

Theatre

'Waiting for Godot' master acting class at Wilbury

By JAMES MEROLLA

For those who scratched their temples in high school, reading the mandatory AP English literary assignment, "Waiting for Godot," and finished, proclaiming, as many critics did, "Nothing happens in the first act, and even less in the second," you must see the brilliantly-acted version staged through Oct. 20 at the Wilbury Theatre in Providence.

Wilbury has launched its ninth season with the polarizing existential missile launched by playwright Samuel Beckett in 1952, that began as a dud, exploded like a rocket, and has embedded itself into the consciousness of actors, writers, critics and audience members for nearly 70 electric years.

(The World War I and II



Photo by Erin X. Smithers

Richard Donnelly, Zachary Gibb, Tom Gleadow and Brandon Whitehead in "Waiting for Godot" at The Wilbury Theatre Group, Providence.

implications are intentional as the searing work about our bleak existence, death, life, being saved, and the importance of faith, loyalty and how we mark our precious little time "while we are waiting," most often for something spectacular that never comes, are the talisman that shaped Beckett's work.)

After seeing this faithful version to Beckett's original version staged simply, tearfully, comically, and authentically by director Fred Sullivan, Jr., reaffirms in my mind this is one of the 10 most important plays ever written.

If you have never seen it, this is the ONLY version you may ever need to see.

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GODOT, from D1

Against a fittingly barren stage – moon, sun, bare tree, two platforms only – Sullivan has cast four brilliant actors, an ensemble that lifts a play that few may have planned to embrace into the absolute purpose of great theater – getting the audience to examine their very lives or, at the very least, the lives of the characters who examine it by not examining it at all.

That seeming contradiction in the sentence above is the essence of Beckett, an existential masterpiece that may say nothing while it may touch upon so much; a flurry of loud and conflicting, often chaotic verbiage and activity, that doesn't mean much to the characters, while perhaps meaning much to the audience.

You may not understand it, but, damn, you have to think about it; unless you are a Millennial and haven't taken a selfie in the last minute, because these damn noisy actors are interrupting your really meaningless self-obsession.

Godot is not "God." The French word for "God," is "Dieu," (Beckett wrote the original in French), but there are many references to the Gospels, salvation, Christ, the Thief on the Cross. The play is wounded philosophy, often erratic rambling, but dotted with penetrating insight, with many ponderous, and ponderable, revelations even in the dark spaces.

Two vagabonds, Estragon (Gogo) and Vladimir (Didi) wait for Godot. They are miserable, battling pain, imagined beatings by thugs, prostate problems, hunger and the weariness of the world. We never know why they wait. We never know who Godot is. By the end, we face, like the wretched Didi, the bleak realization that Godot will never come, although they will continue to abide.

In one of the play's most telling lines, a mini-encapsulation of the entire two-hour work, Didi says,

"Habit is a great deadener."
 "Nothing to be done," is another example, in this master theater class, of the essence of our helplessness in the face of horrible, uncontrollable circumstances. "Let's go!" the two homeless men say at the end of each act, and never move.

If these lines frustrate you, maybe this is not the work to see. But the performances by Richard Donnelly as Gogo, and Zachary Gibb, as the Auschwitz-like, put-upon slave Lucky, who is practically entombed alive all night, explodes with his "thoughts," in a monologue that makes no sense while simultaneously revealing how his tragic personal arch was formed, are fabulous.

As good as they are, the performance of Brandon Whitehead as Pozzo is extraordinary. He is very loud, bellowing horrible commands to Lucky, shifting from charming, to threatening, to vicious, to philosophical, to wow. Whitehead completely embodies the character to phenomenal ends. He is a nimble, gifted physical actor.

There are cute touches by Sullivan, tributes to the silent clowns of Chaplin, Keaton, Laurel and Hardy.

But it is Gleadow, paired perfectly with Donnelly as pitiable companion



Above: Brandon Whitehead, Richard Donnelly, Tom Gleadow and Zachary Gibb in "Waiting for Godot" Wilbury Theatre Group, Providence. Below: Hayley Pezza; bottom: Zachary Gibb.

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for life, who is the essential soul of this multi-souled work. Gleadow is phenomenal, whether he is questioning their purpose (400 times), explaining their purpose (400 times), hatching a new strategy, abandoning that strategy, bucking up Gogo, the childlike cypher who eats the bones tossed by Pozzo, singing a soothing lullaby he cannot remember fully, or questioning a boy about Godot.

I have had the privilege of seeing the finest female performance this year – Jeanine Kane in the GAMM's "Doll House, Part II," and now, the best male performance by an actor, Tom Gleadow in "Godot." Both were directed by Sullivan.

In this case, Beckett was wrong. Habit is anything but a great deadener.

"Waiting for Godot" plays through Oct. 20 at the Wilbury Theatre, 40 Sonoma Court, Providence. www.thewilburygroup.org.



Tom Gleadow and Richard Donnelly

Photo by Erin X. Smithers