

Godot Behind Bars: Beckett's Play within the Prison Heterotopia

Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, about two men waiting for a man named Godot to arrive, premiered in 1953 on the Paris stage to a dismal reaction. An editorial at *Le Monde* reported that director Roger Blin had to drop the curtain before the end of Act I because of "sifflets, insultes, rien n'y manqué" ("whistles, insults, the works") and that many in attendance departed "vociferously" at the start of Act II upon realizing that nothing had changed during the intermission (Duerfahrd). Yet just eight months after the premiere, before the play had reached Berlin, a group of inmates at Lüttringhausen Prison near Düsseldorf had already taken it upon themselves to produce their own unauthorized translation into German, going as far as to write to Beckett and invite him to the performance. The play found a similar reception in American prisons. After touring New York and Miami to an equally dismal reaction, again receiving walkouts and unsatisfied reviews, the performers were invited to perform at the maximum-security correctional facility San Quentin in San Francisco, the oldest in California. The *San Francisco Chronicle* observed that the "surrealistic drama with no plot and no clear meaning played this week before its first captive audience" (Dembin). Another newspaper proclaimed, "The San Francisco company had its audience of captives in its collective hand. Even in the immense and barn-like spaces of the North Dining Hall, an almost tangible feeling of understanding and empathy could be felt as competent mimes plumbed the depths and soared to the heights, telling the story about going nowhere." (Dembin). To investigate how this work produced by an Irishman in exile resonates so deeply with prison inmates while leaving critical audiences in mass frustration and the general theater-public enraged, I evaluate how the prison environment functions as a heterotopia according to Foucault's critical framework, and how those defining principles reflect in the stage-space of Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*.

Who ‘gets’ the play:

Before moving into the comparison between the prison as a heterotopia and the stage-space as a reflection, I want to begin with taking a closer look at the defining nature of the inmate response, the strongest undercurrent I identify being a profound empathy, heightened by a sense of relief in recognizing an aspect of the self-experience being represented on stage and a giddy elation over its accuracy. To even less luck than in Europe, the American tour of *Waiting for Godot* began in 1956 in Miami to walkouts, and again on Broadway to critic’s confusion. The New York Times, in its headline for the review of the Broadway debut, notoriously branded the play a “Mystery Wrapped in Enigma”. After such a tour, the play’s cast could not have anticipated the reception they received from the San Quentin inmate population. Actor Alan Mandell, who played “Lucky” speaks about the responses from inmates in the prison cafeteria, stomping, and cheering: “the kind of ovation you dream about. They didn’t have to like it but they understood it. They understood immediately what that play was about for them. That it was about waiting. Which they knew all about and what we do while we’re waiting” (Asmus). Martin Esslin opened his 1961 scholarly novel *The Theatre of the Absurd*, with a description of the San Quentin performance, marveling that “what had bewildered the sophisticated audiences of Paris, London, and New York was immediately grasped by an audience of convicts.” (Dembin). The San Francisco Chronicle’s review of the play headlined, “Theme Not New to Cons: ‘Godot’ Presented at San Quentin” (Dembin). Inmates interviewed after the performance describe the meaning of the play for its “face value”, a description that further emphasizes the immediacy and clarity of their understanding on an emotional or intuitive level rather than an academic or cognitive one that would require deeper analysis. Rather than a formal education on critical

theory or even any background at all in watching theater, the context which the prisoners draw upon in order to understand the play is their everyday life experiences. “As a matter of fact,” Mandell continues, “lines in the play became catchphrases for the inmates. The warden was referred to as Pozzo and any guy taken out in chains or death row, or wherever the last visit, was lucky. They had no problem with identifying any of the characters... and they were Gogo and Didi” (Asmus). As stage designer Robin Wagner puts it, “They responded as though they were in it” (Dembin). Wagner’s observation catches on one function of the play which I seek to investigate in the continuation of the essay, that is its function as a radical form of representation for the inmate audience accustomed to underrepresentation and creative suppression. This performance, after all, arrived at San Quentin after an over half-century dry spell, the last visiting theater performance being as far back as 1914. In order to identify and elaborate upon the nuances of this representation, I introduce Michelle Foucault’s concept of heterotopia as my framework of analysis in order to draw parallels between the prison environment and Beckett’s stage-space.

The prison as a heterotopia:

Foucault identifies two main categories of heterotopia, the first being the crisis heterotopia, a “sacred or forbidden” place reserved for individuals in crisis for example the boarding school, or youth military service, and the second category being heterotopias of deviation for example psychiatric hospitals, queer pride celebrations, and Rainbow Gatherings. Other heterotopias fall within the border of these two categories, for example, retirement homes, old age being both a crisis, and deviance from societal norms. Though Foucault puts prisons into the second category, I propose that the modern prison exists in the borderline of the two categories, not only as a space for social deviants but also as a place for individuals in crisis.

Waiting for Godot captures this experience between the borderline, representing Didi and Gogo not only as social rejects ostracized from their environment but also undergoing personal crisis which both demands their presence beside the tree and prevents their escape from it.

Foucault expounds upon the heterotopia through six defining principles, the third, fourth and fifth of which stand in particular relevance to an analysis of the inmate experience as reflected in *Waiting for Godot*. The third principle identifies the heterotopic capacity for juxtaposing in one place multiple otherwise incompatible sites. The botanical or zoological garden, for example, may hold within itself species and even entire biomes from across the globe, encapsulating within itself--this small parcel of land--a symbolic totality of the world according to the gardener's worldview. In contrast, prison demographics represent people from all across the general population, infamously combining races and classes of people into one living community who would otherwise remain segregated from each other in a stratified society. The relationship between Didi and Gogo reflects aspects of this mandatory coexistence between inmates. Despite constant arguments, stark differences between their ideologies and personalities, and constant threats to leave each other, the two remain together with a sense of tired resignation as if these arguments have been worn out over decades, but also a sense of begrudging love from those decades spent side by side.

The fourth principle links heterotopias to slices in time, termed for the sake of symmetry *heterochronies*. As Foucault explains, "The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault, 6). On one extreme, heterochronies of the eternal, such as museums and libraries, accumulate time indefinitely. On the other extreme, heterochronies of the temporal and ephemeral, such as the music festival or rave, exist only in their fleeting congregation, coming alive through a brief period of collective

effervescence only to disperse again. These exist like the freezing of a waterfall, in momentary defiance of time “in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect” (Foucault, 7). Then again there remains those between borderlines. The cemetery visitor, for example, steps into the surreal heterochrony apprehending both the ephemerality of mortal life and the eternity of death. In applying this principle to the prison experience, the inmate could be considered to live within a similarly liminal slice: between the eternity of a life sentence, and the immediacy of prison survival, as well as the perpetual promise, however uncertain, of parole or a sentence commutation. The prison itself, therefore, stands as a heterochrony both of the eternal--forever accumulating time as it swallows up the lives of inmates in their entirety--and a heterochrony of the temporal--for others existing merely as a precarious point of transition. In either case, the prison heterochrony is defined above all by waiting... waiting for release, waiting for death, waiting for news from the court or from family, for a meal, a riot, a letter.

According to the fifth principle, analogous to the biology concept of selective permeability, entrance into a heterotopia demands some rite of passage or purification, requiring either permission or compulsion, as with military service. Other heterotopias may appear open, yet hide some “curious exclusion” allowing visitors to pass through without truly inviting them inside. Didi and Gogo inhabit the heterotopic stage-space on the condition, as declared by the play’s title, that they are waiting for Godot. While other characters walk across the stage briefly visiting the pair, these characters remain free to leave on their own terms. As such, their entrance into the heterotopic stage-space remains illusory, interacting with the Didi and Gogo while remaining excluded from their private heterotopia tied to the eternal tree as time passes them listlessly by. This subtle distinction becomes more clear in comparison to the permeability of the prison as a heterotopia. A prison may allow visitors while still barring them from a full entrance.

Freedom to leave conditions the fact that a cafeteria worker, janitor, volunteer, or guard, while within the prison walls does not become an inmate. Again, this “curious exclusion” may be boiled down to the state of waiting. Through this state, the prison heterotopia, as reflected in Beckett’s stage-space, situates itself at a paradoxical crossroads. Those inhabiting this crossroads find themselves with virtually limitless time, while powerless to make use of a single day, rendered into a state of paralysis in which the fullness and freedom of their own lives are sacrificed to the perpetual purgatory.

The play in practice:

Beyond its immediate reception among the prison community, Beckett’s play transformed from a space of representation to self-actualization as inmate audience members continued to engage with the play going on to become actors, directors, and playwrights themselves. The play so inspired the audience at San Quentin that the inmates began their own drama workshop, spearheaded by the inmate Rick Cluchey. The San Quentin Drama Workshop continued for 7 years, as the first long-standing inmate-initiated program in the country, gaining international critical acclaim and aiding Cluchey to get his sentence commuted. After his release, Cluchey went on to tour internationally as a lead interpreter for Beckett as well as an original playwright, adopting the San Quentin Drama Workshop name. As one Guardian article writes, “In prison, Cluchey received an education on what it was to be on Beckett’s stage. It allowed him to love Beckett’s work.” (Helmore) Perhaps, on some level, those who ‘got’ the play were also more suitable to perform it, embodying their lived reality to a level of unintentional artistry and precision unable to be trained or taught to professionals, regardless of nationality. One reviewer describes the “generally poor quality of dialogue as performed in the French and English versions” due to the bland and limited vocal range and gestural skills of many of the actors in

comparison with the 1965 Schiller theater performance in Berlin under Beckett's strict directorial supervision, infamously filling the pages of the script with meticulous choreography notes and stage directions (Cousineau, 111). Since the Schiller performance, countless other productions have claimed connection with it, grasping for the ultimate title of "definite interpretation". Yet despite widespread claims, Beckett continues to reject any semblance of there existing one "true" interpretation, including even his own. Quite clearly declaring, "No, I don't claim my interpretation is the correct one" (Gontarski, 115). As much as the inmates identified with the play, so did they impact Beckett in return, permanently altering his relationship with the work. Autobiographer Knowlson reflects on how that first invitation Beckett received from the inmates at Lüttringhausen Prison marked "the beginning of Beckett's enduring links with prisons and prisoners ... He took a tremendous interest in productions of his plays performed in prisons." (Knowlson). Rather than continuing to direct the play himself, Beckett appears to have turned his attention to supporting the projects initiated by inmates. Beckett developed a close relationship with Rick Cluchey in particular, supporting the San Quentin Drama Workshop until Cluchey's release when he then joined him on tour, helping direct a London performance in 1984 (Cousineau, 110). A year later, in 1985, Jan Jonsen staged the play in a maximum-security prison Komla in Sweden then, encouraged by Beckett, worked with San Quentin inmates until 1988. As Helmore continues, "He had a longstanding empathy for prisoners, and he came to Rick with deep empathy as someone who could not choose his life, someone who had a lived connection to his work" (Helmore).

Beyond finding appreciation for his work and artistry, Beckett had perhaps finally found the recognition and community he had lost in self-exile from his Irish homeland, divorced after his polemic against the revivalist bard tradition and what he perceived to be a restrictive culture

of literary nationalism (Casanova). It was this state of lonely isolation and desire to find his own Irish path, unique from Joyce and Keats, in which Beckett produced *Waiting for Godot*, a response to his sense of constricted freedom, an attempt to find resolution through contradiction. Somehow, these themes spoke to a community of prisoners. Even after a close comparison of the heterotopic prison to the stage-space as a reflection, a wealth of parallels remain unexplored. How did Beckett's experience as an Irish exile manifest in the play? Why did Beckett need to reject the status quo of theater, especially elitist classical theater, in order to do this? Such questions could take up many pages more, on which I will refrain from elaboration, while others merit brief mentions. Casanova propositions a connection between the reliance of Beckett's play on a small, vibrant cast to bring alive the stage's barren set, and the tradition of the Irish spirit to rely on language, and imagination to transcend the barren landscape (Casanova). Beckett once stated he felt the play "needs a very closed box." He even contemplated at one moment having 'faint shadow of bars on the stage floor'" but decided against it at the risk of 'over-explication' (Barry). It was this same barrenness and small cast which allowed the San Quentin prison to host a performance of the play, setting the stage in a cafeteria that had once been a gallows. Reflecting on the incredible luck of the performance, Jodi Jinks, who established the Oklahoma-based ArtsAloud prison program, shares:

The fact that performance took place at all has had an enormous impact on prison theatre programs like mine that have followed. In addition, it was not just any performance, but a play that mirrored the absurdities of life—a life incapable of understanding, a life of senseless routine, oppression, and existential angst.
(Dembin)

More than seeking some 'deeper truth' to the play, I offer my analysis as a testament to the transformative power of *Waiting for Godot* in dialogue with the prison heterotopia, and to a greater extent, the function of theater and performance arts in symbiosis with the audience.

Through this comparison, the play reveals itself as an unintentional yet radical form of representation, made especially acute in relation to the level of creative suppression and dehumanization experienced by inmates. I interpret this profound phenomenon, and the enduring aftereffects as evidence towards the necessary role of artwork and expression in human wellbeing, as a means of validation, self-actualization, and interpersonal connection.

And with that, I'd like to return to 1953, before the American tour and the San Quentin performance, to the group of inmates at Lüttringhausen Prison near Düsseldorf who took it upon themselves to translate the script into German and stage their own performance. After the first night, inmate K. F. Lembke wrote to Beckett, inviting him to the production raving, "Votre Godot ce fut un triomphe, le délire – votre Godot ce fut 'notre' Godot, à nous! bien à nous!" [Your Godot was a triumph, a delirium – Your Godot was 'Our' Godot, ours! Ours!]."

(Duerfahrd).

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