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ARTS

Alias Godot

Julien Arnold finds a Godot he can get behind in Theatre Network's latest

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Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is one of the more unassailable plays of the 20th century, a landmark of modernist theatre that's held up by intellectuals and pretentious elitists alike as one of the more provocative, challenging plays ever written. Its reputation extends well beyond the borders of the theatre community, to the point where it's shorthand for almost anything absurd or pointless, in art or otherwise.

Of course, it's also kind of an interminable drudge of a play. Yeah, yeah, it's about the ultimate meaninglessness and so on and so forth, but it turns out that that's not always so fun to sit through—what makes for a good essay doesn't always make for a good evening. And even though he's set to star in a take-off on the original—and, with a BFA in acting and an MFA in directing, has intellectualized enough theatre to choke a horse—Julien Arnold is in the camp that can appreciate *Godot* without actually wanting to see it.

"I can't say that I'm a huge fan of Beckett, really," he admits, almost tentatively, as if such a statement might get his acting privileges revoked. "I mean, I realize what his importance is in the development of modern drama, but it's a bit of a tough slog, watching *Waiting for Godot*. It's revolutionary, of course, but that doesn't mean I necessarily want to sit through it."

Which is why he appreciates *Alias Godot*, Brendan Gall's modern adaptation/postmodern tweaking of Beckett's, ahem, classic, all the more. A kind of updating of the play—in tone as much as plot—to the contemporary era, it takes place entirely in an interrogation room, where the aloof, befuddled Godot (Arnold), is questioned by a pair of morally suspect cops (Brian Dooley and Chris Schulz), and the three of them are occasionally harassed by a fairly witless anti-terrorism unit (Collin Doyle and James Hamilton). Though it's a sight livelier than its source, it does maintain the original's resistance to spelling things out, and keeps its characters as much as its audience in a bit of a fog of comprehension. Gall's ability to strike that balance, says Arnold, is one of his favourite things about the play.

"That's where a lot of the humour comes, for starters, but also it's really what gets you interested: trying to figure out exactly what's going on," he explains. "It takes an awful lot of skill to have something not really



make sense, but still keep it humourous and interesting, I think, but this play does that really well.”

And though it isn't quite as staid as the original, Alias Godot nevertheless does address some of the same themes, albeit in a decidedly more irreverant manner. There's talk of the non-existence of God, of course, and the events of the play, though certainly more energetic, are ultimately as meaningless as Waiting's looping, incessant chatter, but these things are more often addressed as jokes—like, actual ones, not cosmic ones. In that respect, Alias is very much of its time, kind of a cynic's view of the original's bleak existentialism.

“I don't think we can be as serious about those kinds of things now; it's been with us for so long now, that we're able to make fun of it, for a start, but also maybe the questions don't seem as important as they did at the time,” offers Arnold by way of explanation for Gall's more sardonic take on life's ultimate meaninglessness. “There's this moment near the end of the play where Godot talks about having to do it all again, how it never ends, and I think it's almost a reaction to that. This stuff keeps coming up, and at some point you can't take it as seriously.”

Which isn't to imply that the play has some sort of aloof, unfeeling heart. Despite its absurdist roots and its cynical outlook, among its comedy there is a real feeling for honest despair. The final speech Arnold references above also speaks to a deeper longing, the need we all have to feel like what we're doing is driving towards some kind of point.

Still, for Arnold, striking that note in a play that spends much of its time as something decidedly more carefree is proving to be the biggest challenge, not helped by the fact that, as the eponymous character, he bears a lot of the weight of both the comedy and the wisdom. Finding that balance, though, has been one of the constant joys for Arnold of working on the play so far.

“He's a strange character, but he's so interesting,” says Arnold. “Once in a while he'll say something inadvertently pithy, or something incredibly wise. I think what I've found is that really what he does is takes things very literally, and that's part of the comedy, but there's also an element of this innocent kind of wisdom to it, and if you keep that innocence, that's where the character works best. It's sort of about keeping it simple as all this stuff is going on around him, and it's actually quite beautiful, in the end.” **V**

Thu, Sep 25 - Sun, Oct 12 (8 pm)

Alias Godot

Directed by Bradley Moss

Written by Brendan Gall

Starring Julien Arnold, Brian Dooley, Collin Doyle, James Hamilton, Christopher Schulz

Roxy Theatre (10708 - 124 St), \$21 - \$27

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