

Emotion and Absurdity Between Stage and Screen. A Comparison of Theatrical Techniques and Mockumentary Aesthetics in *Waiting for Godot* and *Waiting for Guffman*

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Abstract: This paper explores the parallels between Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and Christopher Guest's *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), two works separated by medium, tone, and historical context, yet bound by a shared dramatic structure: waiting. Through a comparative analysis, it examines how theatrical techniques and mockumentary aesthetics generate emotion and absurdity across stage and screen. Beckett's play presents existential futility through minimalist performance and cyclical time, while Guest's film transforms the mockumentary form into a study of aspiration, delusion, and human vulnerability. Both works use absence, specifically the unseen figures of Godot and Guffman, as a central narrative force, revealing how performance itself becomes a response to uncertainty. Ultimately, this study argues that in both theater and film, the act of performing, whether as endurance or self-invention, constitutes a profound form of resistance against meaninglessness.

Keywords: Absurdism; Performance; Mockumentary; Theatrical Techniques; Human Condition

Introduction

What do two men waiting by a tree and a small-town theater troupe rehearsing for a local celebration have in common? At first glance, very little. Yet both scenarios form the backbone of two highly original and revealing works of art: *Waiting for Godot* (Samuel Beckett, 1953), a cornerstone of absurdist theater, and *Waiting for Guffman* (Christopher Guest, 1996), a mockumentary comedy that parodies amateur performance and the desire for artistic recognition. Despite their differences in medium, tone, and historical context, these two works share a central dramatic engine: waiting.

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In both cases, a promised presence (Godot in Beckett's play and Guffman in Guest's film) never arrives. The characters remain suspended in time, fueled by hope, speculation, and the belief that this person will bring change, meaning, or success. This waiting is not just a plot device, but a structural and emotional foundation, generating tension, absurdity, and comedy.

This article proposes a comparative analysis of these two works, focusing on how theatrical techniques and mockumentary aesthetics convey emotion and absurdity through the act of waiting. The goal is not to reduce the two works to the same artistic category, but to explore how different media - stage and screen - approach similar themes using different expressive tools.

Waiting for Godot is one of the most important examples of absurd theater, a movement that emerged in the post-war period to reflect the fragmentation and disillusionment of the 20th century. Beckett's characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait endlessly for someone named Godot, who never arrives. Their dialogue is repetitive, circular, often meaningless, and yet emotionally charged. The play confronts audiences with the futility of searching for meaning in a chaotic world¹.

Waiting for Guffman, on the other hand, belongs to a very different genre: the mockumentary, a fictional film that imitates the style of a documentary. It presents itself as a behind-the-scenes look at a local theater production in the small town of Blaine, Missouri, as its cast prepares for a performance they believe will launch their careers on Broadway. The film is largely improvised by the actors, many of whom are part of a recurring ensemble led by Christopher Guest. What makes it compelling is the contrast between the documentary format (which suggests realism and seriousness) and the comic absurdity of the content².

Despite their contrasting styles - *Godot* as a bleak, philosophical tragedy and *Guffman* as cheerful small-town satire - both works are rooted in a similar emotional truth: people long for purpose, recognition, and meaning, and they construct narratives around those needs, even in the face of disappointment.

This study will focus on four major areas of comparison:

1. Waiting as a dramatic structure

¹ The term *Theatre of the Absurd* was popularized by critic Martin Esslin in his 1961 book of the same name. He used it to describe the work of playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov, whose plays emphasized meaninglessness, existential anxiety, and breakdowns in communication.

² Mockumentary, short for "mock documentary," is a fictional film genre that mimics documentary conventions (e.g., talking-head interviews, handheld cameras) to create satire or parody. Famous examples include *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) and the TV series *The Office*.

2. Absurdity as a narrative and emotional tool
3. Performance techniques: stage vs. screen
4. The role of the audience and reception

Each section will look at how Beckett and Guest use form, style, and character to shape audience experience, whether through the silent repetition of *Godot* or the improvised enthusiasm of *Guffman*.

Although one is part of the theater canon and the other a cult comedy, these works are linked by their emotional ambiguity, their embrace of failure, and their unusual use of absence as a dramatic force. The fact that nothing ultimately happens becomes the most important thing that happens.

In comparing these two very different works, we aim to better understand not only their techniques, but also what they say about the human condition, about hope, futility, art, and the delicate line between tragedy and comedy.

Waiting as a Dramatic Structure

In traditional storytelling, both in theater and in film, plot is driven by cause and effect. Characters pursue goals, encounter obstacles, make decisions, and arrive at some form of resolution. But in both *Waiting for Godot* and *Waiting for Guffman*, this classical model is turned upside down. Nothing significant “happens”, and yet, the entire story is built around a central action: waiting.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the characters Vladimir and Estragon wait for a man named Godot, whose identity, purpose, and even existence remain unclear. The play is structured in two acts that are nearly identical: the characters arrive, speak in circles, consider leaving, argue, joke, contemplate suicide, and ultimately decide to continue waiting. The repetition reinforces a feeling of stasis, where time seems to pass without progress. This repetition isn’t accidental; it reflects Beckett’s deeper message about the meaninglessness and monotony of human life³.

This “non-action” is not a flaw, but the very core of the play’s structure. The audience is drawn into the act of waiting with the characters. Even though Godot never arrives, the hope that he might is enough to sustain the characters’ routine. The anticipation creates a form of narrative tension, even if that tension is never resolved. In fact, the absence of resolution is what gives the play its emotional power and philosophical weight.

³ Beckett once said that *Waiting for Godot* is “a game in order to avoid silence.” The structure of the play, where nothing happens, twice, was famously summarized by critic Vivian Mercier as “a play in which nothing happens, twice.” See: Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Times*, 1956.

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In *Waiting for Guffman*, the structure is more conventionally linear, but it is similarly organized around an absence. The film follows a group of amateur actors in the fictional town of Blaine, Missouri, who are preparing a musical for the town's sesquicentennial celebration. They are led by an eccentric director, Corky St. Clair, who informs them that a Broadway producer named Mort Guffman might attend their performance. Suddenly, the stakes are raised: this could be their chance to be discovered.

Just like *Godot*, Guffman never shows up. But this expected visit gives the characters purpose, energy, and a sense of importance. It transforms what would otherwise be an unremarkable local production into a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." Their belief in Guffman's arrival sustains their efforts and gives the film its dramatic arc. Here too, waiting becomes the central organizing principle, though in a more comedic and satirical tone.

What's fascinating is that in both works, the anticipation of an event that never happens is more important than the event itself. This anticipation creates emotional momentum, even in the absence of real plot development. The characters' behavior, whether tragic or comic, is shaped entirely by what they think is about to happen, not by what actually does.

There's a deep irony in both cases. In *Godot*, the characters talk about leaving but never do. They want to act but remain stuck. In *Guffman*, the characters do act - they rehearse, perform, dream - but the result is ultimately the same: disappointment. In both works, waiting creates motion without direction. The characters move, speak, plan, and hope, but they never arrive at anything final or fulfilling.

This structure also invites reflection on the nature of time in performance. In *Godot*, time is cyclical. Each act mirrors the other, as if the characters are trapped in an endless loop. Beckett deliberately avoids a clear sense of chronology. The characters can't remember what happened the day before. They contradict each other, confuse past and present, and treat time as something uncertain and unstable. This technique emphasizes the idea that waiting is not a means to an end, but a state of existence⁴.

In *Guffman*, time appears more linear. The rehearsals progress, the performance takes place, but the ultimate lack of payoff reveals a similar loop: the belief in success remains, even after the failure. The characters adjust their narrative

⁴ The treatment of time in absurdist theater often rejects logical progression or continuity. Characters forget, contradict themselves, or remain static, reflecting existential anxiety and disconnection. See: Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 1961.

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after the fact, convincing themselves that the performance was meaningful regardless of the outcome. As in Beckett, the reality doesn't matter as much as the story they tell themselves.

Both works challenge the traditional expectations of resolution, climax, and transformation. In classical drama, the audience is trained to wait for closure: the arrival of the hero, the appearance of the awaited figure, the moment of revelation. But here, absence becomes presence. Godot and Guffman are never seen, never heard, never confirmed, but they define the entire structure of the narrative. Their non-appearance is what holds everything together.

From a technical perspective, this approach requires a different kind of storytelling discipline. Instead of building action toward a payoff, both Beckett and Guest construct a world where the lack of payoff becomes the point. This forces the audience into an uncomfortable, but revealing, position: we're used to watching stories unfold toward something; here, we're watching people go nowhere. And somehow, that becomes the most human thing of all.

In both *Waiting for Godot* and *Waiting for Guffman*, waiting is not the absence of action, it is the action. It drives character behavior, audience expectation, and thematic depth. Whether on a bare stage or in a mock documentary format, this waiting creates tension, vulnerability, and humor, sometimes simultaneously. In the end, these stories aren't about what happens. They're about what doesn't, and the emotional landscapes we build while we wait.

Absurdity as a Narrative and Emotional Tool

Absurdity is central to both *Waiting for Godot* and *Waiting for Guffman*, but it emerges in very different ways, both in tone and technique. In *Godot*, absurdity is stark, existential, and grounded in the long tradition of theater. In *Guffman*, absurdity is comic and embedded in the unique language of the mockumentary, a cinematic genre that relies on faux-realism, direct address, improvisation, and satirical detachment.

Understanding how each form constructs absurdity is key to understanding how each affects its audience. Theater and mockumentary share performative roots, but their tools, both technical and narrative, are distinct. When comparing the two, it becomes clear that *Waiting for Guffman* is not just "funny" in a general sense, it is deeply theatrical, and it uses the mockumentary form to parody, expose, and celebrate the conventions of live performance.

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Theater as Performance; Mockumentary as Performance of Performance

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is often seen as the archetypal “absurd play.” The absurdity is present in the text itself: in the lack of clear purpose, in cyclical dialogue, and in the static, repetitive structure. It invites the audience to witness performance as ritual: a space where meaning dissolves, and time loops in on itself⁵.

Waiting for Guffman, meanwhile, presents theater as subject. It is a performance about performance. The entire film documents the creation of a fictional stage production (*Red, White and Blaine*⁶) but does so using the style and aesthetics of the documentary: handheld cameras, direct-to-camera interviews, diegetic music, unpolished environments. This is not “film pretending to be theater”, it is film pretending to be a documentary that observes theater.

This second layer of distance is essential to the mockumentary form: it doesn't just present absurdity, it frames it as real, only to then slowly let the cracks show. The comedy (and emotional core) of *Guffman* comes from watching people perform badly, but sincerely, for both a fictional audience (on stage) and the fictional documentary camera (within the film). And, of course, for the most important character, who never shows up.

Improvisation and Emotional Absurdity

A major difference between the two works lies in how absurdity is constructed through performance.

In *Godot*, every pause, line, and gesture is scripted and tightly controlled. Beckett famously demanded exact adherence to stage directions - timing, blocking, even silences had to be precise. The result is a tightly wound system of repetition and delay: a highly theatrical, ritualized absurdity⁷.

By contrast, *Guffman* was largely improvised. Christopher Guest, known for his work in ensemble mockumentary comedies like *This Is Spinal Tap* and *Best in Show*, gives actors detailed character backstories and situations, but no scripted dialogue. This results in naturalistic, often awkward speech, pauses, hesitations, and

⁵ In Beckett's own words, *Godot* is not about something, but the experience of “waiting itself.” The theatrical form echoes the content-circular, motionless, and unresolved. See: Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta*, 1983.

⁶ A word-play on the “Red, white and blue” of the American flag and the founder of the city, Blaine Fabin

⁷ Beckett's control over stage productions was legendary. Even minor alterations to pacing or gestures were considered unacceptable. His scripts are tightly scored, almost like music, with silence treated as a performative act. See: Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett's Theater*, 1980.

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contradictions, mimicking real documentary interviews. The absurdity here isn't existential, it's social: the characters' inflated sense of their own talent collides with the painfully ordinary world they inhabit.

For example, when Corky St. Clair (played by Guest) earnestly declares that the show "could go all the way to Broadway," the camera holds just a little too long, exposing the gap between his passion and the visible mediocrity of the production. The humor is built through the form itself - through editing choices, timing, the characters' earnestness juxtaposed with the audience's outside knowledge.

Absurdity Through Form: Static Stage vs. Moving Frame

Beckett's absurdity is built through immobility. *Godot* takes place on an almost bare stage: one road, one tree, minimal props. The characters are stuck in place, and so is the viewer. There are no close-ups, no shifts in perspective. You're either watching it all, or nothing. The absurdity is embodied in that visual stasis: the fact that they never leave, never change, and can't seem to remember what happened the day before.

In *Guffman*, the camera moves, and that movement creates meaning. It zooms in on awkward glances, shaky smiles, botched lines. The mockumentary uses cinematic language to expose theatrical failure. It doesn't just show the performance, it shows the cracks, the tension behind the scenes, the overly rehearsed talking points, the amateur costuming. The absurdity isn't just in what happens, but in how it's shown.

More importantly, the film edits between "onstage" performance and "backstage" interview, highlighting the discrepancy between how the characters see themselves and how the audience sees them. That double vision is essential to the mockumentary form: we're always watching someone try to control the narrative, even as they fail to do so⁸.

Audience Position: Laughing with or laughing at?

In Beckett, the audience is trapped in the same position as the characters: waiting. There's no fourth wall to break, no narrator to guide us. We're just as lost, just as unsure, and that creates a shared emotional tension. The absurdity hits hard because we are included in it.

⁸ The mockumentary relies on a documentary "truth effect," even though it's fully staged. It uses framing, editing, and composition to suggest realism, while actually constructing a narrative. See: Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking It: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*, 2001.

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In *Guffman*, we're in on the joke. The mockumentary form creates a layer of dramatic irony: we know this isn't a real documentary, and we also understand the social codes the characters don't. The audience is placed above the characters, but not cruelly. The humor comes from empathy, not mockery. We laugh because we recognize their dreams, even if they're hopeless.

That delicate balance, between laughter and affection, is what makes the absurdity of *Guffman* feel emotionally real, even in its most ridiculous moments. It's not absurdity for absurdity's sake. It's about people performing not just on a stage, but for the world, and believing their performance matters.

Absurdity as Emotional Exposure

Ultimately, both works use absurdity to expose vulnerability. In *Godot*, it's the vulnerability of people who keep hoping even when hope has no reason. In *Guffman*, it's the vulnerability of people who build their identities around performance, even if no one's watching, even if no one cares.

What unites the two is a fundamental emotional truth: the need to believe in something. Whether it's the arrival of Godot or the chance to be seen by Guffman, these invisible figures become symbols of recognition, validation, purpose.

And that's why both works, in their own way, remain moving. Behind the absurdity stands, always, the question: What if this time, someone really shows up?

Performance Techniques - Stage vs. Screen

Though *Waiting for Godot* and *Waiting for Guffman* appear to belong to very different artistic worlds, both are fundamentally concerned with the act of performance. They are, each in their own way, about people performing in order to be seen - by others, by themselves, or by some imagined audience. However, the ways in which they construct and present performance are deeply rooted in the technical and aesthetic affordances of their respective mediums: theater and mockumentary film.

In this section, we explore how each work builds its meaning and emotional impact through medium-specific performance techniques - on the stage and on screen - and how those techniques shape our experience as spectators.

Performance in *Waiting for Godot*: Presence, Ritual, and Constraint

Beckett's play is a carefully constructed ritual of non-arrival. On the surface, it appears minimalist: two characters, one tree, almost no plot. But from a theatrical

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perspective, *Godot* is dense with performative precision. Every gesture, every pause, every repeated phrase is part of a choreographed score of meaning.

Theater, as a live medium, depends on the physical presence of bodies in space. Beckett exploits this to the extreme. Vladimir and Estragon's movements are deliberately constrained: they pace, they sit, they fumble with boots and hats. Their actions appear meaningless but are repeated so often that they become ritualized, almost sacred in their futility. These repetitions are not random, they are Beckett's way of turning form into feeling, a strategy unique to the live stage⁹.

Speech, too, is stylized. The characters speak in rhythms and repetitions that border on music. Long silences punctuate short bursts of words. The tension lies in what is not said, and in how long nothing is said. This pacing - awkward in film - becomes a powerful tool in theater, where silence can stretch across the entire room and implicate the audience directly. As a result, the absurdity is embodied, present in every gesture and pause, not just in what the characters say.

Perhaps most importantly, Beckett was famously strict about how the play should be performed. Even small deviations from his stage directions were forbidden. This underscores the fact that in *Godot*, the performance itself is the meaning. There is no backstory, no psychological development. The characters exist entirely through their actions onstage, and the absurdity is built from this tension between highly controlled form and existential emptiness¹⁰.

Theatricality Within the Frame: *Waiting for Guffman*

By contrast, *Waiting for Guffman* is not a stage play, but it is absolutely about theater, more precisely, amateur community theater. The characters rehearse, plan, dream, and perform in a small-town musical that they believe could change their lives. The entire film is framed as a documentary about the making of this show, but it's a fiction: a mockumentary designed to look real.

Here, performance happens on two levels. First, the characters perform as "themselves" in documentary-style interviews. These monologues are improvised by actors, filmed with shaky handheld cameras, and edited to resemble nonfiction storytelling. Second, those same characters perform on stage, poorly, within the

⁹ Beckett once described his plays as "texts for performance" rather than literature. His focus was always on embodiment, not plot. See: Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 1961.

¹⁰ Beckett's stage directions are famously rigid. Even the positioning of hats and boots is significant. Deviations from his script have been legally challenged by his estate. See: Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett's Theater*, 1980.

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narrative. These staged performances are exaggerated, awkward, and sincere, clearly mimicking community theater tropes: over-enunciation, cliché stage blocking, mismatched costumes, melodramatic line readings¹¹.

The genius of the mockumentary form is that it uses cinematic realism to frame theatricality. The absurdity isn't just in the performance, it's in how the film chooses to present it. The camera lingers just a beat too long. A character looks into the lens too earnestly. The editing allows silence to bloom into discomfort. These are not accidents, they are tools that expose the constructed nature of the characters' self-presentation, much like actors onstage unconsciously signal their roles.

In other words, *Guffman* is about bad theater, but it is built through excellent cinematic technique. And that contrast is crucial. While *Godot* uses theater to embody the absurd, *Guffman* uses film to expose theatrical absurdity from the outside. The characters do not know they are ridiculous, but the audience does.

Mockumentary Performance: Improvisation, Framing, and the Camera as Audience

One of the defining features of mockumentary is its use of improvisation. Unlike Beckett's tightly scripted play, *Waiting for Guffman* was created from an outline, not a screenplay. The actors, many of whom, like Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara, come from improvisational comedy, develop their lines in real time. This results in a kind of performance that feels unscripted and "true", even though it's entirely fabricated.

These performances are shaped not just by the actor, but by the camera's behavior. In mockumentary, the camera functions as a character of its own> a passive observer that seems to "discover" moments. It zooms in on reactions, pans awkwardly, or stays too long on a facial expression. These choices create a sense of intimacy and awkwardness that is difficult to achieve in live theater.

Where theater invites a shared, immediate experience, mockumentary simulates intimacy through editing. We feel like we're watching something raw, but it's carefully constructed to appear that way. The audience is positioned as a voyeur,

¹¹ The theatrical scenes in *Waiting for Guffman* parody real community theater with near-documentary accuracy. The performances reflect not just lack of skill, but *genuine enthusiasm*, which makes the absurdity affectionate rather than cruel.

not a participant. We're not in the room with the characters, we're watching them from a safe, ironic distance¹².

This difference in audience position changes how performance is received. In *Godot*, the performance unfolds in real time, with no cuts or close-ups. The actors are always visible, and the audience experiences everything together. In *Guffman*, performance is fragmented, shaped by jump cuts, reaction shots, and talking-head confessions. We see how the characters want to be seen, and then see them contradict themselves. That doubling, the performance of performance, is where mockumentary generates its absurdity.

Framing Absurdity: Two Mediums, Two Gazes

In both works, performance is shown to be fragile, hopeful, and ultimately absurd. But where *Godot* focuses on the ritual of performance stripped down to silence and gesture, *Guffman* highlights the illusion of performance, showing how easily theatrical ambition collapses under the gaze of the camera.

Beckett uses the stage to show how time and space become meaningless through repetition. Guest uses the mockumentary to show how the frame itself - camera, editing, interviews - reveals characters' delusions and desires.

Both use performance as their raw material. But one uses the stage to reveal the void, the other uses the camera to frame the delusion.

The Role of the Audience and Reception

Performance, no matter the medium, is incomplete without an audience. Whether sitting in a darkened theatre or watching a film alone at home, the spectator's position both physically and emotionally shapes how a work is received, interpreted, and remembered. In *Waiting for Godot* and *Waiting for Guffman*, the audience is not just a passive observer but a key player in how meaning is constructed. However, because one belongs to live theatre and the other to cinema (in the form of a mockumentary), the way each medium addresses its audience and the kind of response it invites is fundamentally different.

Theatre and the Co-Presence of the Spectator

¹² Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight argue that mockumentary creates a "truth effect" through formal imitation of nonfiction. Viewers are "invited to believe" while also being cued to doubt. See: *Faking It: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*, 2001.

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In *Waiting for Godot*, the spectator is always present in the same space and time as the actors. The audience shares the waiting, not just thematically, but physically. The lack of action, long silences, and static blocking all force the audience to sit with the characters in their discomfort. There is no cut, no edit, no music to shift the tone. Instead, there is presence: of actor, character, and viewer. The tension is immediate and unavoidable.

The theatre's "fourth wall" may remain intact in *Godot*, but the lack of plot progression makes the audience hyper-aware of their role as observers. They are not drawn into an illusion of realism, as they might be in traditional drama. Instead, they are often left wondering: *Why am I watching this? Why aren't they leaving? Why am I still here?* That self-awareness is central to the play's impact. Beckett doesn't try to hide the absurdity of theatre. Instead, he makes the audience sit with it¹³.

In fact, part of the emotional power of *Godot* comes from its refusal to offer catharsis. In classic dramatic structure, tension builds toward a climax and resolution. But here, the audience, like the characters, is denied closure. *Godot* doesn't come. The act ends. The lights go down. And we're left with questions, not answers. For many viewers, this creates discomfort. But for Beckett, that discomfort is the point.

Mockumentary and the Split Audience Perspective

In *Waiting for Guffman*, the audience experience is fundamentally different. The viewer is not a co-present observer, but a secondary audience, watching a fictional documentary about a fictional play. This layered structure creates a dual perspective: we see the characters perform both onstage and off, and we see how they see themselves.

Unlike Beckett's characters, who are trapped in a metaphysical space, the citizens of Blaine are caught in a social performance, playing roles not just for their fictional town, but for the documentary camera. The absurdity comes from how seriously they take themselves, and how clearly the film shows the gap between their belief and their actual abilities.

The mockumentary format positions the audience as both insider and outsider. We're given access to private thoughts (via interviews), backstage conflict, rehearsal footage, and final performance. But at every step, we're also aware that we're

¹³ Hans-Thies Lehmann defines post dramatic theatre (like *Godot*) as performance that foregrounds presence and space over plot and psychological development. See: *Postdramatic Theatre*, 1999.

watching something constructed. The camera reminds us that this is not a “real” documentary, this is a film about people trying to be seen as performers¹⁴.

This has a profound impact on reception. Instead of direct emotional identification, *Guffman* invites ironic distance. The viewer is constantly switching between laughing at and feeling for the characters. We recognize their desire for success, even if we know it’s doomed. This shifting identification is part of what makes the film’s absurdity so rich - it’s not just funny, it’s uncomfortable. We laugh because we recognize something deeply human: the need to be seen, to matter, to succeed.

Audience and Authenticity: Who Is Performing for Whom?

A key question raised by both works is: who is the performance for? In *Godot*, the characters’ waiting seems to serve no practical function. They are not “performing” in a traditional sense. And yet, their repetition, their insistence on staying, and their endless rehearsing of the same questions becomes a kind of existential performance: not for Godot, not for each other, but for the sheer act of staying alive.

In *Guffman*, the characters are explicitly performing: for the town, for the Broadway producer they believe is coming, and for the documentary camera. This multi-layered performance mirrors the complexity of real-world social dynamics. We all perform in different ways depending on who we believe is watching. In this sense, *Guffman* is not just a mockumentary about theatre; it is a mockumentary about spectatorship itself.

The film subtly critiques the Idea of performance as validation. Characters like Corky and Ron define their identities through the potential success of the play. Their sense of self-worth is tied to the hope that someone important - Guffman - will see them and approve. When he doesn’t show up, they reframe their failure as a kind of success. The performance, though flawed, becomes a source of meaning because they chose to believe in it.

This is very different from *Godot*, where the absence of Godot is not reframed, it is simply endured. There is no resolution, no reinterpretation. The play asks: What

¹⁴ Mockumentary scholar Stella Bruzzi argues that mockumentaries “reveal the process of construction” rather than hide it. They invite audiences to be skeptical, even complicit. See: *New Documentary*, 2000.

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happens when meaning doesn't arrive? The film asks: What do we do when we realize no one is watching?

Theater, Mockumentary, and the Spectator's Gaze

Theater encourages a singular gaze: everyone in the room sees the same thing from a slightly different angle, at the same time. There are no edits, no cuts, no manipulation. The audience must decide, together, what it means.

Mockumentary manipulates the gaze. It guides the viewer's perception through editing, framing, and tone. A glance, when captured in close-up, becomes meaningful. An awkward silence, when extended in the cut, becomes absurd. The audience is led to find meaning in the way things are shown, not just what is shown.

This makes the reception experience radically different. *Godot* leaves space for personal interpretation, often provoking frustration or awe. *Guffman* offers a curated absurdity, one that plays with the conventions of documentary realism to expose theatrical illusions. But both demand that the audience confront their own expectations of performance: What do we want from a story? A character? A resolution? And what happens when we don't get it?

Conclusion: Audiences as Co-Creators of Meaning

Despite their differences, both works leave the audience with the same challenge: how do we make sense of performance that resists resolution?

In *Waiting for Godot*, the theater audience becomes part of the waiting, sharing the silence, the repetition, the absurdity.

In *Waiting for Guffman*, the mockumentary audience is asked to read between the lines, to see both the surface performance and the layers beneath it.

In the end, the absurdity in both works is not just onstage or onscreen. It is in us, the viewers. We are invited to project meaning onto emptiness, to invest in hope without guarantees, and to laugh at our own need to be seen. That is the shared gift of theater and mockumentary: different languages, same truth

Spectacle and Self-Worth: Performance as Meaning-Making

In both *Waiting for Godot* and *Waiting for Guffman*, performance is not simply an artistic act or a form of entertainment. It becomes a lifeline, a way for characters to construct identity, assert presence, and fill the space left by uncertainty, failure, or

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the absence of meaning. These works suggest that performance is not just something we do for others, it is something we do to survive ourselves.

While Beckett explores performance as a form of existential resistance, Guest presents it as self-invention through delusion and hope. In both cases, the characters stage their lives - sometimes literally, sometimes symbolically - as a way of asserting that they matter, even when all evidence suggests otherwise.

Performing to Endure: *Waiting for Godot*

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon live in a world with no backstory, no future, and no visible purpose. They do not work, travel, or complete tasks. They simply wait. But in that waiting, they constantly perform: for each other, for themselves, and for the absent Godot.

Their behaviors - taking off and putting on boots, switching hats, reciting fragmented memories - are not actions with consequence, but rituals of persistence. They joke, argue, hug, consider suicide. These small gestures become the play's only content. In fact, *Godot* is a play in which performance replaces progress. The characters rehearse being alive because the alternative is unbearable silence¹⁵.

One of the most telling examples is their struggle to remember. In both acts, they seem unsure whether the events of the previous day even occurred. Estragon forgets what he ate. Vladimir questions whether they're waiting in the right place. This instability suggests that their identities are sustained not by continuity, but by performance. They act out a relationship, because without it, they disappear.

There is no audience within the play, and Godot never arrives. Yet Vladimir and Estragon keep performing, as if the act itself is enough to justify staying alive. In this way, performance becomes a metaphor for the human condition in the face of absurdity: to perform is to persist, even without meaning or recognition.

Performing to Be Seen: *Waiting for Guffman*

In *Waiting for Guffman*, performance is equally central, but here, it is tied directly to personal ambition and social recognition. The characters aren't waiting for philosophical purpose, they're waiting for a Broadway producer who, they believe, can turn their small-town play into a national sensation.

¹⁵ Beckett often spoke of performance as a structure that replaces plot. His characters rehearse existence through repetition rather than action. See: James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, 1996.

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Their lives, in many ways, revolve around the spectacle of this upcoming show. Ron, the travel agent, believes he was “meant” to be a leading man. Libby dreams of being discovered. Corky, the director, sees himself as a misunderstood genius. None of them are particularly skilled, but they are sincere, and their belief in the transformative power of performance is real. They rehearse, they decorate the theater, they design costumes, all with the hope that the act of performing will change their lives¹⁶.

Here, the relationship between Identity and performance is more optimistic, but equally fragile. The show becomes a vessel for self-worth. They are no longer just residents of Blaine, Missouri, they are artists, visionaries, almost-stars. And while the mockumentary format allows the audience to see the gap between their self-image and reality, the characters themselves live within the story they’ve constructed.

This creates a form of absurdity that’s both funny and deeply human. The cast performs not because they’re good, but because they need to be someone else, or to be seen as more than they are. When Guffman fails to arrive, they are briefly crushed. But they quickly adapt. Corky moves on to audition for *My Dinner with André: The Musical*. Ron and Sheila continue acting. Their resilience isn’t denial, it’s a testament to how powerful performance is as a tool for self-definition¹⁷.

Personal Mythology Through Performance

In both works, characters build personal mythologies through repeated action. Beckett’s characters reenact the same day endlessly. Guest’s characters transform a local history play into a heroic origin story. The first approach highlights the futility of such rituals; the second shows how those same rituals can generate purpose.

Godot suggests that even when meaning collapses, we still act out roles to survive: the clown, the caretaker, the doubter, the dreamer. These performances don’t lead to revelation, but they hold space for identity, perhaps a fragile one, but enough to keep going.

In *Guffman*, performance is almost a form of wishful magic. If the characters believe in the performance enough, they believe it will transform their lives. And although it doesn’t, the act of trying gives them a sense of belonging and pride. The

¹⁶ The exaggerated seriousness of the Blaine cast parodies community theatre, but their emotional investment is authentic. This sincerity is what allows *Guffman* to be both absurd and moving.

¹⁷ Christopher Guest said in interviews that he wanted viewers to “laugh with” the characters, not at them. This balance is achieved by grounding every absurd moment in emotional truth.

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audience laughs at their delusions, but also feels for them, because their dreams are honest.

In both cases, performance becomes a way to reclaim control in a world where little else makes sense.

The Human Need for Story and Spectacle

Both Beckett and Guest understand that people don't just want meaning, they want stories. And in the absence of grand narratives, we construct small ones: a pair of men waiting by a tree; a group of neighbors putting on a play. These stories may not change the world, but they give structure to our days.

Godot strips that impulse bare. The story doesn't progress, but the performance itself becomes the only framework available. Without it, there is nothing.

Guffman shows how people fill their lives with stories to feel bigger, brighter, more important. It's spectacle at its most local, most modest, and most revealing. The mockumentary format, which claims to present the "truth," instead reveals how people build illusions just to make life bearable.

Conclusion: Performing Against the Void

In both *Waiting for Godot* and *Waiting for Guffman*, the characters use performance to push back against absence. Absence of meaning, recognition, success, or change.

In Beckett, performance is endurance: a repeated gesture, a ritual, a routine that forestalls despair.

In Guest, performance is affirmation: a hopeful act that creates value through effort, even in failure.

Theatrical and cinematic forms reflect this difference. Theater, in Beckett's hands, becomes a space of existential exposure: bare, slow, stripped of illusion. The mockumentary, in Guest's hands, becomes a space of emotional camouflage, where performance and personality blur, and the camera captures both the dream and the denial.

Yet despite these contrasts, both works return to the same insight: we perform because we need to believe in something. And when belief fails, we perform anyway.

Because in a world where nothing may ever arrive, the act of showing up and putting on a show, no matter how small, is a form of resistance. A way of saying: *We're still here.*

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The Absurd Performer: Theater and Mockumentary as Reflections of Human Persistence

At their core, *Waiting for Godot* and *Waiting for Guffman* are stories about people who perform in the face of uncertainty. Though they differ in tone, medium, and intent, both works circle the same set of questions: Why do we keep going when there is no guarantee of success, meaning, or recognition? Why do we act, repeat, rehearse, and hope, even when the object of our desire - be it Godot or Guffman - never shows up?

These are questions not just about performance, but about being human. The absurdity explored in both works is not simply a stylistic choice or a narrative device, it reflects real emotional and existential conditions, revealed through the specific artistic languages of theater and mockumentary.

Form Shapes Absurdity

In *Waiting for Godot*, the absurd takes shape through the constraints of the stage. The audience is seated in real time, watching characters whose lives consist of waiting, forgetting, repeating, and performing rituals without clear purpose. The performance unfolds in front of them with no camera tricks, no cuts, no illusion of realism beyond what the actors produce with their bodies and voices. The presence of the performers, static yet persistent, is where the emotional weight lies.

By contrast, *Waiting for Guffman* uses the mockumentary form to create a different kind of absurdity, one built on constructed realism. The characters appear to be speaking directly to the camera, participating in interviews, and rehearsing for a performance that they believe is their big break. The film uses the tools of cinema - camera framing, editing, pauses, and juxtaposition - to highlight the gap between how the characters see themselves and how we, the audience, see them. Here, absurdity emerges from discrepancy and delusion, rather than existential emptiness.

Both mediums expose the absurd in their own way: *Godot* invites us to witness it as a slow-burning ritual. *Guffman* asks us to recognize it in the comedy of self-performance.

Performing to Survive Meaninglessness

In both works, performance is the characters' response to an ambiguous world. It becomes a strategy for survival.

In Beckett's world, performance fills the silence of existence. Vladimir and Estragon are not actors by profession, but their behaviors are undeniably theatrical:

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jokes, routines, mirrored gestures. The act of waiting becomes a performance of persistence: they continue simply because stopping would mean confronting the void directly. Their theater is one of endurance, built not for applause but for staying alive one more day.

In Guest's mockumentary, performance is tied to self-invention. The citizens of Blaine construct elaborate fantasies about who they are or might become. They rehearse not just lines and songs, but identities: rising stars, misunderstood artists, future Broadway talents. Their spectacle is one of aspiration, often painfully mismatched with reality, but sincere. The absence of Guffman - the Broadway "gatekeeper" they hope will validate their dreams - does not stop them. The show goes on. They perform, even when no one important is watching.

What emerges in both cases is the idea that performance becomes a response to absurdity. Not a solution, but a gesture of defiance. The characters can't change the world they inhabit, but they can choose how to act within it. That act, on a stage, in front of a camera, in life, is what gives them shape, however briefly.

The Spectator's Role: Mirror or Witness?

Audience experience, too, is shaped by the form each work takes. In *Godot*, the audience sits quietly, observing a play that openly resists plot, momentum, or closure. There is no narrative payoff. Instead, the spectator is forced into complicity with the characters' waiting: they feel the tension of time passing with no resolution. The theater's immediacy makes this inescapable.

In *Guffman*, the mockumentary format creates ironic distance. The audience is not just a viewer of the story, they are a reader of the frame. We are constantly decoding the film's signals: when are we meant to laugh? To cringe? To empathize? We know we're watching fiction, but it's dressed as documentary, and this creates a layer of awareness that influences our emotional engagement.

And yet, despite these formal differences, both works leave audiences with similar feelings: compassion, discomfort, even recognition. We see something of ourselves in these absurd performers. We understand the need to make meaning, to create stories, to imagine that what we do matters to someone, even if that someone never arrives.

The Absurd Performer: A Universal Figure

What ties *Waiting for Godot* and *Waiting for Guffman* together is not just the shared title structure, or the thematic use of a missing figure. It's the image of the

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absurd performer, the person who acts despite futility, who rehearses even when the stage is falling apart, who finds dignity in persistence. Beckett's characters wait for Godot, unsure of who he is or whether he exists, but they keep showing up. Guest's characters wait for Guffman, convinced he will transform their lives, but they carry on when he doesn't.

Both are, in their own way, portraits of human persistence in the face of nothingness.

The theater and the mockumentary reveal different aspects of this persistence. One is raw and stripped-down, confronting the void. The other is playful, cluttered, funny, and sad, but just as revealing. Both show how performance is not merely an artistic act, but a coping mechanism, a way of organizing time, identity, and purpose.

Final Thoughts: Why We Perform Anyway

Perhaps the most enduring insight of these works is this: we perform not because we are certain of success, but because the act of performing itself gives shape to uncertainty.

Waiting for Godot offers no closure, no answers. But the characters still wait. *Waiting for Guffman* ends with failure, but the characters still dream.

Both works ask us to consider the value of performance without applause, without recognition, without meaning guaranteed. In doing so, they expose the absurdity of life, and the beauty of choosing to keep going anyway.

As audience members, we are not just observers of this persistence. We are participants in it. Because when we laugh, when we wait, when we believe, even for a moment, we, too, are performing.

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