

WAITING FOR GOD KNOWS WHAT

By Peter Bull

“It will be a conversational necessity for many years to have seen Waiting for Godot”—so proclaimed the posters outside the Arts and Criterion theatres during the run of Samuel Beckett’s play. But what, asks Peter Bull, who played Pozzo in the production, about the actors who had to suffer the reactions of the well-brought-up English audiences?



PETER BULL as Pozzo in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.

Photo: Houston Rogers

Life for those who earned their living on the stage at the turn of the century must have been full of excitement, glamour and, above all, admiration. So far as can discover it consisted mainly of having passionate letters written to you by famous playwrights or having champagne drunk out of your little booties. This state of bliss obviously could not last, and now we, the buskers of the fifties, find ourselves tasting the reaction in no uncertain way.

For it seems to me that we are back in the days of the eighteenth century, when things were thrown at you both on and off the stage and you were lucky to escape with your life if you had a shot at a role that was slightly outside your range. This was all very brutally brought to my notice during the rationing period, when my whole existence depended on the TV programme in which I was appearing.

Accosted Everywhere

It is now an established fact that owners, viewers, part-owners, hirers of sets, their relations, friends and daily help regard their seeing of you occasionally on a small screen in a private or public house as a perfectly legitimate excuse to accost you in the open-air or on public transport.

Having done this they proceed to revile you, bore the pants off you, hit you, or—in rare cases—praise you. The pleasure of their praise, however, is usually offset by the blank look they give you after they have asked your name.

I myself was lucky to escape starvation after the war, as the large grocery store which I patronise suddenly took to patronising me—“That wasn’t a bad little play you were in last night. You took quite a good part;...” ‘Bloody awful yesterday;’ ‘What’s going to happen next week to you and Anne Crawford?’—But a few weeks later back I was as old Mum Hubbard owing to an unwise decision to play in a piece about Pontius Pilate—written, rather surprisingly, by the author of *Worm’s Eye View*.

No Iron Curtain

Then there came the great ordeal of the Criterion Theatre, where for some months I have been acting in an entertainment (?) called *Waiting for Godot*. This stimulating but nerve-racking experience forced me into a kind of B—ss and Ma—n existence, with the important difference that I had no Iron Curtain behind which to hide. The iron or safety curtain was only lowered once during the evening at the Criterion, when none of us were on the stage. I used to wish every night that it would stick, as although I faced one or two tricky situations during the war, they were nothing compared to the

nightly ordeal of facing the customers at Samuel Beckett’s play.

Mark you, as my mother would say, they soon stopped mass demonstrations, and only rarely cries of “Rubbish”, “It’s a disgrace”, “Take it off”, “Disgusting!” and “What do you think you are doing?” come wafting over the footlights. In the early days of the run the noise of people slamming seats and crashing through the exit doors was disturbing, but this, too, was only a passing phase.

But it is not very pleasant at the supposedly revered age of 43, after a long and undistinguished career in the theatre, to hear a lady in the front row say in a bell-like voice: “I do wish the fat one would go”. I could not believe my ears and hurriedly looked round at my fellow artists, none of whom have ever looked thinner. But no it was obviously with me that she was displeased, and it was difficult to know how to hit back.

Sexy Evening

Luckily Timothy Bateson, who played my slave and to whom I am deeply attached both in life and on the stage (by a rope), leapt to my assistance and on our exit made as if to land on the lady’s lap. The direct result of this was that neither the lady or her party of 12 were there for the second act. Thinking it over, I was stirred to compassion, as I think she had made the grave error of supposing that *Intimacy at 8.30*, our gay predecessor at the Criterion, was still being played there and had imagined that a jolly, sexy evening was going to be had by all.

One always had to count the house twice during the evening, as those left when the Anthem was played bore no relation to those who started out to enjoy themselves at the beginning of the play. During Motor Show week, I remember, the exodus could not have been quicker if a fire had broken out in the stalls bar.

Floods of Tears

I felt particularly sorry for the lady who turned to a friend of mine in the first interval and asked, “What do you make of it?” My chum, who is nothing if not guarded, suggested it made a change from all those ice shows, to which the lady replied, “It’s my last night in London and they said I *had* to see this.” She then burst into floods of tears. My friend comforted her by packing her off to the second house of the revue round the corner, featuring Benny Hill.

But of course not everybody felt this way: a lot of people thought it was absolutely wonderful, a great treat, gloriously funny, noble, or “just like life”. I thought *them* splendid too, because it meant that I was paid for several months longer than I’d ever hoped. But even they could be alarming, because they either sat

spellbound in respectful silence or laughed their heads off in such a sinister way that the actors used to think they’d forgotten to adjust their costumes.

It was the worst when they came round to the dressing-room after the play to tell us what it all meant. It was far too late for that anyhow, and it was disconcerting, to hear that the character I’d been portraying for months represented Fascism, Communism, Lord Beaverbrook, Hollywood, James Joyce or, rather surprisingly, Humpty-Dumpty.

“It will be a conversational necessity for many years to have seen *Waiting for Godot*”, proclaimed the posters and theatre lists and woe betide those who did not take the plunge. I hear that husbands are being divorced because they wouldn’t take their wives to see the damned thing. Invitations to grand parties are now only issued to those whose conversational powers enable them to discuss the play *ad infinitum*.

Brooding in the Bath

It is a necessary qualification, I gather, to have seen at least three-quarters of the play—which, I fear, would exclude a good many of my friends, including Robert Morley. He is extremely worried by the whole thing, and rings me up periodically to issue a *pronunciamento*. “I have been brooding in my bath for the last hour and have come to the conclusion that the success of *Waiting for Godot* means the end of the theatre as we know it.”

Then he rings smartly off before I can reply. He came for half of the same performance as Boris Karloff, who stayed the course and is now asked out everywhere, and I was much touched by his loyalty. He would have stayed, he said, for the second act, but as he understood I was dumb throughout he saw no point in such masochism. I have not dared tell him that I was blind in the last act and acted my head off.

But even apart from financial considerations, the advantages of appearing in the play far outweighed the disadvantages. I do suggest that the gallantry of both actors and audience should be recognised, however, and a special medal presented to both parties by somebody like Johnnie Ray, himself an expert on stamina. I should like something to show the visitors should I be unlucky enough to end up in the same kind of hospital as the gentleman who played my part in another capital of Europe. And in order to lessen my apprehension of the future I have asked my manager, Donald Albery, to let me do *Noddy in Toyland* next Christmas.