

---

# HAPPY DAYS

**By Samuel Beckett**

Educational Material by Why Not Theatre Company

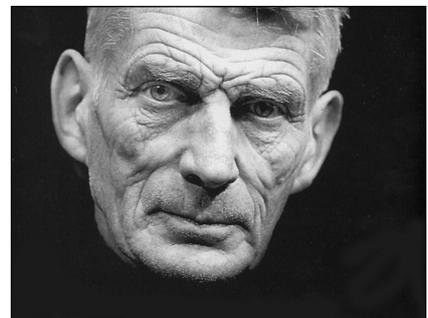
---



---

# INDEX

- 1) Hello from Why Not Theatre Company.... p.3
- 2) Note from the theatre.... p.4
- 3) Short resume of HAPPY DAYS.... p.5
- 4) Excerpt from the play.... p.7
- 5) Use of language in HAPPY DAYS.... p.10
- 6) The Theatre of the Absurd.... p.11
- 7) The absurdists viewed in 2021.... p.13
- 8) Some questions.... p.14
- 9) Samuel Beckett/ short biography.... p.15
- 10) Practical information.... p.16
- 11) Source list.... p.17



# HELLO FROM WHY NOT THEATRE COMPANY

Dear teacher,

We hope you will find this teaching material helpful - both for preparing your students before coming to see our production of HAPPY DAYS by Samuel Beckett, and for post-show discussion and analysis.

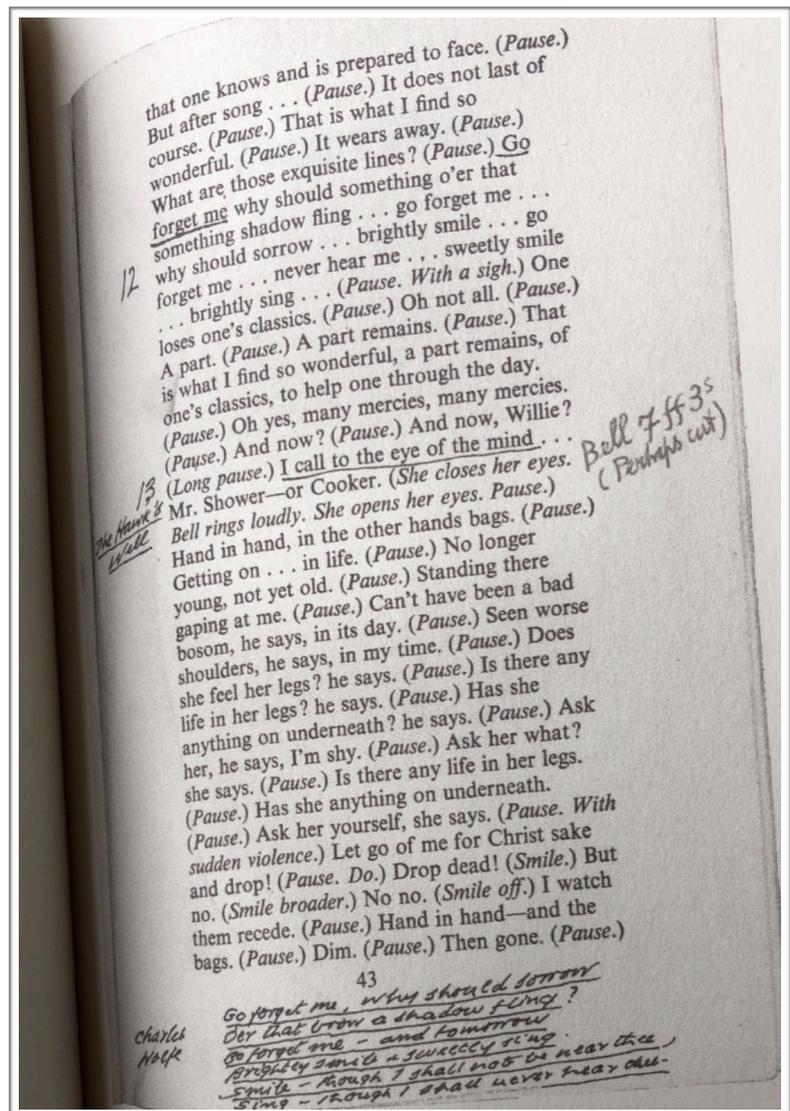
We are always more than happy to conduct Artist Talks after selected performances, so please let us know if you would like us to organise one of these sessions for your group. Our experience shows that it can be hugely beneficial for students to have the opportunity to ask questions after seeing the show and to chat informally with the actors and Director.

We look forward to welcoming you back to the theatre and hope you will have an enjoyable evening in our company.

With best wishes,

Sue Hansen-Styles

Artistic Leader of Why Not Theatre Company



---

## A NOTE FROM THE THEATRE

Over time plays have been written that have a special, universal quality, making them timeless and thus supplying generations with new experiences and reflections. Samuel Beckett's HAPPY DAYS is such a play, with its simple and gripping portrayal of the eternally optimistic Winnie and her passive husband, Willie.

Why do certain plays manage to bridge across time and get discovered again and again, whilst others disappear into oblivion after a few performances? Of course there isn't one simple answer to this question but in a general sense one can consider that these plays are able to touch upon something deep and eternally relevant in the human condition.

The basis of HAPPY DAYS addresses something fundamental about modern human beings: a couple trapped in meaningless rituals, superficial observations and a relationship that is devoid of genuine contact. And they adapt to even the most extreme circumstances, which then almost effortlessly becomes their lives. This is existentialism at its core.

Beckett wrote HAPPY DAYS in 1961, 60 years ago, and this play is still able to introduce us to new perspectives and meanings that are strongly reflected in our time. The world as we know it is going through radical changes on so many levels; environmentally, economically and personally. These shifts open up questions about our position in the universe. What is the purpose of my existence? How will the future be? Where do I find hope when there is so much destruction around me? As human beings we become small in the face of pandemics or global warming issues. Yet these questions have been posed before by the absurdist movement of which Beckett was a member. This movement gained momentum after World War II - their questions were spurred on by the discovery of the copious human atrocities that followed in its wake.

Why Not Theatre Company finds it important to perform HAPPY DAYS with this in mind. To take a new look at this masterpiece and provide our audiences with a place to reflect on life, whilst we are faced with overwhelming forces beyond our control. We identify with little, human Winnie who, despite being stuck in the mud still insists on singing, even if it's the last thing she'll ever do.

In this material we will introduce you to the play and the background for its creation, the Theatre of the Absurd. We will discuss how and if these thoughts are relevant in a contemporary context and give you a little taste of Beckett's life and work.

We hope this provides you with happy reading!

Nina Larissa Bassett

Dramaturg

---

## SUMMARY OF HAPPY DAYS

### ACT 1

Winnie is a middle-aged woman, who is stuck in a mound of earth from the waist down. She wakes up and begins her daily routine, as she speaks to her husband, Willie, who lies barely visible in a hole in the dirt behind her.

Willie is able to crawl, and so is more mobile than Winnie. He is weak and slow yet stays within close range of his wife. Mostly he reads his newspaper and a dirty postcard.

Winnie keeps her beloved handbag with all her necessities close by and, as she talks, she pulls out a number of everyday items, such as her toothbrush and toothpaste. She goes through her daily prayer and muses about her day, her memories and the small part of the world that exists within her view, such as a little ant with an egg sack or the sound of a bell. Winnie then produces a gun, named “Brownie”, that she treats as yet another everyday household item. Winnie starts to feel that they are being watched by a couple passing by.

### ACT 2

Winnie is now buried up to her neck in the mound, unable to move at all. However her perspective on life has not changed, she is as optimistic as ever. Her gun and parasol lie in front of her. She still continues her stories and embarks on a childhood memory about a little girl called Mildred, who has a disturbing experience with a mouse. Willie is silent and Winnie fears he might be dead. After a while Willie manages to crawl closer to Winnie, and she is overjoyed. He collapses in front of her and the couple are left, motionless, as Winnie sings a song.

### Characters

**Winnie:** An attractive, talkative middle-aged woman. She is immobile yet immensely positive about life. She clings to her everyday routines and religious rituals in order to avoid facing more serious subjects like her own mortality. She looks for the meaning of life through her connection to her husband, Willie.

**Willie:** Is an older man, who barely speaks. He has some mobility but is only able to crawl on his hands and knees. He has very little contact with his wife and merely utters the occasional noncommittal responses to her meanderings. His own thoughts are expressed out of context and indicate he is in a separate world.



Themes:

- \* The play expresses at its core the fundamental existential question: Does life have meaning? The routines and conversations between Winnie and Willie signify how humans create meaning through more or less empty actions in order to stay alive.
- \* The element of religious actions is present in the play and underlines a theme of the power of hope and belief, which is strong with Winnie. Even when realising her glasses aren't helping her see, she quickly turns it around and says: "Seen enough". This is a powerful drive in her.
- \* Additionally we find the subject of inter-human relationships to be very dominant in the play. The couple that stays together even though there is no real connection between them. The relationship is stagnant, going nowhere, just like Winnie herself. They are bound by routine.
- \* Underlying in the play is the presence of Brownie - the gun - the symbol of imminent death, the option to end it all. A highly existential question: Should I exist? However this option becomes impossible for Winnie in the 2nd act, as she no longer can use her arms. So, even death is not a solution. She must rely on Willie, but does he have the strength/ the will to go through with it?

---

## EXCERPT FROM THE PLAY

Here you can read a few pages from the play HAPPY DAYS. Note how incredibly detailed the play is written; every movement is described in the stage direction, every pause is mentioned. This is in accordance with the absurdist's desire to create a non-rational universe and their use of language as a tool that disrupts our need for things to make sense.

*To the right and rear, lying asleep on ground, hidden by mound, WILLIE.  
Long pause. A bell rings piercingly, say ten seconds, stops. She does not move. Pause. Bell more piercingly, say five seconds. She wakes. Bell stops. She raises her head, gazes front. Long pause. She straightens up, lays her hands flat on ground, throws back her head and gazes at zenith. Long pause. Gazing at zenith).*

Another heavenly day.  
*(Pause. Head back level, eyes front, pause. She clasps hands to breast, closes eyes. Lips move in inaudible prayer, say ten seconds. Lips still. Hands remain clasped. Low.) For Jesus Christ sake Amen. (Eyes open, hands unclasp, return to mound. Pause. She clasps hands to breast again, closes eyes, lips move again in inaudible addendum, say five seconds. Low.) World without end Amen. (Eyes open, hands unclasp, return to mound. Pause.) Begin, Winnie. (Pause.) Begin your day, Winnie. (Pause. She turns to bag, rummages in it without moving it from its place, brings out toothbrush, rummages again, brings out flat tube of toothpaste, turns back front, unscrews cap of tube, lays cap on ground, squeezes with difficulty small blob of paste on brush, holds tube in one hand and brushes teeth with other. She turns modestly aside and back to her right to spit out behind mound. In this position her eyes rest on WILLIE. She spits out. She cranes a little further back and down. Loud.)  
Hoo-oo! (Pause. Louder.) Hoo-oo!  
(Pause. Tender smile as she turns back front, lays down brush.) Poor Willie — (examines*

*tube, smile off*) — running out — (*looks for cap*) — ah well — (*finds cap*) — can't be helped — (*screws on cap*) — just one of those old things — (*lays down tube*) — another of those old things — (*turns towards bag*) — just can't be cured — (*rummages in bag*) — cannot be cured — (*brings out small mirror, turns back front*) - ah yes - (*inspects teeth in mirror*) — poor dear Willie — (*testing upper front teeth with thumb, indistinctly*) — good Lord! — (*pulling back upper lip to inspect gums, do.*) — good God! — (*pulling back corner of mouth, mouth open, do.*) — ah well — (*other corner, do.*) — no worse — (*abandons inspection, normal speech*) — no better, no - worse — (*lays down mirror*) — no change — (*wipes fingers on grass*) — no pain — (*looks for toothbrush*) — hardly any - (*takes up toothbrush*) - great thing that — (*examines handle of brush*) — nothing like it — (*examines handle, reads*) — pure ... what? - (*pause*) - what? - (*lays down brush*) — ah yes — (*turns towards bag*) — poor Willie — (*rummages in bag*) — no zest — (*rummages*) — for anything — (*brings out spectacles in case*) — no interest — (*turns back front*) - in life - (*takes spectacles from case*) — poor dear Willie — (*lays down case*) — sleep for ever — (*opens spectacles*) — marvellous gift — (*puts on spectacles*) — nothing to touch it — (*looks for toothbrush*) — in my opinion — (*takes up toothbrush*) — always said so — (*examines handle of brush*) — wish I had it — (*examines handle, reads*) - genuine... pure... what? — (*lays down brush*) — blind next - (*takes off spectacles*) - ah well - (*lays down spectacles*) — seen enough — (*feels in bodice for handkerchief*) — I suppose — (*takes out folded handkerchief*) — by now — (*shakes out handkerchief*) — what are those wonderful lines — (*wipes one eye*) — woe woe is me — (*wipes the other*) — to see what I see — (*looks for spectacles*) — ah yes — (*takes up spectacles*) that is what I find so wonderful, all conies back. (*Pause.*) All? (*Pause.*) No, not all. (*Smile.*) No no. (*Smile off.*) Not quite. (*Pause.*) A parr. (*Pause.*) Floats up, one fine day, out of the blue. (*Pause.*) That is what I find so wonderful. (*Pause. She turns towards bag. Hand and card disappear. She makes to rummage in bag, arrests gesture.*) No. (*She turns back front. Smile.*) No no. (*Smile off.*) Gently Winnie. (*She gazes front. WILLIE's hand reappears, takes off hat, disappears with hat.*)

---

What then?

*(Hand reappears, takes handkerchief from skull, disappears with handkerchief. Sharply, as to one not paying attention.) Winnie! (WILLIE bows head out of sight.) What is the alternative? (Pause.) What is the al — (WILLIE blows nose loud and long, head and hands invisible. She turns to look at him. Pause. Head reappears. Pause. Hand reappears with handkerchief, spreads it on skull, disappears. Pause. Hand reappears with boater, settles it on head, rakish angle, disappears. Pause.) Would I had let you sleep on. (She turns back front. Intermittent plucking at grass, head up and down, to animate following.)*



---

## THE USE OF LANGUAGE IN HAPPY DAYS

The play applies absurdist use of language, which tends to undermine conventional meaning of words and tries to reach beyond logical thinking. Thus you will find word-play, clichés, puns and double meanings in many absurd plays.

### Examples of absurd wordplay

- \* Ironic use of the word Happy in a play about stagnation
- \* Pun on the word Days that sounds like daze, in which Winnie arguably is.
- \* **Winnie** is not a winner but in the process of loss
- \* **Willie** seems to have lost the will to live (also willy is a childish term for penis)
- \* Mildred contains the word dread, and something terrible happened to her.

### Difficult words

Bast: raffia, a twine used by gardeners

Setae: Stiff hair, bristle

Qui vive: Who goes there?

Emmet: An archaic word for ant.

Formicate: To swarm, when speaking of ants.

Shiver: Break or split into fragments

Ditty: A sailor's carry-all; ditties slang for breasts

Tosh: Nonsense, bosh

Ergo: Therefore

Boon: Blessing, benefit

Sunderings: Divided parts.

Gouge: 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

---

## THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

The term Theatre of the Absurd was coined by theatre critic Martin Esslin in his description of a number of playwrights working in the 1950s and 60s such as Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Arthur Adamov (1908-1970), Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994), Jean Genet (1910-1986), Edward Albee (1928), Harold Pinter (1930-2008) and Tom Stoppard (1937). Their work shared a similar outlook on humanity; that humans are at discord with the universes they inhabit. An approach seemingly inspired by existentialist philosophy that boomed around WWII, and was expressed by thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Paul Sartre and in particular Albert Camus.



### Existential philosophy

Focuses on the problem of human existence and centres around the lived experience of the thinking, feeling, acting individual. According to existentialists the individual's starting point is based in "existential angst"; a sense of dread, disorientation, confusion, or anxiety that occurs when faced with an apparently meaningless or absurd world.

---

Famously Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* from 1942 encompasses this movement - this is the Greek myth about a king who is punished by the Gods for cheating death twice and must push a heavy boulder to the top of the hill. Once he reaches the top the boulder rolls back to the foot of the hill and he must start his labours all over again. Endlessly he is condemned to repeat this endeavour. Camus uses this image to unpack the contemporary human condition. How we are trapped in a cycle of meaningless struggles, which we are doomed to repeat until death without release. The gesture is at its core absurd. However Camus claims that humankind finds satisfaction in this reparation and finds meaning within the meaninglessness.

## Background

It is no coincidence that these thoughts and ideas manifested themselves in philosophy and art preceding the two world wars in the first half of the 20th Century. Initially through the avant-gard movement and later with Theatre of the Absurd. The realisation that mankind could inflict horror like the mass annihilations of Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia and finally the atomic bombs dropped over Nagasaki and Hiroshima, caused a fundamental paradigm shift. World views were changed forever, and from this trauma a new theatre form was born. In a universe where cities could be obliterated in seconds, where humans could be stored in death camps and exterminated, there could be no God, no overall plan or sense of justice. And if God was dead, could life really have a purpose? If life stopped making sense then art was duty bound to reflect this meaninglessness and therefore distance was taken to the rational and psychologically explainable naturalism that dominated the theatre stages in the beginning of the 1900s. This new form of theatre was disturbing, undramatic and had no intention of pleasing its audience. It forced the new truth upon them by challenging the use of language, repetition, performing the mundane, refusing to supply the audience with meaning and evoking an eerie sense of emptiness.

## Characteristics.

When we use the term *absurd* in everyday conversations we often mean something is ridiculous or mad but in defining the Theatre of the Absurd Martin Esslin reverted to the original meaning of the word: "out of harmony with reason or propriety; illogical". Thus there are a number of characteristics that can be observed in plays belonging to this tradition. Absurd drama subverts the idea of a logical universe by removing the plot, making it technically "non-dramatic" - without a climax or resolution at the end but rather building tension through repetition, humour and the monotonous. There is no development in a classical sense but rather the plays convey an environment, a state of mind, a condition, a relationship (or lack of). Furthermore the devaluation of language plays a significant role: the absurd writers regard language as obsolete, unable to describe the human condition, as it is merely a tool of logical thought. Therefore they toy with language in their plays, giving words new meanings, or non-meanings, they use puns, jargon, nonsense and clichés in attempts to ridicule the conventional speech patters. Objects thus become far more essential than language in absurd theatre. Poetic imagery is applied and the objects on stage gain significant symbolic value.

---

## THE ABSURDISTS VIEWED IN 2021

The absurdist movement was born from a world in upheaval. Prior to the two world wars people had generally regarded their world as civilised, as modern and humane. The shock caused by the realisation that human beings were able to inflict such terror and destruction and annihilation on an industrial scale as witnessed in Nazi Germany's concentration camps or the unleashing of the nuclear bombs over Japan, forged a fundamental shift in our understanding of ourselves as rational, decent people. If we were capable of that, who were we really? Periods of turmoil often result in a moral, ideological vacuum - the old set of values need to be replaced by a new set that either incorporates or explains the recently experienced turmoil. Thus, for a while, things just stop making sense.

Currently the world is going through a time of global turbulence. Effects of climate change are increasingly having an impact on our everyday lives, we are told that we have to make adjustments and sacrifices if the planet is to survive. What can you personally do about melting glaciers, or the 100 species that become extinct every day or the mountains of plastic pollution in the oceans? It is an immense ordeal that is very hard for the individual to comprehend or react to. The reality of it all becomes insurmountable. Add to this a global pandemic that has forced us to renegotiate basic rights that we otherwise have taken for granted for more than 100 years; the freedom of movement and freedom to assemble to name but a few. On the global scene we witness farcical political puppet shows instead of genuine decision making, an uprise of nationalistic movements and big business/ big tech taking immense power yet having zero unaccountability.

All this is far too much for the existentialist individual to cope with. The world no longer looks the same as it did merely two years ago. Our foundations have shifted and rational logic no longer seems to be able to satisfy the growing sense of dread and insecurity about the future.

Our world is becoming increasingly absurd in the true meaning of the word: out of harmony with reason or propriety; illogical.

The absurdist place the individual in the centre of a disjointed world that she/ he cannot connect with, often in a post-apocalyptic atmosphere. In HAPPY DAYS Winnie is stuck up to her waist, going through her everyday routine and trying to connect with her husband through a number of seemingly empty conversations. Today this no longer only presents as an interesting reflection on the results of devastating wars and the disconnection of humanity but we recognise ourselves, stuck at home with nothing meaningful to do due to a lockdown or drowning in environmental responsibilities as the trash piles up around us. Winnie clings to religious rituals, such as prayer, and notably during the pandemic religious institutions have declared an increase in people joining services. The desire for hope and belief is always stronger in times of trouble and disturbance. The play offers us no release or solutions, this was not the aim of the absurdist, instead it provides us with a place to reflect on our own mortality, our own position in an unbalanced world.

Beckett's universe is able to speak to us in a loud and clear voice in 2021 as we ask Winnie to reflect our own absurd situation.

---

## SOME QUESTIONS

What does absurd mean to you?

Can you describe an absurd situation from your life?

Describe a daily routine.

How do you feel about your daily routine?

Did these routines change under lockdown?

How did that feel?

Is Winnie happy?

Describe Winnie and Willie's relationship.

Why do you think they are together?

Who has most power in the relationship?

Do they love each other?

Why do you think Winnie has Brownie - the gun?

How does it feel to read the excerpt of the play?

Why do you think Beckett describes everything that happens on stage in detail?

What does that mean for an actor performing the role?

Name the absurd elements in HAPPY DAYS.

Can language truly describe the human condition?

Can images?

Why do you think the absurdists avoided dramatic storytelling/ or plots?

What happens to a story if there is no climax or solution at the end?

---

## SAMUEL BECKETT/ short biography

Samuel Barclay Beckett was born April 13, 1906, in Foxrock, County Dublin, Ireland. He was one of modern times most esteemed authors, writing in both French and English and is perhaps best known for his plays. He worked as a novelist, playwright, short story writer, theatre director, poet, critic and literary translator. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969.

Samuel Beckett was born in a suburb of Dublin. Like his fellow Irish writers George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and William Butler Yeats, he came from a Protestant, Anglo-Irish background.

From 1923 to 1927, he studied Romance languages at Trinity College, Dublin, where he received his bachelor's degree and he became a reader in English at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris in 1928. Where he met the self-exiled Irish writer James Joyce.

He returned to Ireland in 1930 to take up a post as lecturer in French at Trinity College, but resigned after only four terms. Subsequently he travelled to London, France, Germany, and Italy.

In 1937 Beckett settled in Paris. As a citizen of a country that was neutral in World War II, he was able to remain there even after the occupation of Paris by the Germans, but he joined an underground resistance group in 1941. He went into hiding 1942 and eventually moved to the unoccupied zone of France. Until the liberation he worked as an agricultural labourer.

In the winter of 1945, he finally returned to Paris and was awarded the Croix de Guerre for his resistance work.

The period after World War II saw Beckett's creativity flourish. Pre-war publications included two essays on Joyce and the French novelist Marcel Proust. During his years in hiding in unoccupied France, Beckett also completed the novel, *Watt*, which was not published until 1953.

After his return to Paris, between 1946 and 1949, Beckett produced a number of stories, the major prose narratives *Molloy* (1951), *Malone meurt* (1951; *Malone Dies*), and *L'Innommable* (1953; *The Unnamable*), and two plays, the unpublished three-act *Eleutheria* and *Waiting for Godot* (1953) which had it's world premiere at the small Théâtre de Babylone in Paris. And with this play Beckett was launched into worldwide fame. He wrote fastidiously for stage and radio, relentlessly breaking theatre conventions of the time and producing epic works such as *Krapp's Last Tape* (1960) and *Endgame* (1958). *Happy Days* (1961) was uncharacteristically written in English first, as Beckett most often chose to write his plays in French and then translate them.

Samuel Beckett died on December 22, 1989 in Paris, France only months after his lifelong companion and support, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil (later Mme Beckett) passed away.

---

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

We look forward to seeing you at our rendition of Samuel Beckett's masterpiece.

On stage: Sue Hansen-Styles and Nathan Meister  
Written by: Samuel Beckett  
Directed by: Peter Dupont Weiss  
Light/Sound designer: Lasse Svarre Christiansen  
Technician: Beáta Kublik  
PR: Nina Larissa Bassett  
Produced by: Why Not Theatre Company

Venue: Teatret ved Sorte Hest, Vesterbrogade 150, 1502 København V.

Dates: 3rd September – 25th September 2021, Monday to Friday at 8pm, Saturdays at 5pm

The play is 1 hour 20 mins (without interval) and is performed in English.

For tickets please contact:

Billetten: 70 20 20 96

[billet@sortehest.com](mailto:billet@sortehest.com) or call 33 31 06 06 (Mon - Fri. 11-15)

Artists talks for groups can be arranged by appointment with Why Not Theatre Company.

### **Why Not Theatre Company**

Currently one of Denmark's leading professional, English speaking theatres Why Not Theatre Company seeks to tell compelling stories that are engaging and inspiring. We delve into texts of high literary quality and tell thought-provoking stories that captivate the audience. We make an effort to introduce new faces to the English speaking theatre scene through our productions.

Our latest productions include *Dance with Me* by Peter Asmussen (2020), *Mairead* (2019) and *The Cheyenne Are Leaving* both by Tanja Mastilo (2020). Tanja Mastilo has been Reumert nominated as Best Playwright for season 2020-21.

Why Not Theatre Company was founded in 2011 and only performs in English.

---

## SOURCE LIST

<https://literaturetimes.com/what-is-theater-of-the-absurd/>

[https://www.samuel-beckett.net/Kunkel\\_Beckett.html](https://www.samuel-beckett.net/Kunkel_Beckett.html)

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Beckett>

<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/covid-19-anxiety-syndrome-a-pandemic-phenomenon#What-is-COVID-19-anxiety-syndrome?>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55419894>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-53081929>

<http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/36/absurdism-in-post-modern-art-examining-the-interplay-between-waiting-for-godot-and-extremely-loud-and-incredibly-close>

<https://thebluenib.com/absurdism-today-by-ada-wofford/>