

ENDGAME

by Samuel Beckett

March 21 – April 20, 2008

Stiemke Theater



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This study guide was researched and designed by the Education Department at Milwaukee Repertory Theater, and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding of, and appreciation for, the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of *Endgame*.

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Synopsis

The play opens in a dark, grey room with two windows. Hamm sits in a wheeled armchair center stage, covered with a sheet. There are two trash bins onstage, also covered with a sheet. Clov, Hamm's servant, enters to perform his daily ritual: removing the sheets, peering into the bins, and looking through both windows to check up on the outside world. Having done this, he exits.

Hamm awakens and summons Clov. Hamm demands that Clov cover him with the sheet, since he is ready for bed. Clov refuses on the grounds that Hamm has just woken up. "I can't be getting you up and putting you to bed every five minutes, I have things to do," he complains.

Over the course of their following conversations, we learn more about the relationship between the two men. Clov repeatedly threatens to leave the blind and immobile Hamm to fend for himself, which would be a death sentence for both of them. Hamm is the only one who knows the combination to the cupboard where food is kept, and Clov would be unable to forage for food in the wasteland outside.

Their conversation is interrupted by the appearance of Nagg, Hamm's father, who pops his head out from one of the trash bins and demands food. Hamm angrily orders Clov to feed the "accursed progenitor" and stuff him back into the bin.

Clov exits and Hamm drifts off to sleep, giving Nagg a chance to come out again. He knocks on the other trash bin and his wife Nell emerges. The two attempt to kiss, but they are too far apart. Neither can leave their bin, having both lost their legs together in a bicycle accident many years

before. Nagg attempts to cheer Nell up by telling her a joke, but she remains impassive. Hamm roars at them to be silent, and when Clov enters Hamm orders him to throw the bins into the sea. Clov crosses to the trash bins and reports that Nell has died.

The survivors continue their verbal sparring. Hamm asks Clov to report on the world outside, which Clov describes as "gray" and "corpsed." The two are terrified by the idea of continued life on earth. Clov discovers a flea, which forces both men into a panic - "Humanity might start from there all over again!" Hamm cries, and Clov douses himself liberally with flea powder.

Hamm then works on his "chronicle," an autobiography (which may or may not be true) that he adds to a little each day. He tells the story of a man who came to him from the wasteland and asked him to take in his son. It is possible that this is the story of how Hamm and Clov came to live together.

Clov checks the windows again and spots a boy in the wasteland. He picks up a gaff (a large, sharp hook on a handle), intending to kill the "potential procreator," but Hamm calls him off.

Hamm dismisses Clov, claiming he no longer needs him. Clov fetches his traveling clothes and stands in the doorway watching Hamm. Hamm blows his whistle to summon Clov, who does not react. The play ends as Hamm, believing himself alone, throws his whistle away and covers his face with his handkerchief while Clov looks on, silent and unmoving.

About the Author: Samuel Beckett

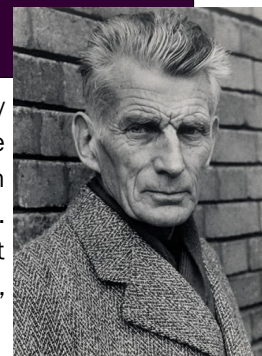
Samuel Beckett was born in Ireland in 1906. Writing and travel were his favorite pastimes: he spent much of his youth writing poems and stories and journeying through Ireland, France, England and Germany. He became a close friend of James Joyce, and helped the man to write what would eventually become the novel *Finnegan's Wake*.

Beckett suffered from depression from a young age, later remarking "I had little talent for happiness." He spurned the advances of James Joyce's daughter Lucia, creating tension between the two authors and leading Beckett to believe that he himself "was dead and had no feelings that were human."

During World War II, Beckett stayed in Paris and became a member of the French resistance. It was there that he met his future wife, Suzanne Dechevaux-Dumesnil, a pi-

ano student. He was forced to flee the city after several of his resistance comrades were arrested, but returned after the war to begin the most prolific period of his writing career. Between 1945 and 1950, he wrote what would become his two most well-known plays, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*.

Beckett's works reflected his bleak outlook on life, flavored with grim humor. He was fascinated with the way humans use humor as a way to move forward in the face of hopelessness or terror. As successful as he became, Beckett was never convinced that there was value even in his own work: he called his writings "an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness" and described winning the Nobel Prize for Literature as a "catastrophe." Despite this, he continued to write steadily until his death in 1989.



Supplementary Information

Absurdism

Absurdism is the term for a movement in drama and prose fiction based on the idea that man's condition is meaningless, and any attempt to understand it or create meaning for one's existence is ridiculous. As Eugene Ionesco, a French absurdist, writes, "Cut off his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."

The absurdist movement began in France immediately after World War II, as a rebellion against the previously-held idea that man was a rational being who lived in a patially-intelligible universe - ideas that some found hard to swallow after the horrors of the war.

Absurdist works typically ignore theatrical conventions of plot, setting and characterization. Situations and dialogue are often repetitive or seemingly nonsensical. These works strive to emphasize the idea of man's struggle to find meaning and purpose in a world he does not fully understand, and the sense of loneliness, futility and despair which accompanies this struggle.

"Nothing is funnier than unhappiness"

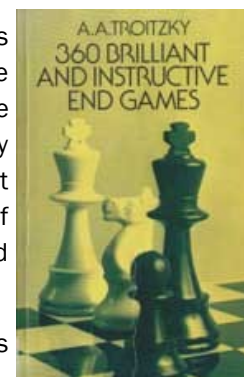
Beckett described this line, spoken by Nell midway through *Endgame*, as key to the play's interpretation and performance. The situation Beckett constructs for the beginning of the play is hopeless: nothing can save the four characters in the shelter, who are all crippled and running low on supplies in the middle of a barren wasteland. The characters all toy with the idea of their own deaths, and the greatest sin (to Hamm at least) would be to reproduce and bring another being into the world to be miserable. Thus, Nagg is labeled the "accursed progenitor," the flea in Clov's trousers is killed in case it starts the human race over again, and Clov's first instinct upon seeing the boy outside is to kill him with a gaff.

Nevertheless, Beckett's aim in many of his works was to find the humor in situations of utter despair or hopelessness. The humor in *Endgame* comes from the wordplay and tactics employed by each character in their never-ending struggle for dominance over one another. The dialogue in *Endgame* follows the repetitive set-up/punchline structure employed by comic duos like Abbott and Costello. Beckett uses comedy not to relieve tension, but to highlight the absurdity of our day-to-day routines by magnifying them: as Oscar Wilde said, "If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they'll kill you."

Endgame and Chess

An endgame is a term used in chess to describe the point in a match where the outcome is known: so although the game continues, one player is guaranteed victory after a certain number of moves. Beckett uses this as a metaphor for life: regardless of the "moves" one makes, we are all doomed from the start.

The play is littered with further chess imagery: Hamm and Clov are "very red-faced", and wear costumes with red accents, whereas Nell and Nagg are pale and dressed in white. Hamm is akin to the King: the most powerful piece on the board, he is also the most vulnerable, having limited mobility. His only true power is his ability to control the other characters, since he is the only one who knows the combination to the cabinet where food and medicine are kept. Clov moves according to Hamm's orders, and Nagg and Nell are allowed to come out of their trash bins only at Hamm's pleasure. Finally, Hamm's repeated line "Me to play" is a phrase uttered by chess players to indicate that it is their turn to move.



Post-show Discussion Questions

- Where does the story take place? What do the production elements (light, set design, costumes) tell you about the setting of the play?
- What is the significance of the character's names?
- What happens to Clov after the end of the play? Based on the nature of the story, and what you've seen about his relationship to Hamm, do you think he will leave?
- Who are these characters? What is the nature of the relationships between Hamm/Clov, Hamm/Nagg, Nagg/Nell? Are there any hints in the text about who these people were before the beginning of the play?

Sources

Beckett by Richard N. Coe. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964

Beckett: a Study of His Plays by John Fletcher and John Spurling. London: Eyre Methuen, 1972.

Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame: A Collection of Critical Essays edited by Bell Galle Chevigny. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969.

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The Audience

You can sit there and have a universal experience, of fear, of anger, of tears, of love, and I discovered that it's the audience, really, that is doing the acting. - **Marlon Brando**

Theater is a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the ensemble performing their role expertly, from the cast and crew to the administrative staff to the audience themselves. Come prepared to make your contribution as a member of the audience. You have an active role to play, and the performers are relying on you to be respectful and attentive. Months of preparation, weeks of rehearsal and hours upon hours of effort have gone towards providing the best possible performance for you. Your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.

Visiting The Rep ...

Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of Electric Railway & Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see a staircase on your left. Behind this staircase is the entrance to the Stiemke Theater.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room, and enjoy them outside the theater during the intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full "running time" of the play.

If you arrive forty-five minutes before the show, you can participate in a FREE pre-show talk called Rep In Depth. An actor from the show usually leads this discussion. This person will tell you a little about the play, the playwright, and the period in which the show is set. Often, they will also share stories about the design and rehearsal process. You can ask questions too!

For information on our education programs and our productions, visit our website at www.milwaukeeep.com

