The Theatre of the Absurd and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)
1. The 1950s

This decade was characterised by:

- The **destruction** of the certainties and basic assumptions of the Victorian Age, swept away by two world wars.

- The **decline of religious belief**.

- The **mistrust in rationalism** as a means to explain reality.

- the **disillusionment with socialist ideals**, brought about by **totalitarianism**

  feeling of emptiness, uselessness, anguish
2. Post-war drama

• There were **two main trends** in 1950s drama:

  • **The Theatre of the ‘Absurd’** expressed **metaphysical anguish, rootlessness, the lack of purpose and inaction**.

  • **The Theatre of ‘Anger’** criticised **establishment values**.
Samuel Beckett

3. The Theatre of the Absurd: main features

- **Absence** of a real story or plot.
- **No action** since all actions are insignificant.
- **Vagueness** about time, place and the characters.
- The value of language is **reduced**; in fact, what happens on the stage **transcends**, and often **contradicts**, the words spoken by the characters.
- Extensive use of **pauses, silences, miming and farcical situations** which reflected a sense of **anguish**.
- **Incoherent babbling** made up the dialogue.
4. The Theatre of the Absurd: main themes

- The sense of *man's alienation*.
- The cruelty of human life.
- **The absence** or the futility of objectives.
- The *meaninglessness of man’s struggle*.

Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. 

- He was born in Dublin and graduated in French and Italian at Trinity College.
- He moved to Paris and wrote most works in French.
- He started his career writing short stories and novels, but he became famous especially for his plays.
- He developed the «Theatre of the Absurd» together with other dramatists (Adamov, Ionesco).
- His first great success was *Waiting for Godot* (1952)
- In 1969 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.
6. *Waiting for Godot*

- **No Setting**: a desolate country road and a bare tree.
- **Time**: no development in time. There is no past or future, just a repetitive present.

- **No plot**: meaningless events, the two tramps are waiting for a mysterious Godot, who never turns up.
- **No characters** in the traditional sense (personality).
- **No Action**
- **No dialogue** in the traditional sense (no communication)
7. *Waiting for Godot*

- **Characters**: two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, bored by a day of nothingness; Pozzo and Lucky.

- **Theme**: the static situation of waiting.
8. Waiting for Godot: characters

- **Vladimir** and **Estragon** are complementary: Vladimir is practical, Estragon is a dreamer. Estragon can’t remember anything about his past and Vladimir remembers for him. They remind each other of their existence.

- **Lucky** and **Pozzo** are linked by the relationship of master and servant.

- Vladimir and Lucky represent the intellect.

- Estragon and Pozzo stand for the body.

- The two couples are **mutually dependent**.

- The character the two tramps are waiting for is **Godot** → Biblical allusion in this name.

Scene from Michael Arabian’s *Waiting for Godot*, Hall Co.
9. *Waiting for Godot*: structure

- The play has a **circular structure** → it ends almost exactly as it begins.

- The two acts are symmetrically built → the stage is divided into two halves by a tree, the human race into two, Vladimir and Estragon.

- It is pervaded by **grotesque humour**.

- Its **tone** is **tragic** and **desperate**.
10. *Waiting for Godot*: themes

- **Human impotence** in the face of life’s meaninglessness.
- **A static world** where nothing happens.
- **Absence of a traditional time** → there is no past, present and future, just a repetitive present.
- **Disintegration of language** → absurd exchanges, broken and fragmented dialogues.
- **The lack of communication** → use of para-verbal language: mime, silences, pauses and gaps.