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*Waiting
for Godot*

BECKETT

*The Birthday
Party*

PINTER

The Visit

DÜRRENMATT

*American
Buffalo*

MAMET

*Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern Are Dead*

STOPPARD

Tango

MROZEK NINE

The Balcony

GENET PLAYS

*The Caucasian
Chalk Circle*

BRECHT OF

Rhinoceros

IONESCO THE

MODERN

THEATER

*Edited and With an Introduction
by Harold Clurman*

NINE
PLAYS
OF
THE
MODERN
THEATER

With an Introduction by Harold Clurman

Grove Press, Inc. New York

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INTRODUCTION

by

Harold Clurman

Vladimir, the more "philosophical" of the two vagrants in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, stiffens their morale by asking, "... what's the good of losing heart now? We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties!" What does this mean in the play's context? What were the nineties that these bewildered blighters should recall them with regret? It was perhaps a time when they had not yet entered upon their agony. It was a time of certainty, a beautiful time—or so it seemed to them and to most of their contemporaries.

In 1882 Nietzsche had pronounced God dead. The mass of men who did not read Nietzsche were not yet affected by his devastating affirmation. In 1865, Ibsen, presumably an athiest, wrote *Brand*, in which God is very real to its protagonist. Faith in those days, though under attack, still resisted. And even in the nineties God was still in his heaven and there was peace on Earth. Disturbed by doubt during the twenties, the world was nevertheless giddily livable and hectically "safe." The destruction of old idols was an intellectual's game.

The Second World War all but demolished the age-old fortress of belief sustained by the idea of God. For what is God, apart from its sacred meaning, but the concept of a coherent order, a hierarchy of values which either rationally or transcendantly illuminates the chaos of existence. Without the support of such a structure life becomes a desert plain without a clear path, direction, or destination; it makes no "sense." Even iconoclasm becomes pointless. Humans become blind mice. Or so it appeared to many people of sensibility and probing minds. The noblest of them could hardly affirm anything more than that they were desperately pining for an answer, a "Godot," which might save them.

The nine plays included in this volume are not only modern by date—1944 to 1975—but in their dramatization of the dilemma. Though each may differ from the other in literary and theatrical quality, in personality or style, they nearly all confront a common concern, the same spiritual situation. While each expresses an individual consciousness and temperament, all move toward a unity in which we may discern a por-

trait of our day. What, in any case, is incontrovertible is that they are among the most representative plays of our era.

Whatever topical material they employ, all of them aim at a universality of meaning. None is strictly realistic. It is only a seeming paradox that while most of them have been lumped as "pessimistic," they are generally comedies, often quite funny. But where nothing is sure, where everything is put in question, when as in *Godot* the difference of one season from another is nothing but the addition of a leaf to a hitherto lone tree, a sad note will prevail. Beckett called his play a tragicomedy, as Dürrenmatt did with *The Visit*.

The exception to the "nihilistic" aspect of the pieces collected here is Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. It is perhaps telling that it was written in California in 1944 when the author, though in exile, was hopeful with the impending defeat of nazism of a better day to come. But a much more operative factor in Brecht's optimism was that he believed in an order in human history. For him, Marxism establishes a coherence and order in the dialectics of experience.

Still, Brecht's Marxism (barely acceptable in the Soviet Union) and the moment when *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was written do not precisely explain the play's healthy ebullience. There is in Brecht a peasant-like robustness of humor, a quizzical wisdom of which his frequent use of earthy proverbs is a sign. Speaking of the Governor's Wife who during the turmoil of a rebellion wantonly loses sight of her baby that is found and cared for by Nina, the baby's nurse, a woman in the crowd comments, "Nina takes it more to heart than the mistress. . . . They [the rich] even have to have their weeping done for them."

The Caucasian Chalk Circle is a fable which never departs from a primitive simplicity. Its ribaldries are gentle, its overall tone light-hearted and cleansing. Its "music" is yea saying. "Fearful is the seductive power of goodness," the Singer (or chorus) tells us; and at another point "in the bloodiest times, there are kind people." Contrary to his reputation, except for a few didactic plays, Brecht's plays are not propaganda unless we consider a morality play like *Everyman* to be propaganda. The climactic scene of *The Circle* is very much a folk jest. The moral is summed up in the Singer's serene envoi, ". . . you who have listened to the Story of the Chalk Circle, take note of what men of old have concluded: that what there is shall go to those who are good for it, children to the motherly that they prosper, carts to good drivers that they be driven well, the valley to the waterers that it yield fruit."

There is another respect in which Brecht is contemporary and pre-eminent: his work is cast in unequivocally *theatrical* form. Along with

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poetically inspired dialogue he employs song and musical accompaniment, innovative scenic inventions rarely found in the drama which runs from Ibsen through to the German expressionists. Brecht's formal means, which mark a return to classic modes—he said “Japanese”—and a new kind of direction (demanded by the texts themselves), have influenced a large area of contemporary stagecraft, whatever their “ideology.”

With *Waiting for Godot*, written in 1948 and first produced in Paris in 1952, we come to the seminal play of the period, indeed its masterpiece. In it the era of dismay and discouragement finds its most incisive and poignant theatrical expression. Its opening line and image set the key for the whole parable. As one of the tramps sits on a low mound “in the midst of nothingness” trying in vain to pull off his boot which pinches painfully, he murmurs “nothing to be done,” to which Vladimir concurs, “I am beginning to come around to that opinion.” But he adds more thoughtfully, “That is man all over for you, blaming on his boots the fault of his feet.”

There is, for all the repetitiousness, hardly a wasted word or an insignificant allusion in the entire play. This terseness is characteristic not only of Beckett but of much of the writing in contemporary drama—often carried to the point of nearly total silence. In Beckett's case the effect, with a few sudden eruptions of anguished verbiage, mounts to an incantatory eloquence.

In the encompassing void and in the absence of meaningful event, each of the men is isolated within his own hurt; yet both feel a desperate need to cling together. Nothing is left to them but to wait for some redeeming agent, a “Godot.” They thrash about, they speak of going on but they do not move. “Let's not do anything, it's safer.” They contemplate suicide, but even this becomes a matter for ridicule. “Let's wait till we hear where we stand,” they decide.

Godot may be salvation. But not God. If he were, Beckett has explained, he would have said so. There is nevertheless a religious core to the play. The theologian Paul Tillich has written, “The god who is absent as an object of faith is present in the sense of restlessness which asks the question of the meaning of existence.” So it is in “Godot.” “To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time all mankind is us. . . .”

Mankind has lost its rights because, Vladimir asserts, “we got rid of them.” Social revolution in which others find the “answer” appears to be of little avail. The two men see Pozzo a “boss” or master-figure driving

Lucky, his slave, like a packhorse. The slave is mute, and only when forced to speak emits a torrent of clichés. And when the situation is reversed and Pozzo becomes a blinded slave, he is driven by Lucky, his former victim. There is little or no progress, Pozzo maintains on Beckett's behalf. "Let us not speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors. Let us not speak well of it either. Let us not speak of it at all," and adds judiciously, "it is true the population has increased."

What then is to be done? Practically nothing, it would seem. "Let us converse calmly, since we cannot keep silent." But human beings cannot keep silent. Nor can Beckett for all his resolve to do so. The play's constriction of grim humor suddenly bursts into a passionate outburst in which we may find a trace of healing: "What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blest in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion, one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come. . . . We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?"

Thus Beckett, a prophet despite himself, proclaims nobility in trying to find a true response to the question posed by the death of God. *Waiting for Godot* may be viewed as a challenge addressed to our baffled minds and wracked souls.

It is also a poem and more than that a consummate theater piece. It is replete with scenic metaphors to visualize and give body to the dramatist's thought and feeling. The means are minimal and in this the work achieves a new kind of classicism.

The Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt in *The Visit*, written in 1956, banks the metal of European dramatic ore and puts it to rich theatrical use. Many currencies become negotiable coin in a new synthesis. There are in this play fragments of German expressionism, of French existentialism, of Pirandello, and perhaps even of the Mark Twain of *The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg*. With macabre humor, a strain of quasi-romantic sentiment and transparent symbolism, the play tells us that everything may be bought, including justice. There is in it the fascination of the horror story, a shrewd melodrama in which a multimillionairess, an old lady whose very limbs are held together by steel and stone, after an absence of many years comes to vengeance on the man and the townsfolk who wronged her in her native village. She is Nemesis equipped with immense industrial and financial power. "The world turned me into a whore," she says, "I shall turn the world into a brothel." The dramatization of the process is the play's effective spine.

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But there is more to the play than that—a special “twist.” Nemesis in this instance is justified. The lady in question was abandoned by the man who seduced her in her innocence so that he might make a monetarily advantageous marriage. Pathos is introduced by a touching scene in which she and the man who betrayed her recall the purity of their early love. But it is this man whom she plans to have murdered by bribing the members of the impoverished town with the bequest of collective and individual fortunes. In the end the victim himself consents to his fate. Here all is hypocrisy: the community pretends that in accepting the bribe it is the instrument of a just retribution in killing the seducer for the crime of his youth, and then extends its hypocrisy to regarding the act as a kind of justice.

Modern civilization as a blazing bawdyhouse is what Jean Genet projects in frenetically exultant prose and a sort of lurid mysticism in *The Balcony*, which dates from 1958. Genet is a “saint” of evil: he embraces it in our stead as a sort of punishment and curse. There is surely no reformist intent on his part, yet if we take it as Genet means us to, his play terrifies and stuns. It is “a true image of a false spectacle.” *The Balcony* (the place itself) is the name of a brothel in which very ordinary citizens—most of them petty functionaries—enact their dreams of power or self-abasement as bishops, judges, generals, executioners. As a dream house it is also to a degree a work of art where the repressed desires and the drives of commonplace people reap gratification from their sordid sublimation. It is a “secret theater.” And as such, like all art, it offers consolation. The house is threatened by a people’s rebellion in which everything is to go up in flames in final dissolution.

The revolution which surrounds *The Balcony* fails; its symbolic leader, Chantal, herself formerly a whore who has escaped the brothel, is shot. The chief of police in a pact with Irma, *The Balcony*’s madam, crowns her as the new queen to replace the deposed one. He himself will become the head of the new state whose triumphant insignia will be a penis! And the brothel’s clients, who previously had only played the roles of bishop, judge, etc., will actually serve in those capacities under the new government. There is little to choose between the rulers the people have turned out and the new incumbents. It is all, Genet tells us, a matter of Nomenclature, that is, of advertised labels, publicity, the “media”! *The Balcony* is an infernal condemnation of society: Genet is a poet of the Last Judgment. He is also an extraordinarily imaginative, albeit occasionally overcomplex and confusing, theater artist. He ends the play with a

bitterly ironic admonition: "You must go home where everything—you can be quite sure—will be false than here."

Though Pinter avows a major debt to Beckett, there is a palpable difference between them. Pinter is much more "realistic": his plays are imbued by a local English atmosphere. The very weather permeates them—cold and damp making for a peculiar seediness. Then, too, Pinter's technique is that of melodrama and the mystery thriller. A mounting tension of impending doom grips us. Both these elements are conveyed in sharp strokes of dialogue composed of a workaday vocabulary.

The dis-ease in Pinter is not the same as in Beckett. Beckett's world has a certain negative purity: his characters are suspended in an airless air. In Pinter all is puzzlement, a kind of helpless groping for intelligibility; the characters hardly know what is happening to them. This ambiguity is couched in concrete words the very banality of which becomes chilling. A deathlike mist hovers over every action. Take, for instance, the final moments of *The Birthday Party*. Something terrible is about to occur. Benighted, Stanley, the central figure, is being removed somewhere; to what destination, for what reason, by whose command? We are not informed. The point is that he is being *taken away* by the strangest of strangers, themselves virtual cretins. We are in a bleak void of schizophrenia. Beckett is wholly expressive; Pinter suggests that expression has become all but incommunicative.

Though to Ionesco, Brecht is as much to be abjured as the *Boulevard* ("commercial") theater because Brecht is "political" and what is worse, Marxist, the fact is that in *Rhinoceros* at least, Ionesco implies a social purpose. It is an anticonformist cartoon. There is much of the same disquiet here as in most of the leading playwrights of the postwar generation and certain traits of mystification, but *Rhinoceros* is a comedy sustained by gags, vaudevillesque stunts, and Marx Brothers jocularities.

Ionesco's target is such a catch phrase as "We must move with the times." Systematically pursued, it makes everything ugly and ultimately dangerous; it transforms humans into "rhinoceroses." Its dominance explains the totalitarian push and why "the world's gone sick." Like the little fellow Berenger, the play's antihero, Ionesco insists "I'm not capitulating." But in *Rhinoceros* Ionesco's resistance is not grave but soft, like a man upset by too demanding and tumultuous an environment who yearns for homey ease and comfort.

Because Poland has for centuries been a subject nation, its theater has

to a considerable degree perfected a style of grotesquerie and invidious farce with subversive political connotations sparked by bitter though seemingly innocuous jokes. The disguise is what underlies the foolery of Mrozek's *Tango*.

Speaking for the author, a character says, "Don't you realize that tragedy isn't possible anymore?" Tragedy requires the recognition of a "god," an order widely accepted as sacrosanct, a sustaining ideal. It is our increasing awareness that this hardly exists anymore which must be the premise for an appreciation of the plays under discussion. But if so, Mrozek asks, what then? "Tragedy impossible, farce a bore—what's left but experiments?" Perhaps this explains much of today's avant-garde theater. What Mrozek is saying in his cockeyed comedy is that Poland especially is stumbling or falling between all the stools.

A late comer in the "field" is Tom Stoppard's 1966 *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. They are the boys from Wittenberg called to spy on Hamlet for objectives they cannot fathom, to an end they cannot anticipate. The play is the cleverest in the present collection. In a most engaging theatrical form the removal in time and place fosters a stagey glamor—it seizes upon a Beckett-like theme—men lost in an incomprehensible world—and makes it delectably witty.

The plot line is saddening, but the trimmings are jocular. On the one hand, we hear the blithe anarchism of "Generally speaking, things have gone about as far as they can possibly get when they have got about as bad as they reasonably get"; on the other hand, we are treated to the foreboding of "We follow directions—there's no *choite* involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means." But for all its dire implications, the play is chiefly bright-minded entertainment.

Its virtue is not in its import but in its writing. It is bedecked with well-turned quips: "Life is a gamble, at terrible odds—if it were a bet you wouldn't take it." The man's mouthpiece amuses and dazzles.

Last we come to our United States. This is only natural. America is the youngest of the great countries, often inspired or infected by Europe. David Mamet's 1975 *American Buffalo* breaks away from the tradition in our native drama which runs through O'Neill, Odets, Williams, to a play reminiscent of, though unlike, Pinter.

It is very much *our* play. A good part of its meaning is in its speech. The characters express themselves in the debris of our language: words and sentences have become eroded. (In part this explains the occasional

obscurity in narrative development.) If the play finally achieves eloquence it is through the inarticulate. No ideas or statements are ever completed, conversation is chiefly carried on in a series of muddled or explosive ejaculations. One often doubts whether the characters themselves know what they want to say. Hardly anything is fulfilled. There is something about the characters and their values as effaced as the American buffalo in the old coins. We perceive only their lineaments.

Yet they are people with feelings, intensified by their very muddle. The guy called Teach speaks of himself as a businessman, but he is the most thoroughly confused of the three. Repressed or undeveloped in his emotions he is terrifying. (We might learn from him something of gangster psychology.) It is he nevertheless who stridently voices the frustration and distress of the general condition—far less exceptional than we are wont to suppose. With a preface and a coda of obscenities, and a weapon ready to destroy the junk shop which is the three characters' collective haven, he cries out, "The Whole Entire World. There is no law. There is no Right and Wrong. The World is Lies. There is no Friendship." In this hysterical blast he speaks for everyone, everyone exacerbated by our present state. No wonder then that Teach and the many like him need a gun—to relax, to make themselves comfortable!

Still, astonishingly, friendship does exist among the three men who brawl, insult, and hurt one another: a friendship of physical connection, a spastic reaching out for solace, even a dumb loyalty. "I am sorry," says the least knowing of them, the shop's apprentice, for having messed up a planned robbery, and is forgiven by his lumbering boss with, "That's all right."

One further observation: where there is little aim motivated by high purpose, psychology becomes rudimentary, thinking is deprived of complexity, emotions sapped of subtlety. There can be little possible action except for the satisfaction of almost infantile cravings and speech itself loses definition. Everything tends toward stylization and abstraction. From all this ensues shortness of breath. Plays with such characteristics often seem little more than expanded sketches. They are like people with no place to go.

This bespeaks no rejection. The merit of the dramatists who write such plays is that they make vivid what is happening to us and, unintentionally in most cases, warn us of our peril. We can understand them correctly only if we share with them their sense of the present day and the societies from which they and their plays emerge and which produce them.

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The
Caucasian
Chalk
Circle

by
Bertolt Brecht

*Revised English Version
by Eric Bentley*

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CHARACTERS

Old Man *on the right*

Peasant Woman *on the right*

Young Peasant

A Very Young Worker

Old Man *on the left*

Peasant Woman *on the left*

Agriculturist Kato

Girl Tractorist

Wounded Soldier

The Delegate *from the capital*

The Singer

Georgi Abashwili, *the Governor*

Natella, *the Governor's wife*

Michael, *their son*

Shalva, *an adjutant*

Arsen Kazbeki, *a fat prince*

Messenger *from the capital*

Niko Mikadze *and* Mika Loladze, *doctors*

Simon Shashava, *a soldier*

Grusha Vashnadze, *a kitchen maid*

Old Peasant *with the milk*

Corporal *and* Private

The Caucasian Chalk Circle / 3

Peasant and his wife

Lavrenti Vashnadze, Grusha's brother

Aniko, his wife

Peasant Woman, for a while Grusha's mother-in-law

Jussup, her son

Monk

Azdak, village recorder

Shauwa, a policeman

Grand Duke

Doctor

Invalid

Limping Man

Blackmailer

Ludovica

Innkeeper, her father-in-law

Stableboy

Poor Old Peasant Woman

Irakli, her brother-in-law, a bandit

Three Wealthy Farmers

Illo Shuboladze and Sandro Oboladze, lawyers

Old Married Couple

*Soldiers, Servants, Peasants, Beggars, Musicians,
Merchants, Nobles, Architects*

The time and the place: After a prologue, set in 1945, we move back perhaps 1000 years.

The action of The Caucasian Chalk Circle centers on Nuka (or Nukha), a town in Azerbaijan. However, the capital referred to in the prologue is not Baku (capital of Soviet Azerbaijan) but Tiflis (or Tbilisi), capital of Georgia. When Azdak, later, refers to "the capital" he means Nuka itself, though whether Nuka was ever capital of Georgia I do not know: in what reading I have done on the subject I have only found Nuka to be the capital of a Nuka Khanate.

The word "Georgia" has not been used in this English version because of its American associations; instead, the alternative name "Grusinia" (in Russian, Gruziya) has been used.

The reasons for resettling the old Chinese story in Transcaucasia are not far to seek. The play was written when the Soviet chief of state, Joseph Stalin, was a Georgian, as was his favorite poet, cited in the Prologue, Mayakovsky. And surely there is a point in having this story acted out at the place where Europe and Asia meet, a place incomparably rich in legend and history. Here Jason found the Golden Fleece. Here Noah's Ark touched ground. Here the armies of both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane wrought havoc.

—E.B.

PROLOGUE

Summer, 1945.

Among the ruins of a war-ravaged Caucasian village the members of two Kolkhoz villages, mostly women and older men, are sitting in a circle, smoking and drinking wine. With them is a DELEGATE of the State Reconstruction Commission from Nuka.

PEASANT WOMAN, *left (pointing)*: In those hills over there we stopped three Nazi tanks, but the apple orchard was already destroyed.

OLD MAN, *right*: Our beautiful dairy farm: a ruin.

GIRL TRACTORIST: I laid the fire, Comrade.

Pause.

DELEGATE: Nuka, Azerbaijan S.S.R. Delegation received from the goat-breeding Kolkhoz "Rosa Luxemburg." This is a collective farm which moved eastwards on orders from the authorities at the approach of Hitler's armies. They are now planning to return. Their delegates have looked at the village and the land and found a lot of destruction. (*Delegates on the right nod.*) But the neighboring fruit farm—Kolkhoz (*to the left*) "Galinsk"—proposes to use the former grazing land of Kolkhoz "Rosa Luxemburg" for orchards and vineyards. This land lies in a valley where grass doesn't grow very well. As a delegate of the Reconstruction Commission in Nuka I request that the two Kolkhoz villages decide between themselves whether Kolkhoz "Rosa Luxemburg" shall return or not.