

“A Man Walks into a Bistro Wearing a Bowler...”

Waiting on Godot: A Jest by Robert Hawkes feels like a really smart shaggy dog story inspired by the hopelessness of expecting anything much from our uniquely human invention of language and the overall absurdity of life. It's a very funny exploration of the power of words to illuminate, deceive, amuse, sabotage, obscure, subvert and—rarely—communicate.

The opening gambit, if wordlessness can be a gambit, is Godot (Robert Hawkes) simply gazing at us for perhaps 90 long seconds. Who is this gentleman? He looks bemused by the human condition, tempted to shrug his shoulders and forget the whole thing, but finally, he enters. He is seated at a single, white-clothed table in “Chez Lucky” as identified by a sign on an easel behind him.

He orders a meal but the order is very upsetting to the waitress (Kim Woodworth) and she asks the maître d' (David L. Munnell) for help. The problem is that his order is roadside diner fare—not Chez Lucky fare (sardines on toast) and even if they wanted to serve him, the kitchen doesn't stock sardines or toast. Eventually, the order is confirmed and “miraculously” several dozen cans of sardines materialize in a cupboard and Fed Ex delivers six toasters and as many power strips. While it's being prepared, a backpacking couple, Jack and Jill (Nate Homolka and JC Cifranic), enter and Godot invites them to join him. They have been hiking for days, possibly in circles, hoping to meet up with a stranger whose name they're not absolutely clear on. Godot finishes and leaves. His parting line is “We live in hope.” Jack and Jill, the maître d' and the waitress discuss whether it was he they were supposed to wait for and whether and when he'll be back. That's it.

While little happens in this play, a great deal is going on and a lot of fun was had by the players and audience as well. I think it would be fun even if you were not familiar with a few cultural touchstones like The Holy Bible and Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, but if you are, as must have been the case for those in the audience when I saw it, you have the extra fun of feeling smug because you get the jokes.

Even if you don't get the cosmic jokes, the earthly wordplay is sumptuous. The discussion about why Chez Lucky can't or won't serve sardines on toast to Godot felt like highbrow Marx Brothers routine as when somebody says to him, “Sir! You try my patience!” and he replies, “Don't mind if I do, you must try some of mine.” Or “Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.” When the maître d' says emphatically that the kitchen has no sardines, *not one, single sardine*, Godot says of course not, who ever heard of a single sardine. When the kitchen can't or won't make toast, but they do concede they have bread, he says, “Use your loaf” (which I now know is slang for head). When Godot tells him, “Pray continue,” the maître d' bows his head and starts murmuring, “Our Father, who art in heaven” and it's funny because Godot meant “pray” the other way.

The through-joke of the script is of course the word play with “waiting on...” as in serving someone and “waiting on” as in *a*-waiting. Which doesn't even get to “waiting on line” as in New York City.

Robert Hawkes is a very good playwright and an amazing actor. His extremely long pause at the beginning of the play is a study in how to embody an archetypal character who is real and/or unreal, human and/or spiritual, and cynical and/or sincere.

David L. Munnell's maître d' is a fine comic partner. In his black trousers and vest and red bow tie, he carries himself as a snooty, self-important Frenchman while his accent is bad enough to be endearing but not so bad as to be ridiculous. At one point his dialogue lapses into French and he is eager to "continuer" but Godot demurs, "Let's remain... translated," wryly ticking off one way in which language can undermine communication.

Less satisfying were the characters of Jack and Jill. I could see their purpose in the story but their costumes and behavior were jarringly naturalistic at first, out of keeping with the tone at Chez Lucky established by the set and the acting style of the other characters. And as they settled in to their meal with Godot, and particularly after he left the scene, they just seemed vague and weird, more placeholders than fully realized.

No matter, the conversation between Jack and Jill and among everybody at Chez Lucky – non sequitur upon non sequitur, misunderstanding upon misunderstanding—is a mordant reminder that it is no use trying to connect with each other using words, even if we are well 'translated.'

The program note by Mr. Hawkes asks, "Isn't language fun?" And the play's answer is "Mais oui! And here's how!" His play was completely charming. And yet, I think there is an existential subtext, too. I am waiting for it to strike me, or rather smite me, perhaps tomorrow.

Waiting on Godot: A Jest by Robert Hawkes was presented by the BorderLight International Theatre + Fringe Festival at The Hermit Club Grille July 25-27, 2019.

Review by Sharmon Sollito
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