



GUTHRIE
THEATER

Education Resources




On
BECKETT

“Nothing is funnier
than unhappiness ...
it’s the most comical
thing in the world.”

– Nell in *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett

Synopsis

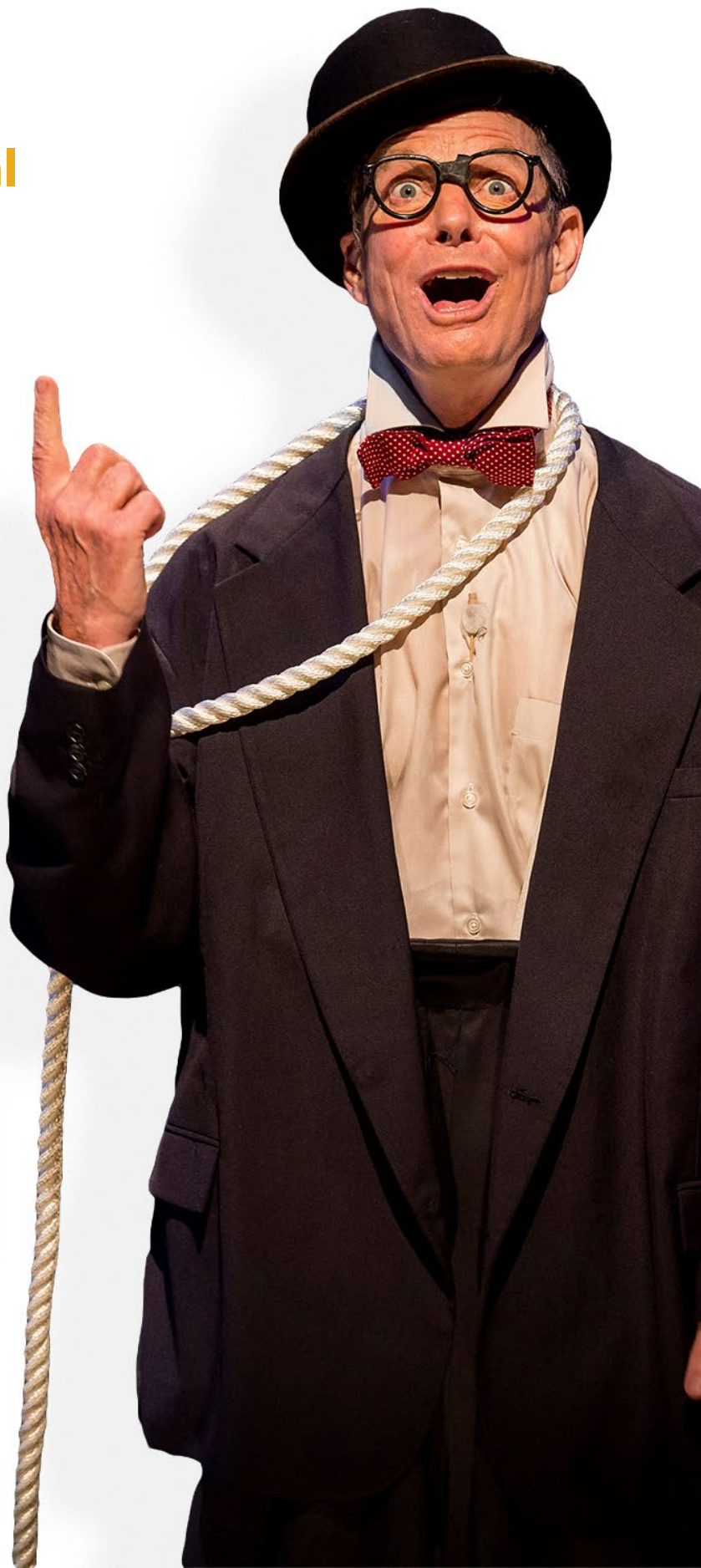
In *On Beckett*, Bill Irwin combines his renowned skill as a master clown and dramatic actor to explore a performer’s relationship to the works of Samuel Beckett, incorporating passages from the Irish author and playwright’s most heralded works and pairing them with his own commentary and reflections. Irwin recites selections from several of Beckett’s novels and plays, including *Texts for Nothing*, *The Unnamable*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Watt*.

Throughout the one-act, one-man show, Irwin utilizes a variety of physical postures, oversized props, lighting arrangements and wardrobe changes to support his performance. For some onstage moments, Irwin is lit so that his face or body is the only visible feature on the dark stage. For others, Irwin dons baggy pants — multiple pairs! — a red nose and comedically large shoes to perform and illuminate the themes of Beckett’s work with a clownish demeanor. 

CHARACTERS

Bill Irwin plays himself in *On Beckett*.

PHOTO: BILL IRWIN (CRAIG SCHWARTZ)






Bill Irwin

Bill Irwin is a Tony Award-winning actor, director, writer and clown. Original works include *The Regard of Flight*, *Largely New York* (four Tony Award nominations), *Fool Moon* (Tony Award winner, created with David Shiner and Nancy Harrington), *Old Hats*, *The Happiness Lecture* and others. He has played in many Broadway, off-Broadway and regional stage productions, including *On Beckett*; *The Iceman Cometh*; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Tony Award for Best Actor in a Play); *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*; *Waiting for Godot* (2009 Drama Desk Award nomination); *Endgame*; *The Tempest*; *Texts for Nothing*; *The Garden of Earthly Delights*; *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*; and *Show Boat*. On TV, Irwin appears as Mr. Noodle in "Elmo's World" and Cary Loudermilk in "Legion." He also created *The Regard of Flight* for "Great Performances" on PBS with Doug Skinner, Michael O'Connor and Nancy Harrington. Selected film credits include *Rachel Getting Married*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Eight Men Out*, *Interstellar*, *Stepping Out* and *The Unsilent Picture*. Irwin was an original member of Kraken Theatre Company directed by Herbert Blau as well as an original member of the Pickle Family Circus with Larry Pisoni and Geoff Hoyle. Irwin is a grateful recipient of fellowships from MacArthur, Guggenheim, Fulbright and National Endowment for the Arts.

PHOTOS: BILL IRWIN (CRAIG SCHWARTZ); SAMUEL BECKETT (ROGER PIC)



Samuel Beckett

Considered one of the most influential theater voices of the past century, Samuel Beckett was an Irish playwright, poet and novelist. Born near Dublin, Ireland, in 1906, he grew up as a gifted athlete, and he studied music and languages at Trinity College. He also traveled extensively abroad, and shortly before World War II, he made his permanent home in Paris. During the German occupation of France, he joined the underground anti-fascist resistance. A keen awareness of humankind's predicament defines Beckett's literature, but his outlook doesn't yield a bleak negativism. Rather, he achieves a supreme convergence of the poetic, the tragic and the comic. Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969 for his penetrating and uncompromising exploration of the human condition. *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Endgame* (1957) and *Happy Days* (1960) are considered masterpieces of 20th-century theater. He died in Paris, France, on December 22, 1989. 

IRWIN ON HIS RELATIONSHIP TO BECKETT

The passages I've included in *On Beckett* are mostly passages that I've had in my head and worked with as a performer for a long time. I want to share them with audiences. I hope to share the place they've come to occupy within me.





PHOTO: BILL IRWIN (CRAIG SCHWARTZ)

Before the Play

BILL IRWIN INTERVIEW

“The Theatre of the Absurd ... aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.”

– Martin Esslin in *Absurd Drama*



Watch

“Meet the Maker: Bill Irwin on Samuel Beckett”

[LINK](#)



Discuss

- What does Irwin mean by “the text repels me”? How can someone be drawn to something that is simultaneously repellent? Can you relate to this feeling?
- What changes do you notice in Irwin’s physicality or voice when he puts on a hat or shifts into performing text? What do you think inspires this transformation? How much is intentional or unintentional?
- Why do we continue to perform and study absurdist texts? What is the purpose of absurdism?

CLOWNING

Clowning is an art form that spans centuries and dates back as far as we know. From the Italian *commedia dell'arte* and Lucille Ball to the Marx Brothers and Homer Simpson, clowns are more than a wig and red nose in the circus ring. Specifically, theatrical clowning is more character-based and uses grandiose scenarios to explore the dynamics of a clown's reactions to a world that rejects them, exacerbating their never-ending failure — and on rare occasions, a small-yet-satisfying success.

Discuss

- What do you initially think of when you hear the word “clown”? What words or images come to mind?
- Consider some of your favorite TV shows and movies. Is there a “clown” in any of them? What purpose do they serve?
- Now that you've examined the clown a bit deeper, have you ever been in a situation that resembled clowning? What made it feel absurd or comical?



Watch

“A, B, Circus! | Episode 3 | History of Clowns | Cirque du Soleil”

[LINK](#)



ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

Samuel Beckett loved music, which deeply influenced his writing. Composer Franz Schubert was his favorite, and he particularly enjoyed “String Quintet in C Major.”



Read

“Why music struck a chord with Beckett” by Sam Doran. *The Guardian*, July 31, 2014.

[LINK](#)



Listen

“String Quintet in C Major” by Franz Schubert

[LINK](#)



Activity

Bill Irwin was inspired by Samuel Beckett's text, which led him to create his solo show *On Beckett* as a tribute to the literary legend. Think about a piece of text that has had a deep impact on you and your life — a speech, song lyrics, a quote, an essay, a novel or a short story. Write a brief description of the piece itself, how it has affected you and why. 🗒️



PHOTO: BILL IRWIN (CRAIG SCHWARTZ)

After the Play

CREATIVE PROCESS

Who or what inspires you? What story needs to be told, and how would you tell it?

Activity

Think back to the piece of text you wrote about in the Artistic Inspiration activity. What original piece of art can you create based on that text? Consider multiple mediums, such as dance, music, writing, visual arts or theater, and use the following prompts to think about your personal creative process:

- Where do my ideas come from? Feelings? Thoughts? Other art? Experiences?
- Why do I want or need to create art?
- How does creating art make me feel?
- What does my art offer to others?
- What am I attempting to express or reflect with my work?
- Do I believe in art for art's sake? Or does my art always have to be "about" something?
- How do I start my creative process?
- Do I seek perfection in my work, or am I okay with flaws or mistakes?
- Does sharing my art make me uncomfortable?
- Is art therapeutic?
- Am I proud of the art I create?
- Am I open to hearing feedback, learning from mistakes and giving myself grace after I create something?

Now that you have considered the inspiration behind your art and how your creative process works, draft an outline of your project. What are the key moments or features? What narrative are you attaching to it, if any? What are you hoping an audience might feel or take away from this piece? Does it satisfy something in yourself?

LEARN MORE

Explore Irish Repertory Theatre's virtual production of *On Beckett/In Screen* and the accompanying Theatre @ Home Kit, which includes additional resources about the play, Samuel Beckett, clowning and more.



LINK