

EXHIBITION

Sketching the drama

Artist Nicholas Harding documents the staging of Beckett's famous play, writes **ANDREW TAYLOR**.

It began, like many artistic endeavours, in Paris. The city where Samuel Beckett wrote *En Attendant Godot* in 1948, which he translated into *Waiting for Godot* and later premiered at the Theatre de Babylone in 1953, would draw artist Nicholas Harding into that absurdist drama six decades later.

Harding was on an Australia Council-sponsored residency in Paris last year when he came upon a flimsy replica of the Globe Theatre called *La Tour Vagabonde*.

"During the matinees I did a whole lot of drawings of actors running around in *Romeo and Juliet* costumes sucking on cigarettes," Harding says. "I posted some of the drawings on Instagram and Hugo saw them."

Hugo was Harding's long-time friend, actor Hugo Weaving, who would play Vladimir in the Sydney Theatre Company's production of *Waiting for Godot* later that year.

Harding and Weaving got to know each other through their children, who went to school together. They bonded over a shared love of food, cinema, theatre and art. So it was only natural that Weaving would invite his artist friend into the rehearsal room to sketch the cast, which also included Richard Roxburgh, Luke Mullins and Philip Quast, as they grappled with Beckett's play in their two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait in vain for the arrival of Godot.

Harding's sketchbooks, watercolours, drawings and etchings of the rehearsals and performances will be shown in *Drawing Godot* from next week. But neither Harding nor Weaving will attend the opening as they will be holidaying together with their families in Sicily. "I guess it's another case of life imitating art," Harding says. "First, Godot doesn't show up, then I'm not going to show up."

Harding, who won the 2001 Archibald Prize for his portrait of John Bell as King Lear, says he was struck by how hard the actors worked during rehearsals to understand their characters. "We're all impressed by how they remember lines, but it's the physical nature of it and trying to get to the core of the play, pulling it apart and putting it back together and learning the lines so it becomes part of their very being," he says. "By the time they get up on stage, it's in their DNA."



Behind the scenes: Nicholas Harding with his portraits of Hugo Weaving and Richard Roxburgh; Weaving in character, as depicted by Harding. PHOTO: LIDIA NIKONOVA

At one stage, the STC's artistic director, Andrew Upton, who took over from Hungarian director Tamas Ascher after he fell ill, put reproductions of Francis Bacon's paintings of contorted, twisted flesh on the floor to help Mullins perform his character Lucky's awkward disjointed dance.

Harding says the actors, three of whom are over the age of 50, also had to come to terms with the physical aspects of their performances. "When they're falling over and jumping around, they have to bear in mind they're doing that for eight performances a week for six weeks," he says.

In her exhibition essay, curator Sarah Engledow writes: "It must demand just as much skill to depict someone clumping around gracefully as it does to render someone dancing with finesse."

There is certainly little of the grace of Degas' ballerinas or the exuberance of Toulouse-Lautrec's Moulin Rouge paintings in Harding's depictions of the shambolic Vladimir and Estragon. As Engledow puts it, "There's a whiff of old trousers about Harding's drawings of the Godot boys that you don't get from the work of the Parisian artists."

Harding says his early drawings were tentative and awkward: "It took me a while to find my rhythm and draw at the speed necessary. Then I became acquainted with the rhythms of the play and began to understand the poses they'd throw and understand the interactions between characters."

Despite his nerves, Roxburgh says Harding was a welcome presence in the rehearsal room.

"I think we were always comfortable with Nick being there, although it may have taken him a little while to get used to it," Roxburgh says.

"It is probably an unusual thing, for someone who's used to the silent, contemplative world of moving paint onto canvas to be plonked into the mad hurly-burly of a rehearsal room."

Roxburgh wholeheartedly concurs with Harding's assessment of the physical demands of *Waiting for Godot*, and says the rehearsals were probably the hardest he has experienced. "As a troupe we would practically crawl off stage every night, longing for beer and a debrief."

"Beckett is always tricky, and *Godot*, I think, is an especially complex world. He incorporates these repetitive patterns that are almost-but-not-quite-the-same throughout. It's very musical, and they are very effective in their action. But they are a complete bastard to try and learn."

Beckett did not make anyone's life easy with his fiendishly difficult play, but Roxburgh says Harding's work grabs many facets of the rehearsal room as well as the play.

"He's captured so much of the temper of *Godot*, and those strange and broken characters in their little park at the end of time," he says. "But he's also described that held-together-with-string quality of the rehearsal room, which I love."

"If Sam B was still around you could show him any one of the works and he'd immediately recognise both the characters and the tiny moment being illuminated."

Drawing Godot is at Olsen Irwin Gallery from May 7-25.



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See a gallery of Nicholas Harding's *Waiting for Godot* paintings.