

Svetozar Poštić*

Vilnius University

Faculty of Philology

Vilnius, Lithuania

STAN LAUREL, OLIVER HARDY AND THE CONCEPT OF LAUGHING THROUGH TEARS IN BECKETT'S *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Abstract

The paper analyses the essence of tragicomedy in Samuel Beckett's most famous play, *Waiting for Godot*, epitomised in the image of the sad clown. The famous comic duo Laurel and Hardy exerted decisive influence on the creation of Beckett's "pseudocouples", one binary character in two bodies. Of all the playwright's double acts, Vladimir and Estragon resemble Laurel and Hardy most and embody the sad clown image best. By invoking both pity and laughter, both couples effectively present the concept of "laughing through tears". *Waiting for Godot* is a theatrical incarnation of the idea of the Absurd presented in Albert Camus's essay "The Myth of Sisyphus", in which the author tries to find a reason for not committing suicide in a world devoid of meaning. Vladimir and Estragon continuously talk about suicide, but what makes them never fall into complete despair is humour and mutual devotion.

Key words: Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Laurel and Hardy, Vladimir and Estragon, sad clown

1. Introduction

Samuel Beckett named his first successful play, *Waiting for Godot*, a tragicomedy. The features of both tragedy and comedy have been sharply delineated since the Antiquity, but the blend of the two genres has also been a constant feature throughout the history of theatre. The term was first articulated somewhat facetiously by Mercury, a character in the play by the Roman dramatist Plautus, *Amphitryon*. The genre became quite prominent in the Renaissance. Italian novelist and poet, Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio (1504-1573), for example, added comic endings to his tragedies in order to make them appear "more pleasing on the stage", and to conform to the "custom of our times" (Dewar-Watson 2007: 16). Some of Shakespeare's last plays that do not bear the most obvious traits of either genre, like *The Winter's Tale* and *Tempest*, are often classified as romances. In the 18th century, German playwright and philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who advocated against the separation of

¹ Faculty of Philology, Vilnius University, Universiteto 5, Vilnius 01122 Lithuania; e-mail: svetozar.postic@flf.vu.lt

theatrical genres, defined tragicomedy as a mixture of emotions in which “seriousness stimulates laughter, and pain pleasure” (qtd. in Marcus 2018: 3). In the 20th century, the “dark” comedy and satire emerged as an expression of a society thrown into the turmoil of bloody antagonisms and disappearance of traditional values. For Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the death of the hero in one of his tragicomedies comes as the result of a fate constructed by fatal human flaws, like greed, and not a divine, “classical” fate, and the comic part stems from its grotesque nature and the accentuated irony (Northcott 2019).

It is no surprise the works of Samuel Beckett – whose main philosophic and cultural influences were, among others, the scepticism of Descartes and Geulincx, pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer, silent slapstick comedies of the 1920s and 1930s and the tradition of the British music hall, and who was formed during the time of interwar volatility that beget the art of irrationalism and surrealism, who also experienced persecution and utter isolation in World War II and literary emerged out of post-war Paris imbued with nauseating existentialism and reconciliation with the absurd nature of the world – turned out to be suffused with doubt, uncertainty, ironic derision and satiric intertextuality. The fifty-fifty chance of salvation that runs through *Godot* was inspired by a phrase by St. Augustine, “Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved; do not presume, one of the thieves was damned” (Knowlson 1996: 379). “The key word in my plays is ‘perhaps’”, Beckett was quoted once (qtd. in Worton 2004: 67). The Theatre of the Absurd, to which Beckett’s early dramatic creation is traditionally ascribed, emerged in the wake of rampant secularism, fragmentation of the world and the all-pervasive artistic irony of post-WW2 Europe. All these traits can be seen in the characters of Vladimir and Estragon, the tramp-clowns who patiently wait for Godot. There is also something clearly distinctive about them, though. Didi and Gogo can be affiliated to the artistic tradition of the sad clown archetype or the concept of laughing through tears. The main characters of Beckett’s celebrated play combine the most prominent elements of the philosophy of the Absurd and the western comedic tradition. They simultaneously generate pity and solicitude, and induce riotous laughter.

The aim of this paper is to illuminate the concept of pitiful clowns expressed through the main protagonists of *Waiting for Godot*. The first step in accomplishing this task will be to examine the influence of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, one of the most prominent comedic duos in the history of cinema, on Beckett’s creation. The famed Hollywood actors will be observed in the context of the author’s lasting fabrication of “pseudocouples”, and compared with Vladimir and Estragon. Next, the Myth of Sisyphus, as a defining expression of the Absurd, will be related to the figurative core of the main concept. Finally, the image of the sad clown, most notably Pierrot and the

White Clown / Auguste couple, will be described through some associated concepts and notable manifestations. The overarching objective of this inquiry is to assign the image of the sad clown a central role in tragicomedy in general and the analysed play in particular, and thus make a contribution in placing this distinct aspect of Samuel Beckett's creation in a wider socio-historical and cultural context.

2. Laurel and Hardy

One of Samuel Beckett's principle humorist inspirations was the music hall, which he frequented during his childhood and youth in native Ireland. *Waiting for Godot* owes much of its forms and rhythms to the vaudeville and clown acts performed at such venues. Its recited monologues, cross-talks, songs and soliloquies are highly reminiscent of this type of entertainment popular on the islands in the early 20th century (Knowlson 1997: 379). Even more influential, however, were the American silent slapstick comedies of the 1920s and the 1930s, which swept over Europe in the interwar period. As a young man in Dublin, Beckett "never missed a film starring Charlie Chaplin Laurel and Hardy, or Harold Lloyd", and his love for films continued well into the 1950s, when frequenting cinemas was one of the few activities he still regularly enjoyed with his wife (Graves 2009: 82). Critics have immediately detected traces of Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers and Buster Keaton – whom Beckett casted in his only film in 1965 – in the writer's early plays. Due to the prominent dual double acts in *Godot* (Vladimir-Estragon and Pozzo-Lucky) and *Endgame* (Hamm-Clov and Nagg/Nell), and the Winnie/Willie duet in *Happy Days*, the impact of the most celebrated Hollywood comedy team of the period, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, is even more prominent. As Normand Berlin (1986: 49) memorably put it, "How could two men wearing bowlers, two men who were annoyed with one another and dependent on one another, one self-important, the other a little obtuse, how could two such men not remind me of Laurel and Hardy?"

When asked in a 1982 interview whether he would have liked to see Laurel and Hardy in *Godot*, Beckett "seemed tantalised by the idea" and said they were "ideal physically", but it was "too late", since they were not alive anymore (Gussow 1996: 41). Even though Beckett, just as later critics, "failed to acknowledge his special debt to the films of Laurel and Hardy" (Graves 2009: 81), there is ample evidence that the famous double act is frequently evoked in Beckett's work. Wylie and Neary, characters in his novel *Murphy*, enact a burlesque classic. Mercier and Camier, the most notable precursors to Vladimir and Estragon in the narrative of the same name, are a "long hank" and "a little fat one". They enact vaudeville dialogue, slapstick and sporadic comic highlights. Art and Con in *Watt* and Molloy and Moran in *Molloy* also represent farcical twosomes. The comedic prototypes are such a constant presence in

Beckett's prose works, they are given a pun. At the end of *Watt*, Arthur at one point laughs so much that he has to lean for support "against a passing shrub, or bush, which joined heartily in the joke". When Arthur asks an old man what the strange growth was, he answers, "That's what we call a hardy laurel" (Beckett 2009: 252) "Pairs of characters pervade [Samuel Beckett's] terrain like animals in search of an ark", expound Ackerley and Gontarski (2004: 463). One of the reasons for their prevalence is certainly Beckett's fascination with symmetry, analogies and repetitions. The duos have also been interpreted as Cartesian duality of mind and body, or two halves of the same personality. Hence their label "pseudocouples"; they are really one person in two bodies (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004: 464). It is no wonder, therefore, that in some *Godot* productions Vladimir and Estragon share a single suit, like in the 1975 Berlin Schiller Theatre performance, directed by Beckett himself, where in Act I Didi had the jacket and Gogo the trousers, and in Act II the other way around.

Critics have often overlooked the analogies between some of the Didi/Gogo and Stan/Ollie scenes. The origin of the "the three hats for two heads" scene in Act II, for example, has habitually been attributed to a vintage threesome routine in the Marx Brothers's *Duck Soup* (1933) (Cohn 1973: 133; Knowlson 1997: 609). Laurel and Hardy had a few bowler hat-swapping scenes of their own, however. The most notable ones, in *Do Detectives Think* (1927) and *Beau Hunks* (1931), for instance, resemble more closely the Vladimir and Estragon routine. Also, the last famous burlesque act in which Estragon's trousers fall down – after he pulls out a cord used as a belt to see if it's sturdy enough for hanging themselves – has been attributed to Charlie Chaplin (Mast 1979: 107). All the Stan and Ollie fans are aware, however, that this is one of the duo's classic gags, as the one in *Liberty* (1929), for example, when they accidentally put on the other's trousers and try to swap them back throughout the entire short film. There are other Hollywood couple's classic routines in *Waiting for Godot*. The scene when Lucky kicks Gogo in the shin immediately recalls the standard-setting, final scene in *You're Darn Tootin'* (1928) in which Stan kicks Ollie in the shin at least a dozen times before other passers-by join in the booting.

In his article about the influence of Laurel and Hardy comedies on Beckett's plays, Robert B. Graves (2009) points out a number of parallels between the early film comedy's duo and Beckett's characters. He compares, for example, Stan and Ollie's touching reunion in *Block-Heads* (1938) with Vladimir's and Estragon's reunion at the beginning of each act, with the latter even repeating some of the same phrases (Graves 2009: 83–84). In both stories, petty squabbling and tit-for-tat abuse alternates with expressions of deep affection and interdependence. Another example is the corresponding, incompetent attempts at suicide and unconvincing talks about ending their lives in *Flying Deuces* (1939) (Graves 2009: 88, 90). In both film and the play, the

intention is thwarted by surmountable circumstances, with the chief reason for backing away found in the fact that Laurel and Estragon don't want to remain alone, without their respective partners. Whereas Chaplin and Keaton are lonely individualists at odds with the world around them, Laurel and Hardy are "two wonderful clowns at odds with themselves, but aware of their inevitable interdependence", McCabe and Kilgore (1983: 7) surmise. The same can be said about Vladimir and Estragon, who suggest twice they might do better on their own, but quickly reject the idea.

As in most comedic duos, one part of the "pseudocouple" represents the mind, the other body. In a manifest symbolic manner, Vladimir dedicates most of his attention to his hat, thus pointing to his cerebral inclinations, and in this he is more similar to Hardy. Estragon, on the other hand, is obsessed with his shoes, highlighting his orientation towards physical concerns, and thus more closely resembling Laurel. It is highly indicative that in the 1975 Schiller-Theatre production, Beckett added a stage direction "*Removes his hat, scratches his head*" (Graves 2009: 90–91), clearly reasserting the influence of Laurel on Estragon. But, no matter how contrasting they might seem, Beckett's tragicomic characters in *Waiting for Godot* can also be seen as indistinguishable. Just as Laurel and Hardy's different traits are reversed in *Thicker than Water* (1935) when their blood gets accidentally mixed, so Beckett in his later stage productions sought to make the physical traits and manners of his pseudocouple more complementary and symmetrical, thus emphasising their symbiosis (Graves 2009: 91). Their interchangeability is one of the keys to their reluctance to consider suicide seriously and their disposition to remain together and share all the challenges of their joint existence.

3. The happy Sisyphus

The direct inspiration for naming the recent French plays by Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Arthur Adamov the "Theatre of the Absurd" came to Martin Esslin, the famous British theatre producer, critic and scholar, from the definition given by Ionesco, "Est absurde ce qui n'a pas de but..." (Absurd is that which has no goal...) (qtd. in Esslin 1960: 4). Still, the deeper, philosophical meaning of the Absurd, which Ionesco presumably had in mind when expressing the above thought, comes from the 1942 era-defining essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" by the Nobel-prize winning French novelist and philosopher Albert Camus. Camus's diagnosis and interpretation expounded in this treatise not only summed up the intellectual atmosphere of the mid-20th century, but also became one of the conceptual creeds of the mankind that has lost meaning, purpose and direction in life. The subject of the essay is also intertwined with *Waiting for Godot* in its themes and attitude.

Camus (1991: 6) defines the notion of the absurd as “the divorce between man and this life, the actor and the setting”, the gap between the certainty of one’s existence and the content one tries to give to that assurance (Camus 1991: 14), the abyss between “the mind that desires and the world that disappoints”, between the human “nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together” (Camus 1991: 33), between “what a man wants to be and what he is” (Camus 1991: 52). When a person carries on with his daily routine, he is driven by hope that someday the hardship and misery will cease or that he will understand the meaning of existence. A time comes, however, when a person realises the futility of his daily toil, and the surprising encounter with reality can lead only to suicide or recovery. Deciding to end one’s life means that you cannot find a reason for enduring the agony any longer (Camus 1991: 5–6). However, if one chooses not to believe in transcendence anymore and to revolt, one discovers freedom and delight in diversity. The “absurd man” finds comfort in promiscuity and artistic creation. He is not overjoyed, but he is at least reconciled to his fate.

In the essay’s feature parable, human struggles and suffering are compared to those of Sisyphus, the mythological character condemned by gods to ceaselessly push a huge rock to the top of a mountain, just to watch it roll back to the bottom. For Camus, Sisyphus is the absurd hero, whose “scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing” (Camus 1991: 76). His futile and hopeless labour is “the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth”, Camus argues (Camus 1991: 76). Being aware of his plight makes Sisyphus triumphant, however. “The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn” Camus writes (Camus 1991: 77). In the world devoid of hope or a master such as God, the world is suddenly painted in most lively colours, and the hitherto meaningless features and details acquire a fresh significance. “Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy”, Camus concludes (Camus 1991: 78). Sisyphus could very well, therefore, be described as a tragicomic character.

There is no evidence Beckett has ever met Camus, but, since they lived in Paris at the same time for almost two decades and shared the same publisher, *Merlin*, their paths must have crossed at some point. Less than a year before Camus’s tragic car crash, Beckett went to see his adaptation of Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*, which casted his friends Roger Blin and Jean Martin, who played Pozzo and Lucky in the 1953 premiere of *Waiting for Godot* (Knowlson 1997: 468). In 1946, Beckett read Camus’s novel *The Stranger* and recommended it in a letter to his first literary agent,

George Reavey: “Try and read it. I think it’s important” (Knowlson 1997: 358). *The Stranger*, published the same year as “The Myth of Sisyphus”, belongs to the same “cycle” of Camus’s oeuvre, and represents the literary expression of the same main idea. “[...] in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger”, Camus explains man’s harrowing condition in “Sisyphus” (Camus 1991: 6). In his novel *Molloy*, Beckett writes, “But I don’t think even Sisyphus is required to scratch himself, or to groan, or to rejoice, as the fashion is now” (Beckett 2010: 128), clearly referring to the influence of Camus’s essay.

Many critics have remarked the effect the essay exerted on the Theatre of the Absurd in general, and on Beckett’s plays in particular (cf. Cohn 1973, Esslin 2004, Durán 2009). The similarities start at the very outset. Camus begins his essay with the following words: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” (Camus 1991: 4), and tries to find a good reason not to kill oneself. The first words in *Waiting for Godot* are about the decision to give up the hope and end it all:

Estragon: Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: I’m beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I’ve tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven’t yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (Beckett 2019: 2)

After a few exchanges about their aches and the chances of saving themselves, Vladimir and Estragon ask themselves in Scene 3 what to do. “What about hanging ourselves?” asks Gogo (10). Whenever they run out of ways to pass time and forget about their hope of meeting Godot, the two tramp clowns revert to thoughts about suicide. They don’t see a reason to keep on living whenever they face the absurdity of their existence.

One of the principle notions that keeps Vladimir and Estragon from killing themselves is habit. “Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering” Camus (1991: 5–6) writes. In his book about Proust, Beckett similarly describes the notion: “Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence. Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit” (Beckett 1978: 7–8). Vladimir and Estragon go through the same repetitions of arguing, reminding themselves they are waiting for Godot, eating and reminiscing. Worton (2004: 73) illustrates this notion well by saying that “one solution adopted by Beckett’s characters is mechanical repetition, re-enacting situations

without perceiving any significance in these repeated actions – somewhat like Pavlov’s conditioned dogs who salivate when the bell rings, even when there is no food”. At one point, they both agree that “one can bide one’s time” and not worry when “one knows what to expect”. “We’re used to it”, Vladimir concludes (30). As Durán (2009: 990) puts it, even though the daily drag is tedious, the thought of suicides is even more frightening.

Ostensibly, Didi and Gogo resemble people who, according to Camus, never understand the absurdity of existence, because they are resolved to continue waiting for Godot. Nevertheless, they do not completely submit themselves to despair. On the contrary. Just like Sisyphus, they declare that all is well and they are happy. But even here Beckett cannot restrain himself from appending a touch of irony:

Vladimir: You must be happy too, deep down, if you only knew it.
Estragon: Happy about what?
Vladimir: To be back with me again.
Estragon: Would you say so?
Vladimir: Say you are, even if it’s not true.
Estragon: What am I to say?
Vladimir: Say, I am happy.
Estragon: I am happy.
Vladimir: So am I.
Estragon: So am I.
Vladimir: We are happy.
Estragon: We are happy. (Silence.) What do we do now, now that we are
happy?
Vladimir: Wait for Godot. (Estragon groans. Silence.) (Beckett 2019: 50)

If the tramp clowns do have something to be content about, it is the fact that they are together. Just like Laurel and Hardy in *The Flying Deuces*, this is the constant comfort that helps them persevere.

Camus planned for each of his cycles to consist of an essay based on a pagan myth, a novel and a play. The play corresponding to the Sisyphus Absurd Cycle is *Caligula*, but one must say that it does not convey absurdity as well as *Godot* does. The same can be said about the plays by Camus’s fellow socially engaged Parisian existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre. Whereas Camus and Sartre portray the absurdity of the human condition through “highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning”, as Esslin observes, the theatre of the absurd does this through “the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought” (Esslin 2004: 24). Rather than “arguing *about*

the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images” (Esslin 2004: 25). In other words, Beckett has found a perfect form to show the absurd in real life, or, as the French burlesque comedian Norbert Abouardham (2015: 22) succinctly puts it, “Beckett ‘incarnates’ the absurd”.

4. The Sad Clown

Soon after the news of Robin Williams’s suicide in 2014, a joke went viral on the internet: “Man goes to doctor. Says he’s depressed. Says life seems harsh and cruel. Says he feels all alone in a threatening world. Doctor says, ‘Treatment is simple. Great clown, Pagliaccio, is in town tonight. Go and see him. That should pick you up’. Man bursts into tears. Says, ‘But doctor, I am Pagliaccio’” (qtd. in Boyd 2014). The backlash effects of public exposure on comic performers are well known. Some of the most celebrated clowns, like Williams, have suffered from serious depression that ultimately ended in suicide. Beckett felt this contradiction very well. His work “taps into the reclusive, depressive and obsessive qualities in [comedians] that are the inverse of what makes them popular yet are integral to their capacity as entertainers”, Jane Goodall (2014: 297) suggests. According to his biographer, Beckett’s own life followed a “structured pattern of black and white, sense and spirit, that [he] later described as Manichean dualism” (Knowlson 1997: 444–445). He was treated for depression and severe panic attacks for almost two years in London, and he found extreme solace from the existential anguish in humour.

The playwright’s love for comedy started in the Dublin Abbey Theatre, where he watched the great clowns of his student days, Berry Fitzgerald and F. J. McCormack, who starred as Captain Boyle and his sidekick Joxer in Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* (McManus 2003: 160). He continued to find inspiration in vaudeville and the burlesque. During his extended visit to pre-war Nazi Germany in 1936–37, Beckett went to see one of the most famous comedians, the “German Charlie Chaplin”, Karl Valentin, in a Munich cabaret. A “crazy” short encounter with the clown followed, leaving Beckett “disconcerted and yet intrigued”. In his unpublished “German Diaries”, he left this note about Valentin: “Real quality comedian, exuding depression”, and in a letter years later, “I was very moved” (qtd. in Knowlson 1997: 259–260). Knowlson (1997: 260) suggests that “the nature of the dialogue between Valentin and Liesl Karlstadt”, his partner, “combined with the more laboured delivery of Laurel and Hardy [...] to produce the sombre, though lively exchanges of Estragon and Vladimir”.

When one analyses the reaction of the audience, the Hollywood double act incites as much compassion as they do chuckling. “Few other performers, comic or straight, matched their capacity to reduce audiences to both laughter and pity with a

simple scratch of the head”, contends a tribute to Laurel and Hardy that recognises their special gift for pathos (“All They Have” 2001). Scenes such as the one in which the beaming and hopeful Hardy is ditched by a girl in *Flying Deuces*, or swallows a hand-full of nails in *The Finishing Touch* (1928), or when Laurel makes his crying face after being hit or insulted, is what immediately draws the audience to their side. Graves (2004) suggests that the comedy in a scene in *Swiss Miss* (1928), for example, in which the clumsy but determined Stan and Ollie try to move a piano across a narrow, flimsy suspension bridge, and then midway meet a gorilla, derives from the futile and pathetic attempt “to deal with situations increasingly and surprisingly beyond the control of the protagonists” (86). Ultimately, one of the defining qualities of clowns is that they arouse, as Ackerley and Gontarski (2004: 100) put it, “pity as much as laughter”. The clown is a being whose helplessness and naiveté are comic and pitiful, a being who doesn’t take himself seriously, who proclaims his sentiments and his miseries without worrying about social codes, Guinoiseau (1995: 71) explains. “If you do comedy, you must never, ever be embarrassed”, Stan Laurel fittingly advised Jerry Lewis (*Jerry Lewis* 2019).

The figure of clown exists in theatrical tradition of all cultures, and it is considered one of the central theatrical archetypes (cf. Varró 2010: 205–206). Its manifestations can be as diverse as the dancing court jesters of ancient China, the Native American trickster, the *avalon* of Greek comedies, Harlequin and Pierrot of *Commedia dell’Arte*, the circus clown or the mime. The one who combines tragedy and comedy most profoundly and evokes greatest pity is certainly Pierrot. He embodies the sad clown whose love, Columbine, leaves him for Harlequin. Performing with a whitened face, he wears a loose white blouse with large buttons and wide, white pantaloons. He is a fool whose defining characteristic is his naiveté. One of the most famous Pierrot characters is Canio in Leoncavallo’s opera *Pagliacci*, who has to perform in front of the audience right after discovering his wife’s infidelity. In the famous aria, he sings, “Laugh, clown, at your broken love!” and the crowd, impressed by his emotional performance, cheers him. Canio kills his wife and her lover on stage, and articulates the well-known final words: *La commedia è finita!* – “The comedy is finished!”.

All things considered, Vladimir and Estragon most closely match the White Clown and Auguste, often distinguished as the “sad clown” and the “happy clown”, who frequently appear in the circus tradition. Whereas the White Clown tries to solve the situation they are in, Auguste, as his direct opposite, is usually completely lost.¹ It is no wonder Blin, the director of the first performance of *Waiting for Godot* at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris, wanted to place the action in a circus rink, and casted a

¹ The irony of the opening dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon is that when stating “Nothing to be done” Estragon is referring to his shoes, while Vladimir’s immediate association is life and death.

cabaret singer and a slapstick comedian, two physically contrasting types, as Vladimir and Estragon (Knowlson 1997: 386). Beckett refused the idea for the setting probably because the ambiguity of tragicomedy would have been lost. In the early productions of the play, more than one director fell into the trap of presenting it as a riotous show, and it took only complete familiarity with the play and participation of famous comedians to pull it off as a comedy. The first American performance of *Waiting for Godot* in the United States, in Miami, was advertised as “the laugh hit of two continents”, and casted comedians such as Bert Lahr (the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz*). It turned out to be a total fiasco (Knowlson 1997: 419). “When I read the play”, said Steve Martin in an interview about his 1988 performance with Robin Williams, “I saw it as a comedy [with] great, smart, high and low laughs, [which] must be served [...] first” (*Uproarious* 2019). Ian McKellen, who played Estragon almost 500 times opposite Patrick Stewart’s Vladimir in London, said that the two of them have been “educated by the audience, because very early on, they started to laugh, and sometimes raucously” (*Meet Samuel Beckett* 2015). When McKellen and Stewart arrived with the play in Edinburgh, it was “as if the Krankies [a riotous Scottish comedy duo] were coming to town” (*Meet Samuel Beckett* 2015). Even though the performances have most often evolved into more high-brow, intellectual style in the Broadway revivals (often to the detriment of the popular perception), as Varró (2010: 215) suggests “the clown has remained the focal point of the play”.

Consequently, the most accurate, successful and acclaimed performances of *Waiting for Godot* were those that kept the balance between the tragic and the comic. The Theatre of the Absurd has adopted the character of the clown precisely because it perfectly captures the metaphysical *Angst* of the disappointed and disoriented post-World-War-Two world and the ability to laugh off its hopelessness and misery. In this quality, the absurdist clown is highly reminiscent of the most important protagonist of Bakhtin’s “Carnival”, the fool or the rogue who combats his fears and despair in captivity with the liberating laughter (Bakhtin 1984: 8). For Beckett, especially while fleeing the Nazis in the occupied Paris and spending the rest of the war in complete isolation in a southern town of Roussillon, humour, as his biographer explains, “became one of the few things that made life at all tolerable” (Knowlson 1997: 351). Appropriately, Arthur Schopenhauer, one of Beckett’s favourite thinkers, states that “the life of every individual is really a tragedy, but in detail it has the character of a comedy” (qtd. in Ackerley and Gontarski 2004: 624). Wise men across the globe have frequently asserted that sweet and sour is the most desirable mix, and Beckett mixes them in a poignant art work perhaps best summed up in the word of Pozzo: “The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another one stops. The same is true of the laugh” (Beckett 2019: 23).

5. Conclusion

Tragicomedy is a genre that combines the best elements of both tragedy and comedy by expressing the ambiguous and often unpredictable character of the human psyche. The form has acquired a distinct significance in the Theatre of the Absurd as an aesthetic display of the 20th-century existentialist philosophy in which the desolation and despair of a disoriented age is repelled by laughter and parody. In the words of the burlesque comedian Norbert Abouardham (2015: 22-23), Samuel Beckett creates a theatre in which “hopelessness and anguish cohabit with laughter of a disturbing yet lucid manner!”. Even before writing *Waiting for Godot*, the Irish-French author seemed drawn to exploring “what is funny about existentialism and what isn’t funny about vaudeville” (Goodall 2014: 295). This exploration culminated in the theatric creation that Jean Anouilh described as “a music-hall sketch of Pascal’s *Pensées* played by the Fratellini clowns” (qtd. in Ackerley and Gontarski 2004: 172). Like most successful slapstick comedy, it is serious and hilarious at the same time. So, Beckett’s most successful play perfectly evokes the notion of laughing through tears.

The central archetype in this particular approach to life and art is the figure of clown. Apart from inciting laughter, the clown, in his unawareness of his own inability to cope with life’s problems, arouses pity. Beckett was shaped by the clowns of the British music hall and the Irish theatre, but his greatest humorist influence were the slapstick comedians of the silent film. To a significant degree, the characters of Vladimir and Estragon were based on the most popular Hollywood double act, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. The influence of those two comedians on the creation of Beckett’s protagonists is evident in a number of highly comparable scenes and the overall relationship between the two. As much as the two are annoyed by one another, they are also highly aware that the presence of their counterpart is necessary for their mental balance and wellbeing.

One of the central questions of “The Myth of Sisyphus”, Albert Camus’s essay that inspired the label for the theatre to which *Waiting for Godot* belongs, is that of suicide. Ending one’s own life is evoked continuously in the play as well, but in the attitude consistent with the genre of tragicomedy: it is never considered entirely seriously, and it is always lightened by irony. One of the morals of the relationship between both Stan and Ollie and Didi and Gogo is that mutual dependence and affection provide unparalleled motivation for continuing existence. Suicide is committed in loneliness; it almost never occurs in pairs.

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Appendix

Films and Videos

- Beau Hunks* (1931). H. Roach (prod.) Laurel and Hardy Classics.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vkf9hs4Vhqk>>
- Block-Heads* (1938). H. Roach (prod.) Laurel and Hardy Classics.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ebn1Y0tTIZs>>
- Do Detectives Think* (1927). H. Roach (prod.) Laurel and Hardy Classics.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qr0UEJ7bW5M>>
- Jerry Lewis on Stan Laurel* (2019). Discussion with TCM's Ben Mankiewicz.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztgVvD67cs4>>
- Liberty* (1929). H. Roach (prod.) Laurel and Hardy Classics.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tl4Msnh1yY4>>
- Meet Samuel Beckett with Richard Wilson* (2015). Manufacturing Intellect.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NIOI5Q-ar0&t=1019s>>
- Swiss Miss* (1938). H. Roach (prod.) Renji Oboro.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3v5_dhOTco>

- The Finishing Touch* (1928). H. Roach (prod.) Laurel and Hardy Classics.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBIm25W4fag&list=PLfrOuVZugB9Ps2eMzhcObK_851V24RBsn&index=25>
- The Flying Deuces* (1939). H. Roach (prod.) Laurel and Hardy Classics.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIIxDO2TbU&list=PLfrOuVZugB9Ps2eMzhcObK_851V24RBsn&index=85>
- Thicker than Water* (1935). H. Roach (prod.) Laurel and Hardy Classics.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAryF2A34Jo&list=PLfrOuVZugB9Ps2eMzhcObK_851V24RBsn&index=13>
- Uproarious Pessimism: Robin Williams and Steven Martin in Waiting for Godot* (2019).
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TazBliAJtb0>>
- You're Darn Tootin'* (1928). H. Roach (prod.) Laurel and Hardy Classics.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDuVVmURAFQ&list=PLfrOuVZugB9Ps2eMzhcObK_851V24RBsn&index=62>