

**SYDNEY  
THEATRE  
CO  
EDUCATION**

**PRE-SHOW  
IN-THE-KNOW**



# **HAPPY DAYS**

**By Samuel Beckett**

**Conceived and Directed by Nick Schlieper & Pamela Rabe**

# CONTENTS

Key Information.....	3
Synopsis.....	4
Teaching the Context of <i>Happy Days</i> .....	5
Individual Context .....	5
Political and Social Context.....	6
Cultural Context .....	8
References.....	10

Image: Pamela Rabe. Photo: Rene Vaile.

Compiled by Kelly Young.

The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. You can contact the Education Team on **education@sydneytheatre.com.au**

© Copyright protects this Education Resource.

Except for purposes permitted by the Copyright Act, reproduction by whatever means is prohibited. However, limited photocopying for classroom use only is permitted by educational institutions.

**Sydney Theatre Company acknowledges the Gadigal of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land and waters on which the Company gathers. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and we extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with whom we work and with whom we share stories.**

## KEY INFORMATION

# HAPPY DAYS

By Samuel Beckett

Conceived and Directed by Nick Schlieper & Pamela Rabe

---

### SUITABLE FOR

Years 9 - 12

### CURRICULUM LINKS

- English Stage 5 & 6
- Drama Stage 5 & 6

### THEMES & IDEAS

- Constructions of Gender
- Loneliness
- Humans and the Non-Human World

### FORM & STYLE

- Monologue
- Absurd Theatre

### APPROX. DURATION

1 hour 40 mins (no interval)

### CONTENT

Loud noises, theatrical blood, flame effect and prop gun.

### CAST

Markus Hamilton

Pamela Rabe

### CREATIVES

**Directors** Nick Schlieper & Pamela Rabe

**Set & Lighting Designer** Nick Schlieper

**Costume Designer** Mel Page

**Sound Designer** Stefan Gregory

**Assistant Director** Kenneth Moraleda

---

### THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- Why has the playwright placed the character of Winnie in a mound of dirt?
- The stage directions describe Winnie as “About fifty, well-preserved, blonde for preference, plump, arms and shoulders bare, low bodice, big bosom, pearl necklace.” What stereotypes of women might the playwright be exploring?
- What are Winnie’s daily routines? Why might these be significant?



# SYNOPSIS

## **An extraordinary theatrical collaboration**

Stage and screen icon Pamela Rabe (*The Children, The War of The Roses, The Lost Echo*) immerses herself in one of the greatest roles ever written, *Happy Days*' eternal optimist, Winnie. Conceived and directed by award-winning theatre designer Nick Schlieper – Lighting Designer on *The Picture of Dorian Gray, Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Dracula* – and Rabe herself, this production of Beckett's classic play is a unique creative offering and a once-in-a-lifetime theatrical experience.

Somewhere in a dreamlike wasteland, Winnie is buried up to her waist in a mound of earth. The sun beats down on her, relentlessly. She is unable to see her husband Willie (a man of few words), who she chatters to and prompts for affection and approval. Undaunted, she continues to celebrate each happy day.

Written in the poetic, distilled and brilliant style that crowned Beckett the greatest dramatist of his day, *Happy Days* is a play about the power of the human spirit when faced with impossible circumstances. In the hands of two legends of Australian theatre-making, this new production will plumb the original depths of Beckett's script while exploring the play's haunting and inspiring contemporary resonances. *Happy Days* is a grand night of theatre that no one will want to miss.

# TEACHING THE CONTEXT OF HAPPY DAYS

## INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin, Ireland, in April 1906. He studied modern literature and languages (French, English and Italian) at Trinity College Dublin, receiving his teaching degree in 1927. Beckett was a gifted cricketer, playing first class cricket for Dublin University against British team Northamptonshire. After graduating from university, he had several teaching roles in both Ireland and France. One of Beckett's most influential roles was as the assistant to fellow Irish author James Joyce, supporting Joyce's novel *Finnegan's Wake*. Joyce's writing style, which reads like a stream of consciousness, was a deep influence on Beckett.

During the 1930s Beckett devoted himself to writing and began to produce short stories and first novels. He spent time exploring Europe, finally settling in Paris in 1937. It was at this time that Beckett made the choice to abandon English and write in French only, reflecting his passion for exploring language and its limitations. During World War II Beckett was an active member of the French Resistance, and when members of his group were arrested by the Gestapo Beckett fled to the unoccupied zone until the end of the war. Images of the ravaged French cities stayed with Beckett for the duration of his life, influencing the desolate setting and mood of his writing. In 1949 Beckett was awarded the Croix de Guerre for his acts of bravery in resisting the Germans during their occupation of Paris.

The 1950s saw Beckett generate much of his outstanding theatre work, including *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, plays that are now loosely categorised as Theatre of the Absurd. In this work Beckett explored his passion for finding the essence of the human existence, the emptiness of language to communicate meaning and create human connection, and the belief that humans are, perhaps, alone in the universe. Unusually *Happy Days*, written in 1960 and first produced in 1961, was one of Beckett's plays that featured a woman as the protagonist.

In 1961 Beckett secretly married his long-time companion of 50 years, Suzanne Georgette Anna Déchevaux-Dumesnil, with whom he had been in a relationship with since the mid-1930s. The motivation for the marriage has been an object of interest with academics noting that Beckett had met and begun an intimate relationship with BBC script editor Barbara Bray earlier that year. Bray had announced her relocation from Britain to France to be with Beckett just prior to the wedding with Déchevaux-Dumesnil. It is speculated that Beckett, who married in England, wanted to protect Déchevaux-Dumesnil's claim to the rights to Beckett's work if he predeceased her. At that time the French had no legislation to protect de-facto partners in the event of their death.

In 1969 Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in December 1989.

### CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

#### Activity 1

Break the class into groups to find images of Paris during the occupation of the Germans, images of the German city of Cologne after Allied bombing at the end of WWII and images of London during the Blitz. Ask each group to decide on three adjectives that describe the images that they are looking at. Encourage students to think about words that are evocative. Create three freeze frames that represent these adjectives. Encourage students to create abstracted shapes with their bodies. As students present their images, the class could discuss the following:

- What is the mood created for the audience?

- Why might abstracted shapes be a powerful method of communicating human responses to the devastation of WWII?

### Activity 2

As a class watch the clip below that explores Samuel Beckett's life.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXSmXNvS3VY&t=222s>

What connections can you find between Beckett's life journey, the historical context in which he lived and the work that he generated?

## POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Samuel Beckett lived through some of the most tumultuous years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century including World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, World War II, and the occupation of Paris, the Holocaust and the unleashing of atomic power at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Each of these events changed the ways in which humans understood their humanity and their place in the universe.

The polarity of human experience, beliefs, and regimes saw extremities in every part of European politics and society. These extremes cannot be underestimated in their impact on both Beckett and the people who lived through these historical events. In particular, the harnessing of the state apparatus to manage and inflict devastation and wide-ranging violence mean that human suffering and displacement, death, and torture were experienced on a level unknown to human beings up until this time.

These tumultuous events accelerated the intellectual challenges that had begun with the Enlightenment about the understanding and acceptance of God, and the belief in His existence. As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century unfolded the depravity of human behaviour moved many to abandon their belief in God. The extremities of the violence inflicted on so many meant that people were unable to fathom how God might have left people to suffer without intervening. This left human beings alone in the universe, a mistake of evolution, each to find their own meaning as they lived their lives.

To understand *Happy Days*, it is also important to understand the patriarchal nature of European society. Organised along patriarchal lines, Europe emerged into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with newly developed understanding of the quest for women's rights. The Suffragettes, active in the UK at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, continued to agitate for the vote in the United Kingdom into the 1920s, when all women were granted the vote in 1928 (women over 30 with property were granted the vote in 1918). Germany granted the vote in 1918 and Austria and the Netherlands in 1919. Interestingly for Beckett's context, France granted women the right to vote in 1944.

Women experienced their lives quite differently to men during this period, with constraints of gender roles deeply felt. Constructed and reinforced during the rise of capitalism in the previous century, middle class women had been firmly placed into the domestic sphere with the responsibilities of family life placed upon them. Middle class men moved into the public space, free to act in this arena to develop their careers, cared for by their housebound wives. Up until WWII, when men were scarce, middle-class women were unwelcome in the workplace and their place was firmly in the home. Cultural ideas of gentleness, caring, and maternal love were used to reinforce these social structures.

Female bodies were disciplined and policed by society. Lacking in political agency and generally confined to the domestic sphere, the female body was rigorously controlled. Women were expected to control their sexuality and remain celibate until marriage. Once married a woman was expected to be monogamous. Sexual desire was not spoken about or encouraged. Part of this control included the policing of the way women presented themselves in public. There

were strict rules about what a woman should look like, which whilst changing over the different decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, were remarkably consistent in that they were expected to look desirable and feminine whilst, paradoxically, chaste and unavailable.

## **CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

### **Activity 1**

The enormity of the first 50 years of the 20th Century cannot be overestimated or easily explored in three activities. The clip below covers the period from 1925 to the beginning of WWII, providing a broad summary of Beckett's experience as an adult man:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ojo8-GhhQcA&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtMsMTfmRomkVQG8AqrAmJFX&index=38>

As the class watches this clip, ask them to try and imagine how a 19-year-old Beckett (in 1925) might have felt as he emerged into adulthood. Working in groups, create a monologue for the character of Beckett as he reflects on his adult life in 1939 – the year that WWII broke out. Students to include the following information

- Summarise Beckett's adult life up until 1939.
- How might The Great Depression have impacted Beckett?
- What might Beckett have felt as WWII loomed? How might he have reacted to The Holocaust?
- What might Beckett have felt as the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Once the monologue is complete, each student from the group should perform an extract of it to the class. They could take turns in performing the monologue or, they could perform as a chorus. If the chorus choice is preferred, as a class discuss the metaphorical meaning of this performance as a representation of humanity.

### **Activity 2**

The link below will take students to the Sydney Jewish Museum, where they can watch short and long testimonies from Holocaust Survivors.

<https://sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au/holocaust-survivor-testimonies/>

The teacher will break the class into groups and allocate each group an interview to watch. Once each group has watched their interview, they should work together to create a verbal report to give to the class that covers:

- The name and birth date of the person interviewed by the Jewish Museum.
- A summary of the person's experience of the Holocaust.
- A summary of the person's understanding of why they might have survived their experience.
- A reflection about how the person has survived their lives post their experience in the Holocaust including their faith in human nature and their belief in God.

### **Activity 3**

The clip below is from the BBC and it covers the time from the release of the atomic bomb by the Americans above Hiroshima to its detonation. As with the other horrors of the 20th Century, the enormity of this experience cannot be easily understood and explored theatrically.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wxWNAM8Cso>

As a class reflect on the ways in which this final act of WWII might have impacted on Beckett and caused him to reflect on the role of humanity in the universe and God's place within it. Evaluate how you might have felt if you had lived through such an experience.

## CULTURAL CONTEXT

The influence of Beckett's Irish identity and his experience of Ireland's colonial history is an important part of understanding the context of Beckett's work, including *Happy Days*. Born and raised in Ireland, and a protégé of James Joyce, Beckett understood the political ramifications of writing in English, which had been imposed by the invading English throughout colonial history. Many Irish writers found English a problematic language in which to write and many reverted to expressing themselves in their original language. Paradoxically, this meant that their work was to be translated into English for the majority of the Irish to read, resulting in cultural miscommunication a sense of inauthenticity and an inability to create true meaning and connection between Irish people. Beckett's choice to write in French, then, is a response to the political paradoxes of the Irish situation. By rejecting the languages imposed on him by birth, Beckett was able to explore the politics of translation, playing with the French language with precision to ensure that nothing is lost in the translation process. This offered a challenge into the importance and power of the original language and its ability to communicate meaning between people.

Beckett was deeply influenced by European philosophers including the Enlightenment philosopher Descartes, who pondered the importance of rational thought, the importance of logic and the application of the mind to the discipline of the body. He was also deeply influenced by contemporaries such as Camus and Sartre, all of whom explored the idea of the inherent meaninglessness of human life and the limits of Enlightenment thinking in the wake of the irrationality, despair, and horrors of World War II. Beckett, like Camus, believed that where the "absurd" or irrational worked against reason, the human response should be based in a rationality. Humans can only understand the world and their place in it through reason, which is developed through our observation of the world around us. For Beckett, the Absurd, or paradoxes within our world view, are challenges to our understanding of the world. Meaning comes from the contemplation of our thinking, the challenge of the paradox and the ways in which we resolve this in our lives.

Beckett's work on *Happy Days* was also generated at a time when the cultural roles of women were being challenged by French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. The life partner of Sartre, de Beauvoir worked to explode other metanarratives that were held by Western society, including the notion of the patriarchy, and the ways in which the patriarchy, capitalism and Western constructs of rationality culturally contained women. Her most famous work, *The Second Sex*, argued that gender is a construct that shapes women into "the other" to keep them in a second-rate position in society. Her analysis examined the cultural reproduction of the category of "Woman" and questioned the ways in which Woman was supposed to move through the world to maintain her position in this cultural category.

### CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

#### Activity 1

Break the class into groups of approximately 4 - 5 students. Assign each group a decade of the 20th Century, with particular focus on the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Allocate the Victorian period to one group, ensuring that this group (and by extension the rest of the class) understand that this period of history was one in which middle class values about women were cemented into the legacy that we retain into the 21st Century.

Ask each group to research and present a devised performance as characters from that decade. This performance should:

- Examine the clothing and accessories of the era and comment on the values and attitudes that these communicate about women and their place in society.
- Examine the expectations about women's roles in the public sphere, particularly including their right to work.

- Examine the expectations about women’s roles at home, particularly looking into the expectations about nurturing and caregiving.

### Activity 2

In the same groups as Activity 1, make a list of the gendered grooming products that a woman may use of a morning. Students might consider hair straighteners, different types of make-up, and hair products. Encourage students to be as detailed as they can as they develop their lists.

### Activity 3

In the same groups as Activity 1 and 2, create a group performance in which they use these products at the start of the day. A mimed performance might be helpful as it will allow students to focus on the physical routine of the process. Additionally, students should work as a uniform chorus, creating a precise and unitary movement. Once the group has their routine established, ask them to add repetition to the routine, so that it cycles through 4 iterations of the work. Ask each group to perform for the class and discuss using the following questions:

- What did you notice about the process of getting ready in the morning?
- What is the impact on the audience of repeating the routine?
- What might these repetitious routines be a metaphor for? How might a playwright like Beckett, who has lived through such horrific world events, interpret the meaning of such routines in the life of a woman?



**Cast & Crew of Happy Days**  
 Kenneth Moraleda, Chloe Langdon, Zoe Davis, Charmian Gradwell  
 Joe Fletcher, Julia Orlando, Nick Schlieper, Pamela Rabe, Mel Page, Stefan Gregory, Markus Hamilton.

# REFERENCES

## IMAGES

Rehearsal photo courtesy of Patrick Carey

## DIGITAL RESOURCES

Economic Depression and Dictators: Crash Course European History #37

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ojo8GhhQcA&list=PL8dPuualjXtMsMTfmRomkVQG8AqrAmJFX&index=38> Accessed 25 February 2025

Esslin, M.J. (2025) *Samuel Beckett*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Beckett/Continuity-of-his-philosophical-explorations#ref62181> Accessed 19 February 2025

Flood, A. (2021) *Samuel Beckett's Secret Wedding in Folkestone Inspires Festival 60 Years On*. The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/jun/02/samuel-beckett-secret-wedding-folkestone-inspires-festival-60-years-on> Accessed 19 February 2025

Hiroshima: Dropping the Bomb. BBC Studios <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wxWNAM8Cso> Accessed 25 February 2025

The Poetry Foundation. *Samuel Beckett* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/samuel-beckett> Accessed 5 February 2025

Power, C. (2016) *Samuel Beckett, The Maestro of Failure*. The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/jul/07/samuel-beckett-the-maestro-of-failure> Accessed 18 February 2025

*The Strangest Philosopher in History: Samuel Beckett*. Binkist

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXSmXNvS3VY&t=222s> Accessed 25 February 2025