THEATRES CLOSED, leaving audiences to turn to the internet and streaming services to satiate their appetite for theatrical experiences. Online presentations, such as The New Group Off Stage's Zoom production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (2021), directed and adapted by Scott Elliot, and *Revisor* (2019), by Canada's own Kidd Pivott, blur the distinctions between stage and screen to offer audiences a theatrical experience they can access remotely.

In each of *Waiting for Godot*'s two acts, Vladimir and Estragon (played by Ethan Hawke and John Leguizamo) occupy themselves with inane chatter as they wait for the ever-absent Godot, and they are met by Pozzo and Lucky (played by Tarik Trotter and Wallace Shawn), a cruel master and his slave, who contribute to the pointless discussion as they travel aimlessly by the tragicomic duo. When Estragon says "nothing to be done" at the opening of the play, he could be succinctly describing the experience of living in quarantine, as we have similarly been left with little, if anything, to do. And we, like Vladimir and Estragon in this production, have turned to digital technologies to connect with the loved ones, friends, or colleagues we cannot see in person. In light of the fact that we cannot leave our homes to see our loved ones but instead connect via digital technologies, the moment repeated at the end of each act, when Vladimir and Estragon agree to leave but remain in place, evokes the experience of quarantine so well it stings.

The parallels between the circumstances of *Waiting for Godot* and the pandemic can be heavy-handed at times. When Vladimir and Estragon hold up handkerchiefs to cover their mouths like masks whenever Pozzo and Lucky enter, this production resonates with the experience of living during a pandemic in a clumsy and pointless manner. The thematic resonances, though clever at the beginning of the play, fail to sustain interest over the

production's three-hour run time. This production consistently, but occasionally far too obviously, reminds us of the impossibility of escaping our present circumstances, echoing the existential conundrum that the characters face.

The format of the performance is the more original and ultimately meaningful element of the play's setting. Before each character ostensibly turns on his computer camera to be seen in his teleconference video call, we see his name displayed, as we all now are accustomed to when logging on to these digital platforms. The occasional glitch (a distortion of the video) and the few moments when the camera freezes make the technological frame even more realistic. These moments highlight how attempts to connect with another person fail, echoing a theme that permeates both Beckett's script and Elliot's adaptation. Though we might share the same (digital) space, it is difficult to feel and understand each other's pain and joy, in part because we often fail even to understand the words we speak to one another.

The sets of this production—that is, the rooms from where each of the characters call from—also capture the claustrophobic atmosphere of quarantine. The audience finds Vladimir and Estragon in dark, dank basement-like rooms that represent Beckett's dystopian environment. When the script calls for the two characters to comment on their environs—or, more specifically, about the tree that is mentioned in both the dialogue and the stage directions—they each look out of a window in the rear walls of their rooms. These atmospheric spaces match the general feeling of depression and languish that most of us feel, as we too are confined to our own cramped spaces.

The difficulty of Beckett's masterpiece for an actor is to emotionally invest in the characters and the existential, meaningless, and uneventful situation in which they find themselves. Hawke and Leguizamo meet this challenge admirably, and their performances are authentic and enrapturing. Despite their expert capacity to embody these two iconic characters, however, the production's lack of investment in the comic elements of Beckett's tragicomedy leaves the production much less enjoyable to experience than it could have been. In his role as the mute Lucky, Wallace Shawn effectively elicits pathos through his pained expressions but is not directed to bring the much-needed comic relief that other stage and screen performances suggest he can deliver. Tarik Trotter, playing Pozzo, admirably provides a contrast between Pozzo in the first act, who is commanding and almost regal, and

Pozzo in the second act, who has become feeble and blind, but again leaves an audience crushed by the weight of tragedy.

The production is ultimately a more interesting experiment than either a theatrical or cinematic experience, but the metatheatrical/metacinematic commentary does not seamlessly apply to videoconferencing platforms. The moments in which the characters are required to hand an object, such as the boot, carrot, or hat, to another character, which they do by passing it over the top of their respective screens after it magically appears at the top of another character's screen, does not seem to add anything to the experience other than to follow the stage directions of the script faithfully. When the production fails, it is because the concept does not allow for Beckett's metatheatrical brilliance, which requires all the actors to share a space and perform before an audience. After all, cyberspace is not a physical space. Though the characters of Pozzo and Lucky move in and out of the story, the effort to make cyberspace function as a real life/space is proven to have its limits. For example, when Estragon suggests that he and Vladimir "converse calmly," since speaking means they "won't think," the production painfully dramatizes the inclination many of us have to busy ourselves with inane tasks. The experience of speaking is thus a central element of both the play and our lives, as we cannot dine together, play together, or be physically together, yet this does not necessarily provide an enjoyable cinematic experience.

The inertia and languish evoked by this production directly contrast the entertaining and dynamic *Revisor*, despite how both experiences explore the blending and blurring of boundaries. *Revisor* tells the story of Nikolai Gogol's play *The Government Inspector* (1836) through exaggerated, stylized movement choreographed by Crystal Pite. Gogol's play and Pite's adaptation both follow the major officers of a minor Russian jurisdiction as they first prepare to cover up their corruption and incompetence after hearing that a government inspector from the capital has been sent to report on the administration and then later as they try to ingratiate themselves with the upper-class twit they mistakenly identify as the inspector. The production blurs boundaries not just because it can only be enjoyed online but also because it combines the conventions of dance and theatre. Each line of dialogue in the play, adapted by Pite's frequent collaborator Jonathan Young, is recorded by actors and played over the theatre's sound system, and this "soundtrack" is accompanied by choreographed movements and

gestures that indicate whether a particular character is speaking that text or whether a particular character or characters is reacting to what is happening around them. In addition to these movements, the dancers also lip-sync the text attributed to their characters, just as a drag queen would in a conventional drag performance. *Revisor* thus exemplifies dance-theatre in the most literal way, as the performers both enact dialogue, as they would in a conventional play, and express themselves—or, in this case, their characters—through dance. This metatheatrical conceit, which directs the audience's attention not only to the performance but also to how it is performed, is further established by a narrator, who describes the setting and the actions of the characters on stage.

This conceit is explored further when the real inspector, not the character who is mistaken to be the inspector, offers her report on what she saw during her visit. After a third of the performance, one of the dancers removes her overcoat and wig to reveal neutral black pants and a black shirt, and she then begins to dance to her last line of dialogue, which slowly repeats itself in such a way that the words eventually become indistinguishable. When this brief dance interlude concludes, the web-like lighting projected on the back scrim of the stage speaks. That is to say, the light projection flashes and changes shape as the narrator that spoke the stage directions at the beginning of the play speaks again, confessing that it is the government inspector. The dancers then repeat the performance of the first third, dressed now in neutral pants and shirts, but they no longer lip-sync to the soundtrack of spoken dialogue. In fact, the spoken dialogue now creates a dreamlike soundscape where the text is repeated, distorted, and reverberated. These repeated actions chart a metatheatrical journey from conventional storytelling to abstracted deconstruction, as the reproduction pares the original performance down to its essential actions, which are then described by the voice-over narrator, like a sports play-by-play announcer. *Revisor* thus demonstrates how the act of reporting produces a truth that is distinct not only from the original source but also from other attempts to reproduce what was seen, heard, and experienced.

The minimal set of the production mirrors this metatheatrical journey. At the beginning of the play, the set accurately represents the many details provided by the narrator. When the performance is reproduced in the second third, only the essential items are included. For example, the first scene is set in an office that includes a bureau, a filing cabinet, a chair, and a door-

way, but when this scene is reproduced only the bureau remains. As the reproduction strips away information, the set is also stripped down to its most basic elements.

The dancers who embody the characters in Gogol's play are extremely talented, and their capacity to capture the essence of these characters through the exaggerated act of lip-syncing is virtuosic. When this is abandoned after the first third of the performance, they are able to demonstrate their dancing skills even more fully, as their choreographed movements give more attention to the conventional elements of theatrical storytelling, character, expression, and story.

The lighting design is also striking in the most literal way. During the course of the performance a synapse-like lighting structure is projected onto the backdrop of the stage, as if it is growing out of the floor. As the play develops, the tension within the narrative is metaphorically represented by white lights flashing across the scrim, and this flame-like lighting effect constantly shifts and moves, most notably when the real inspector appears.

Unlike The New Group Off Stage's production of *Waiting for Godot*, Pivott's production employs a clever metatheatrical conceit that succeeds in being both entertaining and intellectually stimulating. As the conventional theatrical storytelling shifts to deconstructed contemporary dance, the audience is not weighed down by this heavy-handed conceit but is instead offered new insight into this familiar material. Both *Waiting for Godot* and *Revisor* involve repeated actions, but only *Revisor* finds a way to develop the original into something deeper, more profound, and ultimately more dynamic.

Waiting for Godot is currently available for \$9.99 on The New Group's website (thenewgroup.org/production/waitingforgodot), and *Revisor* is available for free on CBC Gem (gem.cbc.ca).