CHAPTER 1

The Laugh Sensation of Two Continents!

Waiting for Godot, Beckett’s first published play, had not one but two different American premieres, in two separate productions. The first, directed by Schneider, opened at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami, Florida, and closed after two weeks, a critical and commercial flop. The second, which was not directed by Schneider, opened on Broadway a few months later and enjoyed a modest run of about two months. It was the first and only time that Schneider was not at the helm of a major Beckett premiere in this country.¹

Beckett’s introduction to the United States through his first produced (and still best-known) play was characterized by mistakes, miscommunications, and misunderstandings among all involved. Despite these missteps, it was a formative experience for Schneider, and it shaped his approach to all future Beckett productions. Hired by a demanding producer, he had little control over decisions made for the production. After Godot, he took a much more active role, assuming nearly complete control for all subsequent American premieres. This failure therefore laid an important foundation upon which subsequent success would be built.

Waiting for Godot, Miami, 1956

Schneider’s introduction to the man he would later call the most important person apart from his family² began on a European tour in the summer of 1954. While on vacation in Germany, he met with a dramaturg for a local theatre, who told him about a new play called En Attendant Godot.
Although the German production had recently closed, the original production was still running in Paris, which, coincidentally, was Schneider’s next destination where he had tickets to see the Berliner Ensemble perform *Mother Courage*, with Helene Weigel. Intrigued, Schneider tracked down the tiny Théâtre Babylone and attended two performances of *En Attendant Godot*, directed by Roger Blin. Even his rudimentary French did not temper his excitement about the play. He spent much of his remaining time in Paris trying to track down Beckett (even going so far as to wait outside his apartment in hopes of meeting him by chance), hoping to inquire about rights for an American production. After learning that the English-language rights were recently sold to Curtis Brown in London, he gave up and returned to the States, where he tried to put the elusive *Godot*, and the even more elusive Samuel Beckett, out of his mind.³

The path to the American premiere of *Godot* meandered considerably over the course of three years between the world premiere in Paris and the eventual opening in Miami. Originally optioned by producer Harold Oram in 1953 for an American production, Beckett had rushed to produce an English translation for him. But Oram was unable to mount a production before his rights expired in October that year.⁴ After Oram’s option lapsed, Donald Albery acquired the British Empire rights, with an option on the American rights included, in 1954.⁵ Albery and his producing partner, Peter Glenville, made many false starts in their efforts to stage the London premiere, which held up any potential American productions in the meantime. Although several parties expressed interest in the intervening months—including Proscenium Productions, a group that had leased the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village⁶—it was ultimately New York producer Michael Myerberg who acquired the rights through Albery for the American premiere.

In the fall of 1955, Myerberg contacted Schneider to see if he was available to direct a Broadway production of *Godot* starring Bert Lahr as Estragon and Tom Ewell as Vladimir. Schneider and Myerberg had never met. Schneider directed a revival of *The Skin of Our Teeth* the previous year and formed a friendship with Thornton Wilder, who recommended him to Myerberg.⁷ Initially hesitant about the offer, Schneider was uncertain whether the play would be a good fit for Broadway audiences and wary of Myerberg, who had a reputation for being difficult to work with. Still, he had not been able to banish *Godot* from his mind since the previous summer, so he agreed.

The original contract, dated November 16, 1955, was a document that would cause years of headaches. Schneider was to be paid $1,000 at contract signing, a $250 weekly salary, and 1 percent of the royalties of the weekly box office gross. The contract further stipulated that he would direct the