

Happy Days

by Samuel Beckett

an NAC English Theatre Company production

Study Guide

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<http://www.artsalive.ca>

A Production Who's Who

creative team

director.....Leah Cherniak
set and costume designerVictoria Wallace
lighting designer.....Jock Munro
sound designer.....Thomas Ryder Payne
assistant director..... Tanner Harvey

cast

Winnie..... Tanja Jacobs
Willie.....Paul Rainville

stage manager.....Laurie Champagne
assistant stage manager..... Jane Vanstone Osborn

Beckett Biography (page 1 of 3)

Samuel Barclay Beckett was born on Good Friday, April 13th, 1906 in the Protestant community of Foxrock, near Dublin. He died at the age of 83 three days before Christmas on December 22nd, 1989 in Paris, France.

Samuel Beckett was the younger of Bill and May Beckett's two sons. Beckett senior's career in land surveying provided a comfortable middle class lifestyle for his family. Bill's affectionate nature and emotional stability made for an uncomplicated father-son bond. In contrast, May's intense attachment to her son, her rigid expectations of him, her bewildering anger and recurring depression forged a complex mother-son dynamic, a relationship he later acknowledged to be the crucible of his talents and torments: "*I am what her savage loving has made me.*"¹

At Portora Royal School the young Beckett proved to be a strong student with a special aptitude for Latin, though he also excelled at cricket and rugby. At 21 he received a B.A. in Modern Literature (French and Italian) from Dublin's famed Trinity College. In his hours away from school, Beckett enjoyed the Dublin theatre scene. This exposure to Ireland's version of vaudeville comedy surfaces in the conversational style and staging details of his most famous play, *Waiting for Godot* (1954). His love of lowbrow comedy—he adored the films of slapstick legends Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin—coexisted with an academic brilliance of the highest order: Beckett was chosen by Trinity College to represent the institution abroad in a traditional exchange of lecturers with the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in Paris.

Post-graduate work in Paris brought Beckett into direct contact with the living guru of literary modernism, James Joyce (1882-1941), and set him on the path to his true calling. Like Joyce, Beckett's childhood involved a good measure of religious indoctrination (Catholic and Protestant respectively); like Joyce, Beckett's growth into adulthood involved a radical renunciation of the institutions and social conventions that traditionally shape an individual's identity. His writing at this time on Marcel Proust (1871-1922), another giant of modernism, betrays a preoccupation with the ideas that were to become his great themes: life as we experience it is mere habit, our existence ultimately senseless and absurd, its certain end nothing more than an inescapable dissolution into dust.

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Back in Ireland, Beckett quickly grew frustrated with the teaching job he'd landed at Campbell College in Belfast, quitting it after less than two years. Still only 26, he abandoned conventional middle-class success to devote himself to writing full time, much to the dismay of his parents. He spent time in Germany, indulging his passion for art in its galleries, and tried to make a go of life on his own terms in both London and Paris but was forced to return home in disgrace. Then in May of 1933 Peggy Sinclair—Beckett's first cousin and first love (despite parental disapproval) died of tuberculosis; within weeks, his father, too, was dead, of a sudden heart attack, his dying hours witnessed by his family. The nervous condition Beckett had struggled with most of his life now deepened into a severe depression.

After two years of psychoanalysis in London where he came to identify his recurring terror of entrapment with memories of being in his mother's womb, Beckett made a new home for himself in Paris. His career as a writer began in earnest with the publication of poetry, short stories and his first novel, *Murphy*, in 1938. The same year Beckett was stabbed by a petty criminal of his acquaintance while walking down the street; absurdly, the perpetrator could give no reason for his violent act. During his recuperation in hospital, Beckett was visited frequently by another acquaintance—his tennis partner Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil. This was the beginning of their lifelong partnership; Beckett credited much of his later success to Suzanne's belief in and dedication to him and his work. The pair worked for the French Resistance during the war but were forced to flee Paris in haste in 1942 after a friend and member of their cell was arrested by the Gestapo. They waited out the war with Beckett working as a farm laborer in the south of France. In the evenings he wrote *Watt*, his second novel, published in 1953.

His aging mother's Parkinson's-ridden decline towards her death in 1950 brought Beckett back to Ireland several times in the post-war years, as did his brother Frank's death from lung cancer in 1954. Perhaps not coincidentally, the years between 1946 and 1950 saw the production of Beckett's prose and drama masterpieces—the trilogy of novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, and the play *Waiting for Godot*—that epitomize the epiphany he'd experienced at his dying mother's bedside: “I realized that my way [as an artist] was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.”² Beckett wrote these works in French, intentionally striving to fashion a mode of

Beckett Biography (page 3 of 3)

expression that was spare, compressed, and free of ornament. He then translated them back into English, becoming a major literary figure in two languages. The runaway international success of the stage productions of *En attendant Godot* / *Waiting for Godot* began in Paris in 1953 and made Beckett an overnight sensation at 47. *Endgame*, the translation of his *Fin de partie* (1957), secured Beckett's reputation as a genius of modern theatre. His drive towards ever-greater minimalism and abstraction is evident in the works that followed: *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1966), *Lessness* (1969), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982), *Worstward Ho* (1983), *Stirrings Still* (1988) [prose]; and the stage plays *Act Without Words I and II* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Happy Days* (1961), *Play* (1963), *Come and Go* (1966), *Breath* (1968), *Not I* (1973), *Ohio Impromptu* (1981), *Rockaby* (1981), *What Where* (1984), and *Catastrophe* (1984).

In the second half of his life Beckett continued writing and directing, living as quiet a life as he could manage given his unwanted celebrity. He received many awards and honours, including a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. With characteristic humility and compassion, he gave away the \$70,000 in prize money to struggling artists and to charity.

1 "Savage Loving" by J.D. O'Hara (book review) *The New York Times on the Web*, November 24, 1996. <http://www.samuel-beckett.net/fastweb.html>

2 "Sam I Am: Beckett's private purgatories" by Benjamin Kunkel. *The New Yorker*. August 7, 2006. http://www.samuel-beckett.net/Kunkel_Beckett.html

Timeline of Major Conflicts Occurring during Beckett's Life: An Historical Backdrop to Absurdism

1845-9	Potato Famine in Ireland. Deaths of approximately one million people through starvation and disease; a million more emigrate. Irish aspirations to escape British rule intensify.
1912	Communist revolution begins in Russia.
1914-1918	World War I. Death toll: eight million military, six million civilians. Twenty-one million wounded.
1915	Albert Einstein develops his theory of relativity, arguing that space and time merge in a continuum.
1916	Easter Rising in Dublin. Irish Rebel leaders defeated by the British and executed in public.
1919-21	Anglo-Irish War. Irish Republican Army (IRA) engaged in bloody guerilla war against the British.
1921	Adolf Hitler made leader of German Nazi Party; Fascist Benito Mussolini takes power in Italy the following year.
1922-3	Civil war in Ireland.
1929	US stock crash heralds collapse of world economy resulting in the Great Depression of 1930s.
1933	Adolf Hitler takes power in Germany.
1934	Joseph Stalin begins Great Purge (1934-1939) killing millions of his Russian countrymen.
1938	Nazis terrorize and imprison thousands of Jews.
1936-1939	Spanish Civil War. Fascists prevail.
1939-1945	World War II. Death toll: 20 million military, 40 million civilians. Figures include the Holocaust, atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
1946-1954	France at war in Vietnam.
1949	Communists win China's 22-year civil war. Soviets test their first atomic bomb.
1950-1953	Korean War.
1952	First hydrogen bomb (US); first British atomic bomb.
1957	First satellite, Soviet Sputnik 1, and first Soviet ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile).
1961	Berlin Wall goes up.
1962	Cuban missile crisis: Soviets place nuclear missiles in Cuba, US blockades Cuba; global atomic war narrowly averted.
1965-1975	America fights and loses war in Vietnam.
1966-1969	China's Cultural Revolution prompts attacks on artists, intellectuals; many hundred thousands killed or injured.
1969	Beginning of "The Troubles", chronic sectarian violence, in Northern Ireland.
1975-1978	Cambodian holocaust. Two to three million die.
1986	Chernobyl nuclear accident sends radioactive cloud over Europe.
1989	Berlin Wall falls.

Overview of *Happy Days* (page 1 of 7)

Script and Production History

What began as a one-act called “Female Solo” took final form as the two-act, two-character play *Happy Days* in 1961. [Beckett’s working title for *Happy Days* was *Great Mercies, Tender Mercies, Many Mercies.*]

Happy Days, was written in English, reversing Beckett’s previous pattern of writing his dramas in French and then translating them into English. *Oh les beaux jours*, Beckett’s French version of *Happy Days*, was published in 1963.

The play was first produced at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York in 1961. Directed by Alan Schneider, it starred Ruth White as Winnie and John C. Becher as Willie. Beckett directed Billie Whitelaw and Leonard Fenton in his own production at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1979.

Themes

The details of plot, character, and setting that follow make little sense without an awareness of the larger context of ideas Beckett explored in his work. *Happy Days* is the theatrical embodiment of some of Beckett’s particular ideas about existence as they intersect and overlap to create a concrete image of the anguish of the human condition. These ideas include:

- unbridgeable isolation between individuals—people are essentially trapped within the prison of their own minds; we see this in Winnie’s constant anxiety about being left alone by Willie and in the physical, mental and emotional separation that exists between them;
- a capacity for self-awareness that appears to exist for no greater purpose than to acknowledge that the self will eventually die; we see this in the pain and physical limitations the characters have to endure in their progress towards death;
- habit and routine used to deaden one’s awareness of the suffering of being and the instability of identity; we see this in Winnie’s steadfast clinging to the order of her daily routines and in her reliance on memories of a lost past for her sense of herself;
- a disordered, chaotic and unpredictable universe that perpetually frustrates the human desire for logic and meaning; we see this in the cruel absurdity of the situation Winnie and Willie are in and in Winnie’s futile efforts to make some kind of sense out of it.

Overview of *Happy Days* (page 2 of 7)

Plot Synopsis

In Act One, Winnie, a woman of around 50 stuck in a low mound of earth from her waist down, is awakened by the piercing ring of a bell. Despite the bizarre situation she's in, Winnie gazes skyward, commenting cheerfully on "*Another heavenly day*". She prays and then commands herself to begin her day, going about her grooming routine using the objects she keeps in her beloved black shopping bag. She talks to her husband, Willie, a man of around 60 who lives in a hole in the ground hidden from view behind Winnie's mound. It becomes clear from Winnie's comments in Act One that Willie can only crawl on all fours and has difficulty meeting the minimum standards of civilized behaviour, such as putting on clothing and refraining from eating his own snot. When not sleeping, Willie is subjected to Winnie's constant stream of conversation. He says very little, reads his newspaper and looks at a dirty postcard. Winnie is delighted with Willie's infrequent responses—they, too, are taken as proof that her day is a happy one, her life filled with "*great mercies*".

Winnie sees an ant with an egg sack, which leads to a laugh for both husband and wife. She pulls a revolver out the black bag and recalls how Willie asked her to keep it away from him, fearing he might be tempted to commit suicide with it. She puts up her parasol, is suddenly paralyzed while holding it up and can only let it go after it catches on fire. She takes a music box out of her bag and listens to the tune it plays, files her nails, feels she is being watched by someone, and recounts a story about a couple, Mr. Shower (or Mr. Cooker, she can't quite remember) and his partner, who once saw her stuck in the mound and commented on what it might mean and what might be done.

In Act Two Winnie is still embedded in the mound, but now only her head is visible. She cannot move it and can no longer see what's happening to Willie behind the mound. Her bag and parasol are there beside her as in Act One, but now the revolver is out of the bag and sits on the ground beside her head. The bell rings every time she closes her eyes for more than an instant. Winnie tries to get a response from Willie; when he does not respond, she fears he may be dead or have abandoned her. She begins a story about a little girl named Mildred who has a disturbing encounter with a mouse, interrupts herself with a repeat of the story about Mr. Shower/Cooker and his companion, and then returns to the
(continued on next page)

Overview of *Happy Days* (page 3 of 7)

Plot Synopsis (continued)

Mildred story. Despite the fact that all her family came running when she screamed, Mildred's story does not end happily—the family arrive “*too late*”. Winnie then decides the time is right for her to sing her song when Willie appears from behind the mound. He is “dressed to kill” and crawls towards her with great effort. He tries to crawl up the mound to her but doesn't have the strength for it. He says, “*Win!*” in a weak voice, which prompts Winnie to comment on how happy he has made her day. She sings her song, a duet performed as a solo. The play ends as the couple look at each other, Winnie from her imprisonment in the mound, Willie on all fours on the ground in front of her.

Characters

Winnie: an attractive middle-class woman in her 50s, relentlessly optimistic about her grim situation, distracting herself from her awareness of her own mortality and sense of isolation with constant chatter and a strict adherence to her daily rituals. She looks for meaning in her life through her relationship with Willie and her pleasant memories of the time before she was stuck in the mound. Beckett described her as a “*hopeful futilitarian*”.

Willie: Winnie's husband, a physically decrepit, possibly senile man in his 60s who fills up his time with his own routines—crawling into and out of his hole, sleeping, reading the newspaper, fiddling with his handkerchief and hat, and occasionally responding to Winnie's conversational gambits. His true feelings for Winnie are never made clear; it's impossible to know whether his movement towards her at the end of the play is a tender expression of love or a violent desire to shut her up once and for all (or to escape the misery they share by committing suicide).

the Shower/Cooker pair: a couple Winnie claims to remember seeing after she was stuck in the mound. They are openly puzzled about what her situation might mean and bicker over their differing reactions to it, but continue on their way without helping her.

Mildred: the young girl in Winnie's story in Act Two.

Overview of *Happy Days* (page 4 of 7)

Setting

A low mound covered with scorched grass under a punishing sun in the middle of nowhere, with a poorly painted backdrop that indicates the horizon line behind it. The distinction between day and night has ceased to mean anything because the sun never stops shining. The opening image created by the details of setting here contains the central image/metaphor developed in the rest of the play—Winnie’s entrapment as a representation of the suffering of existence in an absurd universe. Critic Ruby Cohn has suggested that Winnie’s partial burial in the earth is Beckett’s literal rendering and exaggeration of the common expression “to have one foot in the grave.”

Literary Devices: Irony and Wordplay

- ironic use of “happy” in a play concerned with suffering
- pun on “daze” for “days”—perhaps happiness comes from living in a daze
- “Winnie” is caught up in a process of loss
- “Willie” may have lost the will to live (“willy” is also slang for penis)
- “Brownie”, Winnie’s name for the revolver, is an allusion to a line written by Robert Browning—“*I say confusedly what comes uppermost*”—which may in turn be an ironic comment on what Winnie is doing throughout the play.
- “formication” sounds like “fornication” [see definition in Glossary (page 12)]
- “Shower” and “Cooker” echo German words that mean to look and to peer—the Shower/Cooker couple are onlookers, spectators who represent the audience watching the play unfold
- the name “Mildred” contains in internal echo of the word “dread”—the Mildred story seems to be a way for Winnie to contemplate her terror over her impending doom by describing it as happening to someone else.

Overview of *Happy Days* (page 5 of 7)

Literary Devices: Literary Allusions

Winnie's speech is filled with references to classic literary works. Here's a partial list:

“Woe woe is me...to see what I see” *Hamlet* Act III Sc. 1: “... O woe is me/To have seen what I have seen, see what I see.”

“Oh fleeting joys...oh something lasting woe.” *Paradise Lost*. [Book X, 741-742] “...O fleeting joys/Of paradise, dear bought with lasting woe.”

“Ensign crimson...pale flag.” *Romeo and Juliet*, Act V Sc. 3 “... Beauty's ensign yet /Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks/And death's pale flag is not advanced there.”

“Fear no more the heat o' the sun.” *Cymbeline*, Act IV, Sc. 2. “Fear no more the heat o' the sun/Nor the furious winter's rages/Thou thy worldly task hast done,/Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages./Golden lads and girls all must,/As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.”

“something something laughing wild amid severest woe” “On a Distant Prospect of Eton College” by Thomas Gray. “And moody madness laughing wild/ Amid severest woe...”

“just to know you are there within hearing and conceivably on the semi-alert is...er...paradise enow.” *The Rubaiyat* by Omar Khayyam. “A book of verses underneath the bough,/A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou/Beside me singing in the wilderness,/Ah wilderness were Paradise enow.” (“enow” is an archaic form of the word “enough”)

“Hail, holy light!” *Paradise Lost*, Book III, Line 1. “Hail, holy light! Offspring of heaven first-born.”

“Eyes on my eyes. (Pause.) What is that unforgettable line?” *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* by Lord Byron. Canto III, stanza xxi: “A thousand hearts beat happily; and when/Music arose with its voluptuous swell,/Soft eyes look'd love to eyes which spake again,/And all went merry as a marriage bell./But hush! hark! a deep sound strikes like a rising knell!”

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Overview of *Happy Days* (page 6 of 7)

Literary Devices: Literary Allusions (continued)

“Beechen green” “Ode to a Nightingale” by John Keats. “In some melodious plot/Of beechen green and shadows numberless.../where but to think is to be full of sorrow”

“What are those exquisite lines?” “Go forget me, etc.” “Go, Forget Me.” by Charles Wolfe. “Go, forget me—why should sorrow/ O’er that brow a shadow fling?/Go, forget me—and tomorrow/Brightly smile and sweetly sing./Smile—though I shall not be near thee;/Sing—though I shall never hear thee.”

“Where are the flowers? That smile today.” “To the Virgins to make much of Time” by Robert Herrick. “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,/Old time is still a-flying,/And this same flower that smiles today/Tomorrow may be dying.”

“Though I say not/What I may not/Let me hear,/Yet the swaying/Dance is saying,/Love me dear!/Every touch of fingers/Tells me what I know,/Says for you,/It’s true, it’s true,/You love me so!” (Winnie’s song at the end, sung to music-box tune) “The Merry Widow Waltz” from Franz Lehar’s opera *The Merry Widow*, 1905 “[“When Irish Eyes are Smiling” was Beckett’s other option for the song.]

Overview of *Happy Days* (page 7 of 7)

Glossary of Difficult Words

bast: raffia, a twine used by gardeners

setae [see' tee] (plural of seta): stiff hair; bristle

qui vive [kee' veev]: “Who goes there?”; to be “on the qui vive” is to be on the alert, watchful

emmet: an archaic word for ant

formicate: to swarm, speaking of ants, or to have the sensation on one's skin of ants swarming

shiver: break or split into fragments (famously in the pirate's expression “shiver me timbers”)

ditty: a sailor's carry-all; plural “ditties” is slang for breasts

tosh: nonsense; bosh

ergo: therefore

boon: blessing, benefit

sunderings: divided parts

gouge: a beveled chisel or a hole made by gouging

bumper: a brimming glass for toasting on happy occasions

anthrax: a disease that produces malignant carbuncles in humans

jizz: Dublin slang for liveliness and energy

Happy Days and the Theatre of the Absurd (page 1 of 2)

“Absurd” in literary circles refers to a 20th century understanding of the universe as a place without meaning or value in which it is impossible to determine any ultimate purpose to life. The word took on this sense as a result of its use by the existential philosopher Albert Camus (1913-1960) in his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus”*. The phrase “the Theatre of the Absurd” was coined by Martin Esslin in his 1961 book of the same name. It describes the work of several dramatists who came to prominence after World War II by producing plays that expressed in poetic image and fractured language the absurdist world view.

The study of great paintings was one of Beckett’s passions, and his drama reveals the same kind of preoccupation with abstraction that dominated the visual arts in his lifetime. Like abstraction in the visual arts, absurdity as a theatrical style rejected conventional “realistic” representations of the world and human experience. As Martin Esslin has observed, these plays display

...a psychological and inner realism; they explore the human sub-conscious in depth rather than trying to describe the outward appearance of human existence. ... (D)eeply pessimistic as they are, they are... (more than) an expression of utter despair. It is true that basically the Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It 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, Introduction to "Penguin Plays - Absurd Drama" (Penguin, 1965)
<http://www.samuel-beckett.net/AbsurdEsslin.html>

*According to Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned to push a heavy stone up a steep hill; but before he reached the top the stone always rolled down, and he had to begin all over again.

***Happy Days* and the Theatre of the Absurd** (page 2 of 2)

Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*, and especially his *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, modern masterpieces of world drama, exemplify the Theatre of the Absurd at its best. Aspects of these works that belong in the category of the Theatre of the Absurd are:

- minimally realized dream/nightmare-like physical surroundings which the characters seem unable to escape;
- references in staging and dialogue that call attention to the plays as plays, the characters as performers, the audience as spectators, etc. (no suspension of disbelief);
- strangely depopulated (post-apocalyptic?) locales in which characters seem to be among the last of their kind;
- action that has no clear beginning, middle, or end but seems instead to circle back on itself perpetually;
- the present experienced as a kind of limbo that reveals the futility of characters' memories of their pasts and hopes for their futures;
- little development of characters' individual identities; distinctions between characters most often based on contrasting and complementary qualities and roles;
- language used compulsively to ward off anxiety about isolation and the pointlessness of existence;
- broad physical comedy and humorous wordplay combined with disturbing and tragic situations.

Director Leah Cherniak on Beckett (page 1 of 2)

Leah Cherniak is an acclaimed writer, actor, teacher and director. She is the co-founder and co-artistic director of Toronto's Theatre Columbus, a company devoted to creating high quality, collectively created shows. Ms. Cherniak studied clown and movement at the renowned École Jacques LeCoq in Paris, taught these disciplines for 14 years at the National Theatre School in Montreal, and currently teaches at The Ryerson Theatre Program and George Brown College in Toronto. Her work last appeared at the NAC during the 2006/07 season when she directed John Mighton's *The Little Years* in a coproduction with Neptune Theatre.

I love Beckett, always have—there's so much to love about his work. I saw *Waiting for Godot* as a student. Even though I didn't fully comprehend Beckett's mysterious sad/funny world at the time, I was very moved by it and attracted to it, to the language, to the strangeness of it all. I was also attracted by how radically different it was from more traditional theatre experiences. His work embodies a kind of rebellion against established conventions, and that kind of rebellion is always attractive to young people.

Later on, in my 20s, I was in a production of *Play** and had to investigate Beckett's work at a much more profound level. *Play* has that characteristic strangeness and minimalism—it presents the same kind of physical challenge for actors Tanja Jacobs will face playing Winnie because the three characters in *Play* are stuck in funeral urns and can only use their voices and facial expressions to communicate. Despite its bare-bones style, the rehearsal process for *Play* showed me that there was so much more to be found in the work. Their circumstances were exceptionally odd and extreme, but these were real people nonetheless. You could only play them if you imagined them as real people.

Working on *Play* I also became much more attuned to Beckett's brilliant use of language, which is so deeply complicated once you start delving into it. When you push beneath the surface there's always incredible detail and complexity in what's being said—so many layers of meaning. Every aspect of his work is charged with ambiguity and paradoxical possibilities. In *Happy Days*, for example, Beckett repeats the stage direction "Smile..." "Smile off." for Winnie. But what does that mean? What kind of smile? How big? Is she really happy or faking it? What motivates the change? And how does this "smile on, smile off" pattern work in terms of the idea of human happiness that is so central to the play? Precise staging details like this in Beckett's scripts, which could feel very limiting in a script by a different playwright, are actually very liberating and rich for actors and directors because they absolutely compel you to make clear, specific choices all the way through.

**Play* (1963) The bitter story of a love triangle (two women and a man) is narrated by the characters involved in it. They appear on stage encased in three large urns with only their heads protruding. The heads speak in turn and sometimes all at the same time on cues given by spotlights.

Director Leah Cherniak on Beckett (page 2 of 2)

The opening image in *Happy Days*, which I love, is so distinctively Beckett in the way it starkly confronts the audience with the puzzle of Winnie’s bizarre predicament. The curtain opens and there she is stuck up to her waist in the mound—it makes me laugh, but it’s awful, too. You can’t help but ask yourself what it means, how such a thing could have happened, but we never get any explanation. Winnie’s situation is what it is, and she just accepts it. It’s life as she knows it and she carries on as best she can. And undoubtedly there’s irony in the title “Happy Days,” given her situation—she’s so vulnerable, she can’t move, all her supplies are running out and the sun seems to be burning everything—but it’s Beckett, so it’s not as simple as that. There’s an incredible playfulness to Beckett even in what feels like the direst of circumstances. It’s a lovely paradox of playfulness that sweetens the darkness of Winnie’s situation and makes it bearable.

I’m drawn to this kind of comedy that sits on the edge of tragedy. As a clown artist and teacher, I see strong parallels between Beckett and clown. Both work out of a tragicomic perspective that combines the broadest sort of physical comedy with a poignant sense of human vulnerability and aloneness. No matter how much difficulty they’ve gotten themselves into, clowns can’t really leave the stage. They’ve got to see things through. Beckett’s characters, too, are often trapped on stage, exposed to the audience. Clowns make audiences “see” the imaginary worlds they create through the strength of their belief in them. Beckett’s characters are up to something similar, shaping the whole world out of their own heads. We might recognize this as naïve, but it’s where hope comes from, too—for them and for us.

Happy Days: Activities (page 1 of 4)

Pre-performance (page 1 of 2)

1. Improvising the Story

Pique students' curiosity about *Happy Days* by providing them with the brief description below of its opening image and asking them to come up with a middle and an ending to Winnie and Willie's story (or use the description as a jumping off point for free writing). Set a limit on the amount of time they have to write and encourage them to keep getting words down on the paper for the entire time. Alternatively, set up this activity as a pair or small group improvisation, with the description as the scene starter.

“A sleeping, middle-aged woman named Winnie is buried up to her waist in a mound of earth as the sun blazes down. She has a large black shopping bag and a parasol beside her. Willie, her husband, lives in a hole in the ground behind the mound. A bell rings and wakes Winnie up. She looks up and says...”

2. Quick Overview of the Play

Use the *Happy Days* Overview section (pages 6-12) and the Overview crossword puzzle (pages 22-24) to quickly familiarize your class with the play. Divide the class into groups and give each a copy of the *Happy Days* Overview section. Give them 20 to 30 minutes to read aloud and discuss the handout in preparation for a crossword-style quiz. Give each group one copy of the Overview crossword puzzle to complete within an appropriate time limit (10 to 15 minutes). Collect the completed puzzles and take up the correct answers.

3. Explore Daily Rituals through Improvised Movement

Because much of the “action” of *Happy Days* is based on Winnie's daily routines, it's a good idea to do some work in advance that gets students thinking about the way rituals and routines shape their own lives. Ask students to list activities they perform on a daily basis such as brushing their teeth, riding the bus, or chatting on the computer. Form groups (five to eight students per group) and ask them to compare lists. Next, ask each student to choose one activity from his or her list that can be acted out with simple movements. Each student in turn then teaches his or her movement to other group members, who mirror it back in unison.

Finally, ask each group to take the series of movements they developed and link them together into an abstract movement piece about daily rituals that they perform as a group in unison. Follow up the group performances with a discussion or journal entry on the role routine and ritual plays in their lives.

(continued on next page)

Happy Days: Activities (page 2 of 4)

Pre-performance (page 2 of 2)

3. Explore Daily Rituals through Improvised Movement (continued)

Questions to kick start discussion:

- How much time do you devote to your routines each day?
- Which daily activities do you enjoy, and which do you resent or wish you could skip?
- Are you mostly on “automatic pilot” mode when performing these activities?
- Do you feel liberated or enslaved by your routines?
- In *Waiting for Godot* Beckett wrote, “Habit is a great deadener.” Do you agree or disagree?

Variations:

- Have students write about and discuss their parents’ routines.
- Ask groups to add a dramatic incident of some kind at the end of their movement piece that forces the performers to abandon their routines.

4. Physical Comedy: Things Have a Life of Their Own

Beckett drew on many sources to create the physical comedy in his tragicomic plays: the *mimes** of Greece and Rome, the *commedia dell' arte* of Renaissance Italy, and the silent film antics of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Get students thinking about physical comedy by having them work out short mimed scenes in pairs or small groups that revolve around characters having increasing degrees of difficulty with ordinary objects. Possible objects include: chewing gum, wallpaper, a ladder, paint, an article of clothing, spaghetti, an umbrella, a vacuum cleaner, scissors, glue, a balloon, a bowl of soup, an insect, an alarm clock, a fishing rod, etc.

5. *Come and Go* by Samuel Beckett

In the drama textbook *Interpretation: Working with Scripts* by Charles J. Lundy and David W. Booth, you will find the script of Samuel Beckett’s short play *Come and Go*, a perfect example of Theatre of the Absurd. Give students time to work with the script; encourage them to pay close attention to the very detailed stage directions, especially with regard to hand positioning. Have students perform it for each other. Discuss and elicit comments on interpretation, subtext, staging, choices and their effectiveness. What backstory did each group create to explain the relationships between the characters? What different emotions did each interpretation evoke?

**mimes*: catch-all category for popular performance-based entertainment in ancient Greece and Rome that included short plays, dance, animal and bird imitations, singing, acrobatics, juggling, etc..

Happy Days: Activities (page 3 of 4)

Post-performance (page 1 of 2)

1. Topics for Class Discussion

- Is there true happiness in *Happy Days*? Based on your own experience, what circumstances and attitudes are likely to promote happiness? Can some people be happy no matter what circumstances they find themselves in?
- Is Winnie brave or cowardly? Support your view with evidence from the play.
- Does Winnie love Willie? Does Willie love Winnie? Support your view with evidence from the play.
- Who has more power in the marriage—Winnie or Willie? Do their stage positions relative to each other (Winnie is higher and on the vertical axis, while Willie is beneath her and on the horizontal axis) suggest anything about who is superior and who is inferior?
- *Happy Days* is a play with very limited movement and very little for an audience to focus on except the stark stage picture with the main character at its centre. Why would Beckett have wanted to strip the theatre experience down to such an extreme? What effect does this radical simplicity have on you as an audience member?
- There are several film versions of *Happy Days* (see Resources page 21). What challenges would a director face in adapting the play for film? What aspects of *Happy Days* make the immediacy of a live audience so important to its effectiveness?

2. Written Responses

Possible writing tasks to assign as a follow-up to viewing *Happy Days* include:

- a play review (for a quick “how to” on writing reviews, see the Theatre Ontario website at http://theatreontario.org/content/play_reviews.htm);
- a decisive ending that picks up where Beckett left off;
- an inner monologue for Willie;
- a poem or lyrics to a song inspired by the play.

Happy Days: Activities (page 4 of 4)

Post-performance (page 2 of 2)

3. Happy Days Poster Project Plus

How do graphic designers decide what combination of text and visuals on a poster will be attention-grabbing? Visit *Persuading Presence*, the NAC's Performing Arts Poster Archive site to find out. This latest addition to the award-winning educational website ArtsAlive.ca will give your students a comprehensive introduction to the multifaceted world of poster design including detailed lessons and interactive quizzes on what makes a poster effective, the elements and principles of design, and insights into a career in graphic design.

To begin exploring this rich resource, check out this address:

<http://www.artsalive.ca/collections/posters/index.php?lang=en>

4. Happy Days Show and Tell

Follow up your trip to the theatre with an activity that develops critical thinking and presentation skills by devoting a class period to a “show and tell” event. Beckett’s bleakly comic, angst-ridden prose and drama helped popularize dark social satire and artistic outpourings of anguish—features of contemporary popular culture that are in no short supply. Songs like “Hurt” by Nine Inch Nails (*What have I become?/My sweetest friend/Everyone I know/Goes away in the end/You could have it all/My empire of dirt/I will let you down/I will make you hurt.*), “Road to Nowhere” by the Talking Heads, or “A Day in the Life” by the Beatles, for example, express absurdist themes.

Set aside one class in which students each do quickie class presentations that introduce the song/movie/TV show/video game/T-shirt, etc. they connect to Beckett’s world view as expressed in *Happy Days*.

Resources and Works Consulted

On the Web

BBC4 hosts an excellent companion site to the film *Beckett on Film: 19 Films by 19 Directors*. Here's the link to the home page: <http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/B/beckett/>

This site contains complete teacher study guides for each play, as well as a page that links to several other comprehensive sites on Beckett, the link for which is <http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/B/beckett/more.html>

MahloBeta offers another extremely useful clearing house link to a range of Beckett information including links to study guides, biographies, and images: http://www.mahalo.com/Happy_Days_Play

Film

See complete film versions of Beckett's *Film* and *Not I* at the link <http://www.ubu.com/film/beckett.html>

The Beckett on Film Project, brainchild of Michael Colgan and Alan Moloney, saw the creation of film versions of all 19 of Beckett's plays. The project was completed in 2001. For full details, follow this link to the Wikipedia article: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beckett_on_Film

To view the film version of *Play* directed for the project by Anthony Minghella and starring Alan Rickman, Kirsten Scott Thomas, and Juliet Stevenson, visit the link <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NdTjRumkT9k>

Books and Articles

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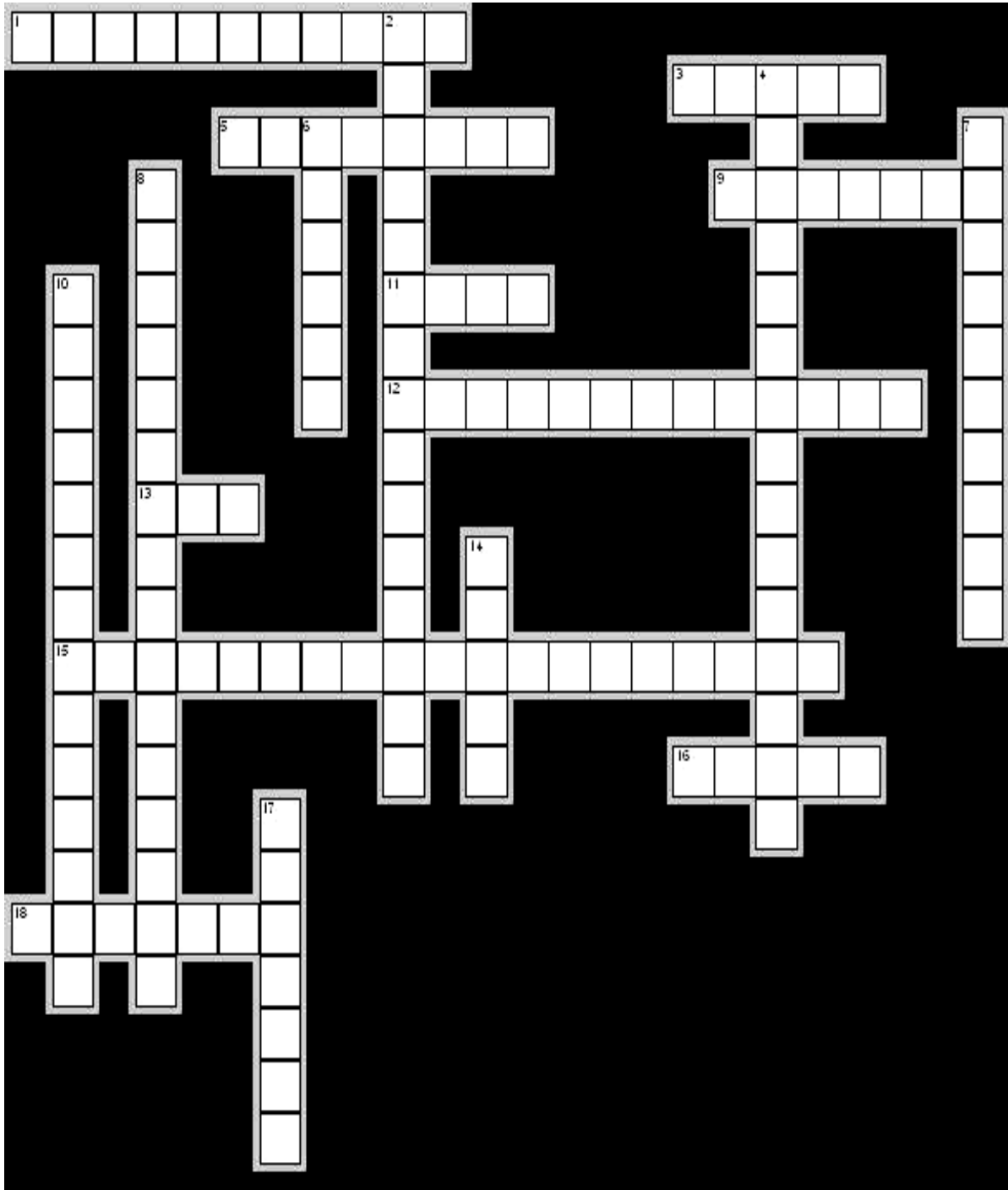
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Happy Days Overview Crossword Puzzle (page 1 of 3)



***Happy Days* Overview Crossword Puzzle** (page 2 of 3)

Across

1. the action of swarming ants or the sensation of ants crawling on the skin
3. old-fashioned word for ant
5. Willie's means of locomotion
9. a revolver named _____
11. garden twine
12. *Happy Days*' first director
13. castrated male swine reared for slaughter
15. words Beckett used to describe Winnie
16. stiff hair, bristles
18. it catches on fire

Down

2. title of French version of *Happy Days*
4. music-box song
6. an _____ universe defies human desire for order and logic
7. One-act precursor to *Happy Days*
8. Winnie tells herself not to overdo it
10. Beckett's Winnie
14. "Where but to _____ is to be full of sorrow."
17. name of the little girl in Winnie's story

Happy Days Overview Crossword Puzzle (page 3 of 3)

Answer Key

Across

1. FORMICATION
3. EMMET
5. CRAWLING
9. BROWNIE
11. BAST
12. ALAN SCHNEIDER
13. HOG
15. HOPEFUL FUTILITARIAN
16. SETAE
18. PARASOL

Down

2. OH LES BEAUX JOURS
4. MERRY WIDOW WALTZ
6. ABSURD
7. FEMALE SOLO
8. BLACK SHOPPING BAG
10. BILLIE WHITELOW
14. THINK
17. MILDRED

***Happy Days* Set Design Maquette (detail)**



created by Set/Costume Designer Victoria Wallace

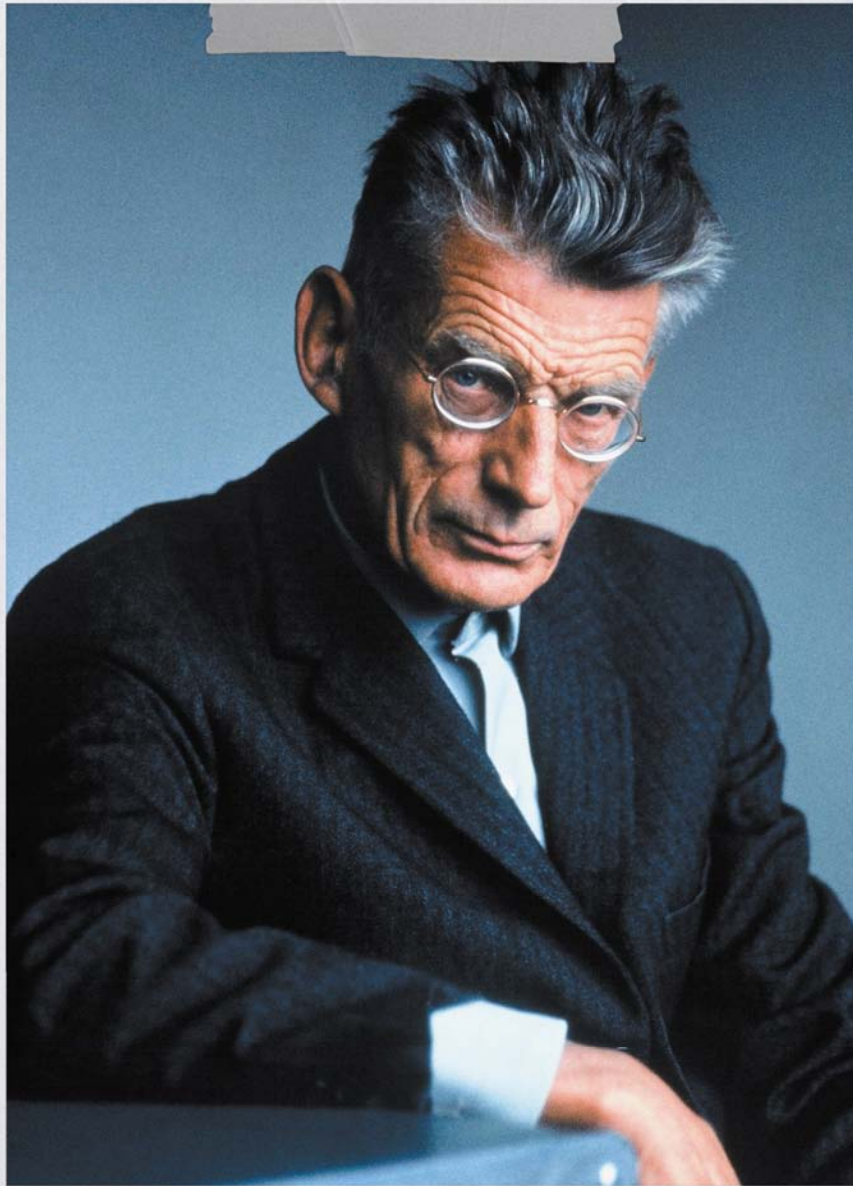
***Happy Days* Set (under construction in NAC shop)**



design by Victoria Wallace

Playwright Samuel Beckett (in Paris, 1960)

© Luti Ozkok/Sipa



Sam in Paris, 1960



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