



[Endgame](#) at [Home](#)

by Samuel Beckett, co-presented by Citizens Theatre

Reviewed by [Stephen Bowler](#) February 2016

Imagine, if you will, an existential launderette, where, one evening, you take your embodied self for a service wash. You check in your soul, which goes into a big boxy machine on a programme marked *all-Western-thought-and-then-some*, along with some Cartesian powder and a little Comedic conditioner. During the 90-odd minute wash your psychic goods go round and round, scratching a bit on the window, yielding flashes of apparel in no particular order. The end of the cycle looks a lot like the beginning.

This is **Endgame**, a play with no plot, and which means nothing at all, at least not in any conventional way. Supremely anti-realist, it denies a higher order of truth standing over and

above the human imagination, as something to which theatre – that is, *we* – should conform. All that matters is our struggle to make sense of things, bounded as we are by forces eternal and inexorable. We stumble through a fog of words and power, hoping He might point the way whilst knowing all along He won't, because, unfortunately, 'The bastard! He doesn't exist!'

All of which makes *Endgame* sound worthy but dull, which it isn't. There is humour of the blackest kind and musicality to phrases that shape and acknowledge the recognisably play-like events unfolding on stage. And by the end, when dialogue begins to sound more like stage direction – 'I'm warming up for my last soliloquy'; 'This is what we call making an exit'; 'It's the end'; 'Articulate!' – we are aware that we have, despite ourselves, been carried along by the slenderest of coincidences.

To make any of this possible requires actors of the highest calibre. Beckett's directions are most specific, down to pauses and gestures and how many steps to take in a given move, and the fact that all performances are of exactly the same play – for no deviation is permitted – makes his work especially demanding. Fortunately this production has an excellent cast that does justice to this tough text. **David Neilson's** *Hamm* was properly irascible and manipulative. He brought wonderful clarity to the role and I especially appreciated his rendering of the difficult, stream-of-consciousness monologues; no mean feat.

In a play about the elusiveness of meaning, I got every nuance. Hamm's relationship with *Clov*, his slavish other, is as much about movement and confinement as ideas and speech and

Chris Gascoyne

(as

Clov

) strikes just the right balance between animated and paralysed. The concluding section, where

Clov

struggles with the realisation that the words he has acquired have ‘nothing to say’, is exquisitely attuned to the narrowing gyre as the dialogue closes in on itself to the . . . [pause] . . . end of the game.



Nagg, played by **Peter Kelly**, was hugely entertaining, pulling-off the tailor/trouser gag as if he were Tommy Cooper. For a moment I feared he would upstage all others, but

Nell

(

Barbara Rafferty

), his wife alongside him – they have no legs and live in neighbouring dustbins – is his loving foil, with the killer line that ‘Nothing is funnier than unhappiness’. Which is so, at least here, where the quest to wrest meaning from life is as absurdly comic as it is tragically sad, a point underlined when

Hamm

says at one point, ‘We’re not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?’ and

Clov

replies; ‘Mean something! You and I, mean something! Ah that’s a good one!’

Knowingly ironic, for sure, but also strangely life affirming in the intimation that whilst the end-game is certain there is still everything to play for along the way as we struggle to signify something more than speech itself. Check your self into this existential launderette and see if it doesn't tackle the stains that other dramas leave untouched.