Endgame and Play

By Samuel Beckett
Directed by Carey Perloff
American Conservatory Theater
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COVER Set model for Play, by scenic designer Dan Ostling
Characters, Casts, and Synopses of Play and Endgame

Play was first produced as Spiel on June 14, 1963, at the Ulmer Theater in Germany, directed by Deryk Mendel. The first English performance was on April 7, 1964, at The Old Vic in London. Under the direction of Roger Blin, the French Fin de partie premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London on April 3, 1957, before transferring to Paris’s Studio des Champs-Elysées on April 22. Beckett translated it into the English Endgame, which had its U.S. premiere at the Cherry Lane Theatre on January 28, 1958, directed by Alan Schneider.

Characters and Cast of Play

wl .................................................................. René Augesen
w2 .................................................................. Annie Purcell
m .................................................................... Anthony Fusco

Synopsis of Play

Three figures are encased in urns with only their faces visible. They can neither see nor hear one another. A spotlight, acting as a voiceless interrogator, swivels between them, prompting each in turn to speak; when the light leaves, the face falls silent. A man and two women—a husband and wife and the husband’s mistress—are compelled by the light to recount the story of their love triangle. W1 (the wife) had M (the husband) followed. She found no proof but she was convinced of M’s infidelity, to which M eventually confessed. W1 found the house of W2 (the mistress) and threatened to kill her; to her husband, she threatened to kill herself. M, frightened of losing W1, agreed to stop seeing W2. Afraid of losing W2, he agreed to go away with her. He was convinced he could not live without either. Unable to bear the stress any longer, M disappeared. Each woman thought M left with the other.

Reaching the end of their sordid story, the figures reflect on their current state. Each imagines the other two are off somewhere together. The uncertainty of their existence
is a great source of anxiety for them; each seems torn between equal terrors of speech and of oblivion—in other words, terror that the light will come, and terror that it will never come again. The man arrives at a fundamental question: “Am I as much as being seen?” Then, the play begins again. They are condemned, it seems, to repeat their story for all eternity.

**Characters and Cast of *Endgame***

Clov .............................................................. Nick Gabriel  
Hamm ............................................................ Bill Irwin  
Nagg .............................................................. Giles Havergal  
Nell .............................................................. Barbara Oliver

**Synopsis of *Endgame***

Clov, a hobbled servant, enters a barren room that contains two trash cans (covered with an old sheet) and an armchair on casters (also covered with an old sheet). Using a ladder, he draws back the curtains from the room’s two small windows. One window looks out over the sea, the other over land. He peers out and laughs. He removes the sheet from the trash cans, peers in, and laughs. Finally he removes the sheet from the armchair, revealing Hamm, who wears a dressing gown, blacked-out glasses, and a large blood-stained handkerchief over his face. Clov laughs.

Hamm wakes and laments, “Can there be misery loftier than mine?” He has the grandiose air of a former man of influence who has fallen on hard times. For Hamm and Clov—and Hamm’s parents, Nagg and Nell, who live in the two trash cans and occasionally surface to ask for food and tell stories—there is no life outside their shelter; inside, their resources are drying up and their health is in decline. Hamm is blind and cannot stand; Clov cannot sit down; Nagg and Nell can barely see or hear. The end is coming, though not nearly fast enough for Hamm. At the same time, it is terrifyingly near.

The daily master/servant games Hamm and Clov play serve as distractions from their existential anxiety. Hamm orders Clov to look out the sea window, look out the land window, and look out both again. He demands that Clov push him around the room’s perimeter and then return him to the exact center. Hamm amuses himself by sparring with Clov, abusing his parents, and composing his “chronicle”: an account in which a man begs for bread for his son.

Like their resources, Clov’s patience with Hamm is dwindling, and he often threatens to leave. Clov escapes to his kitchen whenever possible to find solace and order—only to be called back by Hamm’s increasingly desperate whistle. At last, Clov makes preparations to depart. Dressed for the road he stands, arrested, at the doorway, neither leaving nor responding to Hamm’s calls, as Hamm steels himself to face the end alone.
Director’s Remarks

By Carey Perloff


*Endgame* is just one day in the life of Clov and Hamm, and yet it’s a day crowded with incident. Clov figures out he has fleas, so there must be at least one thing left alive in the world. Then he discovers a rat alive in the kitchen—this is big news. Then he looks out the window and he thinks maybe he sees a little boy, and that’s a disaster because maybe there’s a future. Clov and Hamm don’t want to believe there’s a future, because then they’d have to speculate on the meaning of life. Hamm gets wheeled around the room; he is cursed by his father; his father tells a long and bizarre Irish tale; Hamm tells his story; and finally we’re a little further along on the road of life than we were an hour and a half before.

There is something both hilarious and heartbreaking about the enormous longing embedded in Beckett’s characters. Trapped in frustrated lives seemingly devoid of meaning, they long (like all of us) for escape, for love, for release, for transcendence, for amusement, for a better way to pass the time. “What is there to keep me here?” muses Clov. “The dialogue,” Hamm quickly asserts, reminding us that, when we watch Beckett, we are not only watching life being lived, we are spectators at a play. In *Endgame* Beckett introduces us to a consummate “ham” actor, who begins by saying, “Me—to play,” as he attempts to launch a final great performance in the losing chess match of his life. There are wonderful metatheatrical jokes scattered throughout the script, as when Clov turns his telescope toward the audience and says, “I see a multitude . . . in transports . . . of joy. (Beat) Now that’s what I call a magnifier!”

Beckett’s work is simultaneously very rich psychologically and hugely entertaining theatrically. His characters are trapped within the confines of the play the way we are trapped within the confines of our lives, and unlike characters in a naturalistic play, Beckett’s characters *comment* on their strange fate as theatrical actors. Beckett uses the metaphor of the “long run” in the theater to explore the repetitive pattern of everyday life. He asks us to imagine ourselves as actors who repeat the same lines in the same
order again and again in the “play” of our lives; a part of us wishes the run would end and we could be released from the inferno of our own personal play, and part of us lives in terror of the moment when that play will be over and we will cease to exist.

This is the central metaphor of Beckett’s brilliant and rarely produced Play, which presents three adults who endlessly repeat the conditions of their marital infidelity from someplace in limbo long after the affair has ended. Each is permitted to speak only when a light shines in his or her face, a light that is both intrusive and life-giving, both the light of the stage and the light of the sun. The light, which the actors in the first production called “Sam” in honor of its author, exposes the outrageous lies and sudden, desperate moments of honesty that occur when we have to confess our bad behavior.

By juxtaposing Play with Endgame, we contrast two Beckettian explorations of marriage and family. In Play we see the corrosive effects of longing and betrayal on a marriage; in Endgame we see both the salutary effects of a shared life (in the relationship of Nagg and Nell) and the complex tug-of-war between fathers and sons (Nagg/Hamm and Hamm/Clov). Both are comedies with dark underbellies; as Nell mordantly observes, “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness.”

As I looked at these plays and looked at Beckett’s notebooks (which are terrifyingly meticulous—he would count exactly the number of steps that Clov needed to take to get to the ladder to get to the window) it made me go back to something that Clov says in the play: “I love order. It’s my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place under the last dust.” I think that’s why we make theater: Out of the chaos of the world we try to make a little order. We try to repeat this, we try to make it beautiful and precise and complete, but something always falls apart or something happens with the audience that changes it, and we finish, and then we get to start all over again.

Excerpted from remarks made on the first day of rehearsal at A.C.T., April 9, 2012.
Absent, Always
An Interview with Actor Bill Irwin

By Emily Hoffman

In *Endgame*, Bill Irwin, one of our country’s finest physical comedians, spends the duration of his performance sitting in a chair. “I don’t think I’ve ever done that before,” he says, “not for very long anyway. Except maybe for sections of shows where I have been looking out of a trunk or peeking out of a drawer or around a corner for some reason.” The challenge of such enforced stillness to an actor is daunting, Irwin admits: “If you’re totally immobile and you have blacked-out glasses on, it can be difficult to convey the story beyond the footlights.” On the first day of rehearsal, though, it was clear what weapons remained in Irwin’s arsenal, mobile or not: wily eyebrows, pointed inclinations of the head, aggressive arms. The man has comedy in his cartilage.

A graduate of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College and an early member of San Francisco’s legendary Pickle Family Circus, Irwin has been clowning around to great acclaim for the past 40 years, creating a host of original productions that exploit his unique blend of acting and clowning: the Tony Award–winning *Fool Moon* (seen at A.C.T. in 1998 and 2001) and *Largely/New York, Mr. Fox: Ruminations on the Life of a Clown*, and, most recently, *Scapin*, which delighted A.C.T. audiences as the kick-off to our 2010–11 season, to name but a few.

Irwin has had an equally illustrious career as a “straight” actor (in 2005 he received a Tony Award for his portrayal of George in the Broadway revival of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?), and he has earned a reputation as a particularly adept interpreter of Beckett’s works. He has twice performed in *Waiting for Godot*—a play that has haunted and driven him, like many great actors, for years—first as Lucky at Lincoln Center Theater with Steve Martin, Robin Williams, and F. Murray Abraham, and more recently as Vladimir on Broadway with Nathan Lane, John Goodman, and John Glover. He has performed his own adaptation of Beckett’s beautiful prose work *Texts for Nothing* at The Public Theater, Classic Stage Company, and at A.C.T. in 2001. Now there’s *Endgame*.

Irwin admits that he was reluctant when director Carey Perloff approached him about Beckett’s end-of-life play. It wasn’t until he recognized how funny it really is that he understood its poignancy. When we spoke to Irwin, *Endgame*’s immediacy was particularly sharp in his life: He was generous enough to call in from the home of his
ailing 90-year-old parents, whom he was visiting. “We move less at the end of life,” he observed. “And we wonder whether it’s time for a pain-killer. . . . It’s not abstract.”

As a clown, what draws you to Beckett—and to *Endgame* in particular?

Well, *Endgame* is a very funny play, and I didn’t get that for a long time. I thought it was sort of lugubrious and self-serious. It is a very serious play, but it’s also a very funny play, full of straight-out comic business. In doing Beckett’s plays, you always feel this responsibility to the hugeness of the questions and the magnitude of the existential issues that the playwright is usually associated with, but you can only get there by means of absolutely believable emotional exchanges between people.

Beckett’s stage directions are very precise and very helpful when you understand the code, but until then they can be unhelpful. The description of Clov’s action at the beginning of the play is a certain kind of clinical, telegraphic description of a very funny little comic sequence. But it doesn’t necessarily feel funny as you read it. Like all of Beckett’s plays, a lot of *Endgame* is about memory: “I’m at the window: Hell, I forgot the ladder. I’ve got one thing: Oh hell, I forgot the other.” It is a kind of silent movie sequence at the very beginning.

And the gag gets repeated later in the play—when Clov comes in with the telescope, for instance.

Right. Like great clown material, they repeat with little variations. When Clov finally gets up on the ladder and says, “Oh, oops, I dropped the telescope—I did it on purpose,” Hamm and Clov get into a wild, almost giddy little section that’s very uncharacteristic of what people think of when they think of *Endgame*.

You’ve played Vladimir, one of the eternally waiting tramps in *Waiting for Godot*—I wonder what you make of Beckett having suggested that Hamm and Clov could be Vladimir and Estragon at the end of their lives.

I’ve heard that, and more recently people have been saying Hamm and Clov are like Lucky and Pozzo at home. But, of course, as you get deeper into this play, it’s completely its own animal, its own set of relationships.

Do you think Hamm is cruel? Is he evil?

He’s human. . . . He longs for intimacy but isn’t really interested in it. He longs for it but isn’t equipped for it.

Hamm, as the therapists would say, doesn’t like an equal relationship. He prefers—and I think this is deep in human wiring: we *all* prefer—hierarchical relationships, where people are below us or people are above us. Things are clear this way. But at the same time, there’s a part of the human soul that longs for equality.
So is he cruel or evil? He’s not an attractive personality. But there’s always that question: Can anything really get done without somebody in charge? We revere the idea of democratic structures and group decision making and everybody being satisfied, but in fact . . .

This is deep in Beckett’s work, it seems to me: The master/servant relationship is something he’s really preoccupied with. His work strikes a chord because we’re all preoccupied with that relationship.

Is Hamm evil? That’s a particularly pointed question because I’ve just been jokingly referring to my father as Hamm as he wheeled by in his motorized scooter chair. I don’t think he is. The genius of Beckett’s writing is that Hamm is a very compacted portrait of selfness, just completely engrossed in himself and his own needs. And, guess what? That’s holding a mirror up to nature. We’re all like that in different ways. Hamm’s opening, signature line: “Can there be (yawn) misery loftier than mine?” That’s basically the human question: “Can anybody really suffer as much as I do? I know that a lot of people have it pretty bad—but compared to me?”

How do you make Hamm sympathetic?

It’s tricky with a character who’s totally solipsistic, totally bound up in himself. It taps into a history of characters, starting with Miles Gloriosus in the classical tradition—the
asshole boss. Every sitcom has a guy whose grandiosity is funny and recognizable. We all recognize what it feels like to be at the receiving end of that kind of complete self-absorption. This character starts out at an almost cartoonish magnitude (“Can there be suffering loftier than mine?”) and, as in all really great dramatic writing, he reveals need along the way. He reveals that he’s not as self-sufficient or as removed from the rest of the world, from other human beings, as he would like to be. I’m not sure he ever gets sympathetic, but we see ourselves in him.

How would you describe that need?

It’s a need for intimacy, existing within an inability, an absolute contempt for the same. There’s a quote I carry around in my wallet, from a book review of a French historian’s account of the rise and fall of Communism. The book review ended with a quote about how every human being longs for community of the sort that no political system is really built to allow. We’re all looking for the thing that we absolutely couldn’t stand to find. Here it is, on yellowed newspaper: “It seems to be our destiny as modern men to live in an age that ‘creates the need for a world beyond the bourgeoisie and beyond Capital, a world in which a genuine human community can flourish.’ A need that no society can ever satisfy.”

Endgame seems to present a day that is tortuous precisely because it is like any other day; at the same time, it seems full of incident. Is this day, for Hamm and Clov, different from any other day?

I remember when I was doing Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? sometimes somebody would say afterward, “I think these two characters play these games exactly the same every night.” That person obviously feels an attachment to this interpretation, but it doesn’t seem very interesting to me.

Something is happening. Hamm’s coming to an end. Clov is leaving. Nagg and Nell are dying. It’s time to end. And the resources—there are no more bonbons. “You’ll never get another one.” Hamm is facing scarcity, asking for something to be said, asking for a kiss.

There’s a particularity to this very day even though Hamm says at one point, “It’s a day like any other day, isn’t it Clov?” He seems to need to be reassured that it is. Because that means that life will go on, even though it’s unbearable. But is it the last day? Beckett doesn’t give a clear answer.

Here’s a question for you, dramaturgically. Nick Gabriel [who plays Clov] and I have talked about this a lot. In that very last moment of the play, does Hamm know that Clov is still in the room? With his very last words, “You remain,” is Hamm talking to his handkerchief, as he seems to be, or is he talking to Clov, who’s there but not answering?
It’s a big question.

Another interpretive question, and it’s one that will always exist: Is this the story of the end of one person who, like some human beings, thinks the end of his life means the end of the world, or is it really the end of the world? Is it some post-nuclear-apocalyptic moment and indeed all of the other outposts of humanity are disappearing except the few bits of food that Hamm and Clov have in their dilapidated building? Is it really the end of the world as it will happen someday, or is Endgame about the end of one consciousness, which happens every day?

I don’t know the answer, and maybe there is no answer. That’s one of the great things about Beckett’s plays. Often you think, “Oh, this is a writer who’s just realizing the inevitability of death.” But his explorations of consciousness are so much more complex than that. For instance, when Hamm says, “Enough, it’s time it ended, in the shelter, too,” it’s always seemed to me that Hamm is touching or beating or somehow referring to his head. The whole play, in a certain sense, takes place inside of a head—two windows, two eyes, two different parts of consciousness; your memory of your parents, your irritation with your parents, but at the same time your need for them and the place they occupy in your consciousness; the two parts of consciousness having to ask each other to do things: Have you looked? Have you checked yet?

Is it grim? Yeah, it’s grim. Is it grim like the end of humanity is grim or grim like the end of one guy’s consciousness is grim? For Hamm, for some of us, maybe there’s not much difference.

Does the answer to that question influence how you play Hamm?

Oh yes. These end of life questions . . . my wife’s mother died over Christmas; my parents are near the end of their lives; and other deaths have come around us. Death is always around us. It’s part of life. Some people, some consciousnesses, seem to expire with a sense of the world going on without them, and that’s great—they’ve played their part. Some consciousnesses are maybe more like Hamm and can’t really conceive of the world going on without them. So for them, their end is the world’s end.

Do you have a favorite line in the play? Beckett’s favorite was, “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness.”

I love that line, and I’ll be interested to hear how it plays every night. But it’s probably not going to end up being my favorite. A line that will rarely leave me alone from Waiting for Godot is, “Was I sleeping while the others suffered?” In Endgame, you can’t escape this line: “You know what it is? I was never there, absent always.”

When I was in my 20s, a friend used that line in a projection exercise we did in a theater company we belonged to. He said to me, describing me, “I was never there. Absent, always.” It’s haunted me for all the decades since, and for the longest time I didn’t know where it was from. It’s from this play, and now it’s my job to speak those lines.
Essential Choices

An Interview with Scenic Designer Dan Ostling

By Emily Hoffman

As a longtime member of Lookingglass Theatre Company, a Chicago-based ensemble known for its attention to spectacle and physicality in its storytelling, Dan Ostling is no stranger to playwrights who come into a rehearsal room with strong ideas about design. His ability to negotiate the specific visions of such writers has served the Tony Award-nominated designer well during his recent work on *Endgame* and *Play*. Beckett was very precise in describing how he wanted his plays staged and was notorious for shutting down productions that did not comply with his wishes. Since his death, his estate has ensured that productions remain faithful to his text. This has not fazed Ostling, who is tackling Beckett for the first time.

In the weeks leading up to the first rehearsal, Ostling was kind enough to talk to us about the challenges of designing *Endgame* and *Play*, the Beckett estate, and his love for live theater.

Did the specificity of Beckett’s stage directions about the set give you pause when you started designing?

I think our designs are respectful of what he asked for so, no, I didn’t worry too much. I work with a lot of people like that: who devise shows and have very strong ideas of what they want scenically. They don’t write with the design being a separate element; the design is very integrated from the beginning. So there is something about Beckett’s writing that feels like home to me. I don’t find what he wants to be limiting. I think that once you climb into and understand what he’s getting at, there is a huge world of choices that need to be made.

Have you researched the scenic designs from other productions of *Endgame* and *Play*?

In general, I never look at other productions. I always tell my students, “Just don’t do it.” Even if you look at other designs and you don’t like them, they’re still in your craw, and if there is anything you end up using, it just sort of bothers you; it bothers me.

But I actually did look at other designs for this production. Not at the beginning, but a little later in the process, mostly because there are some really specific elements Beckett calls for. I didn’t care overall what those designs looked like, but I was very interested
in what people did with the trash cans, what people did with the ladder, what people did with the urns.

Beckett deeply loved Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers. To me, the plays have unbelievable timing. They are very funny. The worst thing you can do is see a long, humorless Beckett—it’s not what he was writing. There is an incredible weight, but you don’t lean into it. It moves much quicker than undergrads often think it moves. That timing—it’s like working on an opera. How big can that ladder be? How many steps up? You might think, “Me and my big ideas,” but you have to realize people have to get up there in literally 15 seconds. You can’t say, “We’ll vamp or something.” The process has been very interesting. That is the kind of thing I looked for: How tall is the ladder in different productions? The trash cans: Often they are unlike any trash can you’ve ever seen.

Sometimes they’re sunk into the floor so the actor can stand in a trap.

Or they’re old-fashioned tin trash cans, but people can’t fit inside them unless they’re made extra large. But when they’re extra large, they no longer look like trash cans. People often read Beckett and think it’s so abstract, that it means something. I actually think he wrote exactly what he wanted. It’s not that abstract. It’s not that weird. We’re not the Jetsons in outer space. He made an essential choice about action. He made an essential choice about environment. I

Scenic designer Dan Ostling’s earliest experimental sketches for Endgame
don’t think it’s that opaque. *Endgame* is actually quite specific and based in the human reality of what it’s like to live on earth and get old and get sick. So the last thing I want to do is put something onstage that is false. Like a garbage can that is false: stuck in the ground or extra big in order to fit someone in it. To me that is the ultimate sin: to have anything onstage that feels false.

**Do you feel similarly about the three urns in *Play***?

With the urns, I began with the question: How can we have the actors in there in a way that is physically healthy and yet controlling? So I started to research ergonomic sitting. I had the prop shop buy one of those kneeling chairs that pushes your torso forward, and I played with that and took pictures of people sitting in them, and then we had the actors come into the shop and we fit them into chairs. At first, they were very resistant, but when we got them into the chairs they thought they were comfortable. We are no longer using those chairs, but we started with the human body: keeping it compact but not unhealthy.

**Looking at the design, the urns remind me of beehives.**

A big part of being a designer is keeping your eyes open and reacting to happy accidents. When I was modeling the urns for the set model, I wanted to get something that was to scale that still felt like an urn, that felt real. So I went to a couple of different bead stores and I found these beautiful African beads. I liked their brass and the patina on them felt great. The urns in *Play* are often done with chipped plaster. I thought the patina on the beads was interesting; there was something about it that had an ancient echo to it. [Director] Carey [Perloff] loved the beads and loved that shape and thought they felt like funeral urns, so they’ve become the basis of the design. The shape will be a little different—a little longer, a little more elongated—but they will be coiled patina brass.
Since the three characters in *Play* are supposed to be “so lost to age and aspect that they seem almost part of the urns,” will the actors’ faces be shiny like the brass?

In many productions they are inseparable from the urn, but we aren’t doing that. Their makeup and some design choices will pull them away from—

Simply looking like actors sitting in urns?

Exactly. They will look gaunt and ghostlike—dusty—so that the urns pop a little more.

It’s funny that designers often pledge their allegiance to Beckett and fidelity to his directions, yet there is always something that they might not agree with. Sometimes it’s little and sometimes it’s big; they each draw the line in a different place.

Theater, by its very nature, is not definitive. Film is definitive. You made the film and that is the film. You can remake the film, but that is a different thing: Then it’s a new version of the film. That is not how theater works. Scripts are meant to be interpreted. They are meant to come to life, to react to the times we’re living in, the styles, the issues that are on people’s minds at any given moment. I don’t think Beckett meant to limit his plays so that they only mean what they meant in the 1950s. I think he created something that could echo and could resonate throughout time.

I had an incredible experience a couple of years ago: A friend of mine was dying of prostate cancer and he was sort of doing okay but one day he just had a turn for the worse. I went over to his house and he couldn’t get up anymore and he turned to me and said, “Yesterday, I thought I was tired and I went to lie down and now I can’t get up and I know I will never get up. Yesterday when I lay down I didn’t know I would never get up.” It blew my mind because it is literally from *Endgame*. Literally. It is exactly what
Hamm says to Clov. One day you're tired and you say I am going to rest a bit, and you open your eyes and it’s black. He says the same about getting up.

Beckett has written something that will forever resonate, because we are all mortal. I don’t think he wants to limit that. That being said, he had a very clear idea of the world he was creating and to me it is connected to what I’m talking about: Even though it is tempting to find a theme or a meaning, I don’t think we need that. I think you actually just do the play and are honest with what it means to you and what it means to society today. I don’t think there needs to be some big concept.

On the other hand, I think that you can go to wild places if you keep your eye on the play. Frank Galati talked about wanting to do an *Endgame* in the ’80s with Hamm and Clov being lovers in the time of AIDS. You know, I think you could do that and that could be . . . the reality is *that’s* what people were living at that time. That’s not some concept, some abstraction. For Frank Galati, an openly gay man living in the late ’80s, that was the world he was living in. I can’t imagine Beckett would have had anything but pride that his play continued to feel fresh at that moment.

**In light of that, what are the interpretive choices you’ve made in your design? Particularly in terms of the way the room is situated in relationship to the audience and the proscenium.**

In theater, the most exciting thing is that you are suspended between reality in the play and reality in the theater. That is why I go. I am not interested in losing myself completely in the play. To me, the vibration that happens between completely believing in the reality of these characters and being aware of the people next to me [in the audience] as human beings and that I am a human being—that just gets me all hot and bothered. I think that is the world Beckett lived in.

In *Endgame* Clov turns his telescope on the audience and says, “I see a multitude in transports of joy.”

Right. First and foremost, you are in the theater. In *Endgame*, you spend two hours sitting there. You are two hours closer to the grave. That is all that happens. You are and the characters are—and the actors are. If you can actually feel that “I am dying” feeling, that connects us to the characters and the people around us and to the world. We become more compassionate, better people when we are aware of existence. It’s the same with *Waiting for Godot*. What do you do? You wait for Godot, the same as the characters.
“You Must Go On”
A Brief Biography of Samuel Beckett

by Elizabeth Brodersen

Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it’s me?

—Texts for Nothing, by Samuel Beckett

Samuel Barclay Beckett was born in Foxrock, near Dublin, on Good Friday, April 13, 1906, the second son of an Anglo-Irish middle-class Protestant family. Beckett’s beloved father was a hearty fellow who loved going to the races, swimming with his sons in Dublin Bay, and hiking the nearby mountains for hours on end. His mother, on the other hand, was a sternly critical, strait-laced woman prone to violent outbursts of temper and bouts of dark depression. Beckett was close to all the members of his family, and their deaths would later have a profound impact on the evolution of his views on life, love, and art.

Although shy and occasionally solitary, young Sam Beckett enjoyed an active, happy childhood. At 14 he left home to attend Portora Royal School, where he excelled at sports, chess, music, and the execution of practical jokes. At 17 he went up to Trinity College, Dublin, where he studied French and Italian and developed a love for literature. His free time was often spent at the Abbey Theatre, where he particularly enjoyed Sean O’Casey’s Juno and the Paycock and The Plough and the Stars, as well as all of John Millington Synge, who Beckett later claimed was the dramatist who most influenced his own work. He also appreciated the lighter fare of the music hall and circus and the silent films of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, whose physical comedy and humor-tinged pathos (and archetypal bowler hat) would so indelibly mark Beckett’s later characters. Despite his apparently lively social life, however, he became increasingly withdrawn and depressed, disturbed by the suffering he saw around him on the streets of Dublin.

In 1928 Beckett took a post as lecturer in English at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he joined the circle of fellow expatriate Irishman and lover of words James Joyce, who became his friend and mentor and inspired much of Beckett’s early prose. Beckett’s first published work began to appear, including essays on Joyce and Proust, as well as his first poem, “Whoroscope,” a brilliant 98-line deconstruction of Descartes, written on a whim over dinner for a poetry contest.
In 1930, Beckett returned briefly to Ireland to teach, but soon discovered that he hated the academic life. Deeply depressed by a bitter argument with his mother, who threw him out of the house in disgust after reading his writing, he quit his post to travel across Europe. When his father died in June 1933, Beckett was devastated by the loss of his closest companion: “I can’t write about him, I can only walk the fields and climb the ditches after him.”

After two years in London undergoing intensive psychotherapy, and one last terrible row with his mother, Beckett left the United Kingdom for good, and in 1937 he settled in Paris, where he became a familiar fixture on the literary and artistic scene. By 1938 he had published *More Kicks Than Pricks*, a collection of ten stories (1934); followed by the poetry collection *Echo’s Bones* (1935) and his first novel, *Murphy* (1938). In January of that year, however, he was deeply shaken by the random cruelty of a vicious assault: One night while walking with friends, he was stabbed by a pimp, whose knife narrowly missed Beckett’s heart. When he later visited the assailant in prison to ask him why he had attacked him, the man could only reply, “I don’t know, monsieur. I’m sorry.”

While recuperating in the hospital, Beckett became friends with a young piano student, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, who would become his lifelong companion (and, in 1961, his wife). As the threat of war loomed, Beckett decided to remain in Paris with Suzanne instead of returning to neutral Ireland; appalled by the Nazis’ treatment of Jews, they joined an underground Resistance cell, for whom Beckett translated smuggled intelligence reports. In 1942, betrayed by a mercenary French priest, they fled Paris just minutes ahead of the Gestapo. Settling in the hill town of Roussillon in the Vaucluse, Beckett waited out the rest of the war working as a farmer, helping the Resistance, and working on the novel *Watt* (published in 1953).

With the cessation of hostilities in Europe in 1945, Beckett visited Ireland briefly before returning to France as a volunteer in a military hospital in Saint-Lô, where he was shocked by the devastation and misery caused by the war. In the winter of 1945–46, he finally returned to his beloved Paris, where the most creatively productive period of his life was about to begin.

From Frenzy to Impasse

While visiting his mother in 1946, Beckett had a revelation that would utterly transform the way he looked at his life and work. Standing in her room, he became suddenly, glaringly aware of his own stupidity: “*Molloy* and the other [volumes in the ‘trilogy’] came to me the day I became aware of my own folly. Only then did I begin to write the things I feel.” Struck by an overwhelming compulsion to simplify, he determined to explore his own inner world as the source of his writing, to focus on universal explorations of human poverty, failure, exile, and loss.

At the same time, he decided to write only in French, as a way to “cut away the excess, to strip away the color,” to experiment with language with a greater simplicity and objec-
tivity. Galvanized by these decisions, Beckett commenced upon a “frenzy of writing,” producing between 1946 and 1949 his greatest prose works—the three narratives known as “the trilogy,” *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*—as well as the novel *Mercier et Camier* and several stories.

With the completion of *The Unnamable* in 1949, however, the brief spurt of productivity had been spent, and Beckett found himself inexplicably unable to write. In *Three Dialogues*, his famous 1949 text on painting, Beckett describes the profound frustration of this period in terms of the artist’s existential dilemma: “There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.”

Beckett attempted to break through this impasse by turning his hand to dramatic writing. “In search of respite from the wasteland of prose,” he soon produced the plays *Eleutheria* and *Waiting for Godot*.

In 1950, Beckett’s mother succumbed to Parkinson’s disease. Stricken with grief while watching his mother’s downward slide into dementia and death, and still lost “in the doldrums that followed the ‘trilogy,’” he worked sporadically at several short texts, struggling to record the antithetical desire for cessation and continuation that was to plague his thoughts, and illuminate his writing, throughout his life. Picking up the ending of *The Unnamable* (“I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on”) virtually uninterrupted, he began the first of his 13 *Texts for Nothing* (published in *Nouvelles et textes pour rien* in 1955 and adapted and performed at A.C.T. by Bill Irwin in 2001): “Suddenly, no, at last, long last I couldn’t any more, I couldn’t go on. Someone said, You can’t stay here. I couldn’t stay there and I couldn’t go on.”

Simultaneously author and subject, the speaker of the *Texts* struggles in vain to identify the disembodied voices that run through his imagination, defiantly proclaiming the anthem of Beckett’s favorite philosopher: “I think; therefore, I am.” But just who exactly is the “I” who thinks and, therefore, exists? In Beckett’s art, as in life, there is no easy answer.

To the Stage

By 1951, at the age of 45, Beckett’s work remained little known outside a circle of avant-garde artists. Eventually picked up by Jérôme Lindon’s Éditions de Minuit, the trilogy appeared between 1951 and 1953; English editions, painstakingly translated by Beckett himself, soon followed in the United States and caught the attention of American academics. Encouraged by this nascent success, Beckett became preoccupied with trying to get his dramatic work produced. Eventually the French actor/director Roger Blin agreed to produce *Godot*, and in 1953 the premiere production at Paris’s Théâtre de Babylone was a *succès de scandale*, prompting fistfights among perplexed audience members waiting for a plot and not entirely certain they weren’t the victims of some elaborate theatrical hoax. Similar controversy followed the London, Miami, and New York productions.
Beckett found himself an instant international celebrity, and *Godot* entered the theatrical canon as an existential classic.

Discomfited by the attention and in despair over his continuing inability to write, he built a small home in Ussy, about 60 miles outside Paris, to create a haven where he could work undisturbed. “I feel very tired and stupid, more and more so, in spite of my often resting in the country,” he wrote to a friend, “and I feel more and more that I shall perhaps never be able to write anything else. . . . I can’t go on and I can’t get back. Perhaps another play someday.”

More plays did follow, notably *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), *Act without Words i & ii* (1959), *Happy Days* (1961), and *Play* (1963), as well as the prose narrative *How It Is* (1961), a film, radio and television plays, and a few pieces of short prose. By his death in 1989, Beckett had become such an avant-garde icon that every one of his nondramatic works had also been adapted for the stage, with and without his permission. Yet he never felt that he had conquered what he called the “agonies of galloping speechlessness.”

In his life as in his writing, Beckett stripped down to the bare essentials of human existence, living out his days in modest simplicity. Even when honored with the Nobel Prize in 1969, he refused to attend the award ceremony and gave the prize money away to needy artists. Although he flatly refused to grant interviews or public appearances throughout his life, he graciously agreed to meet anyone interested enough to show up at his neighborhood café for an espresso.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the mountains of words written about him, Beckett persistently resisted analysis of his life and work. “If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them,” he wrote. “And provide their own aspirin.” Beckett’s work was his life. “Nothing matters but the writing,” he insisted. “There has been nothing else worthwhile.”

Acutely aware of the brevity and ultimate meaninglessness of human existence, Beckett nevertheless struggled on, completing his last work, the short prose text *Stirrings Still*, in 1987 and ’88, before passing away in ’89 at the age of 83. “I couldn’t have done it otherwise,” he once said. “ Gone on, I mean. I could not have gone through the awful wretched mess of life without having left a stain upon the silence.”

“In Such a Place, and in Such a World”

By Michael Paller

In November 1957, Alan Schneider, soon to direct the American premiere of *Endgame*, wrote to Samuel Beckett that the *New York Times* might ask him to write an article about the play prior to its opening. If he wrote it, he promised to run it by Beckett first. Beckett replied that he had no interest in discussing the meaning of his work with either journalists or critics. In any case, the play was simple as far as he was concerned: “Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together as stated, *nec tecum nec sin te*, in such a place and in such a world, that’s all I can manage, more than I could.”

*Nec tecum nec sin te*: I can’t live with you or without you. Hamm and Clov’s predicament in *Endgame* is as human and as recognizable a situation as there is. Later, Schneider wrote, “Beckett himself had always stressed that he was writing about what he termed a ‘local situation,’ i.e., Hamm and Clov (as well as Nagg and Nell) were individual personalities operating in a given set of circumstances. They were not to be considered as abstraction or symbols, or as representing anything other than themselves.” This was Beckett’s intent in all of his work.

For a long time, it seemed impossible for critics to consider Beckett without invoking such terms as “abstract,” “absurd,” and “existential.” Thanks largely to these efforts, his work acquired a reputation, especially among those who hadn’t seen the plays, of being difficult, dry, unapproachable—a forbidding, dolorous evening in the theater.

Beckett became famous with *Waiting for Godot*. First produced in a time and a place—Paris, 1953—where the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus was all the rage, its stark, stripped-down quality, in which Vladimir and Estragon wait in a desolate place for a figure who never arrives, seemed to dramatize precisely the condition that the existentialists were describing: a world devoid of meaning until we give it one, in which we stand paralyzed before a universe that refuses to acknowledge us.

Had audiences known Beckett’s novels, at the time languishing unread in warehouses, they would have discovered that he had little interest in existentialism per se or in making oracular pronouncements about man’s position in the universe. Abstractions held little attraction for him. Waiting for an unknown Resistance member to deliver a message, or hiding in a small town in Vichy France, not knowing whether the Nazis or the
Allies would arrive first: concrete experiences like these interested him, because he had lived through them. Conditions in a Normandy town called St.-Lô, destroyed by the Germans in 1944, interested him. In 1945 he lived there among a traumatized populace in a bombed-out landscape, serving as a volunteer quartermaster and interpreter in a Red Cross hospital. By all accounts his work was determined and unstinting. His last official act was providing poison to kill the rats that threatened the hospital’s maternity and children’s wards.
Beckett the Disciple

James Joyce encouraged the young writers in his circle, including Beckett, to write about what they knew. “In the particular,” he told them, “is contained the universal.” Beckett eventually freed himself from the gravitational pull of Joyce’s influence (no two writers are more unalike), but he heeded this advice. His plays, poems, and prose are replete with echoes of his life, but he stripped them of their external references so that what’s left are the experiences themselves. In this sense, his work is abstracted but not abstract.

Beckett knew well, for example, the complicated ties that connect Great Man and disciple. In his Parisian flat, Joyce made himself the center of attention, positioning his chair in the middle of the room, the better to command and regale the admirers he cultivated. Beckett became one of his most ardent helpers, making himself useful in a hundred ways: running errands, taking dictation, performing research, writing an article in praise of the then-unpublished *Work in Progress* (which became *Finnegan’s Wake*), all without pay. He went so far as to wear the same kind of patent leather shoes that Joyce wore, and in the same size, though Joyce’s feet were much smaller than his. The result was corns and calluses, and for as long as Beckett put himself in Joyce’s shoes, he walked in considerable pain. Beckett’s intense emotional bond was not equally felt by his idol, however, who was appreciative of Beckett’s devotion but saved his love for his family. He was, as one of Beckett’s biographers, Deirdre Bair, writes, “a man who had little need for relationships except when they could be useful to him.”

Beckett: Caretaker and Son

Beckett also knew about the relationship between ill person and caregiver. When his beloved father, Bill, suffered a heart attack in 1933, Beckett lovingly cared for him, bathed and shaved him. It was the first time in his life, Bair notes, that Beckett felt needed and useful within his family. His relationship with his mother, Mae, was more complicated. She dominated his life during his Dublin childhood and kept it up when he was a grown man. They could hardly be together without simmering in mutual resentful silence or bursting into vehement recrimination. Yet when he was stabbed in a Parisian street in 1938, Mae rushed to his hospital bedside and sat vigil for many days. Her action healed the breach between them, and Beckett wrote of this episode to a friend, “What a relationship!” The reconciliation was temporary, however, and he spent much psychic energy in the coming years trying to separate himself from her. When she was dying in 1950, it was Beckett’s turn to sit by the bedside, although whether out of love or duty, resentment or relief, or some unknowable combination, is hard to tell.

Similarly he cared for his aunt Cissie Sinclair and his brother, Frank, when they were dying. Stiffened by years of rheumatoid arthritis, Cissie was confined to a wheelchair (“Straighten up the statue,” she cheerfully instructed visitors), and Beckett would push her along the paths near her house. She had a telescope which she trained on the bay to watch the ships pass and the birds wheel. In addition to Beckett’s visits, it was one of the few pleasures of her final days.
In 1954, Frank was diagnosed with lung cancer. Beckett ministered to him for four long, dreadful months. He described the experience in a series of letters: “And so soon it will have been another day and all the secret things inside a little worse than they were and nothing much been noticed,” he wrote, and later, “Things drag on, a little more awful every day, and with so many days yet probably to run what awfulness to look forward to,” and, “Waiting [is] not so bad if you can fidget about. This is like waiting tied to a chair.” Shortly after these two deaths, he began *Fin de partie*, the original French version of *Endgame*.

**Beckett and Women**

Beckett also knew the pangs and pleasures of marital affairs. He had many of varied length and intensity during the 51 years that Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil was his companion and his wife, and Beckett’s biographers speculate that she knew of at least some of them. In 1961, he and Suzanne married after being together for almost a quarter century. Beckett went through with it because he wanted to ensure that Suzanne, who had no rights of inheritance as a common-law wife and had done much to bring his work to the world’s attention, would have a sufficient income if he died. James Knowlson, Beckett’s authorized biographer, suggests that the marriage had a devastating effect on Barbara Bray, a young British woman with whom Beckett was then involved (and continued to see following the wedding). Beckett had doubtless hurt Suzanne with this affair; with the marriage, he injured Bray. And Beckett, the politest of men, never wanted to hurt anybody.

**Reality of Situation and Character**

When actors asked Beckett questions about his plays, his response tended to emphasize the reality of character and situation. When he directed *Endgame* in Berlin in 1967, he told the actors to play it as if the fourth wall of realistic drama stood between them and the audience. Clov’s one wish, he told them, is to get back to his kitchen, while Hamm’s is to detain him. That simple conflict, he said, was the center of the play. It had nothing to do with philosophy. He told actors in early productions that Hamm and Clov were *Godot’s* Vladimir and Estragon late in their lives—also that they were himself and Suzanne when they were going through a period best characterized as *nec tecum nec sin te*.

However one describes them, the characters in *Endgame* and *Play*, and in all of Beckett, are human—painfully human. Beckett himself was prone to depression and despair, but those who knew him attest to his dogged spirit and determination to go on. “Hamm,” he told the actors in Berlin, “says no to nothingness.” This is human, too, and noble. One thing it’s not is abstract.
On Play

By Marjorie Perloff

A man and two women—wife and mistress—caught in the eternal triangle. Each woman thinks she is The One and despises her rival. The man has accommodated both sexually—"What a male!" says W1 (the wife), admiring his potency—but seems passive and unengaged as the ladies duke it out. And these are indeed "ladies" with respect to class: genteel and well-off, both are given to such phrases as "I rang for Erskine" (the butler) or "I suggested a little jaunt to celebrate, to the Riviera or our darling Grand Canary."

But Play is hardly a drawing-room comedy, not even a parodic one. The three-way catfight, for starters, can only be a language game, for the principals are encased up to their necks in tall urns. And the spotlight (more properly a searchlight) projected on their faces, first in unison, then one at a time, acts as Grand Inquisitor: the light signal turned on W1 ritually prompts her speech until it is interrupted by a shift to W2 or M. He said, she said, with no end in sight. What makes it all so hellish—indeed we are witnessing one of Beckett’s many versions of Dante’s Inferno—is the necessity of telling it again and again: the three characters are forced to remember and rehearse the endless petty details that characterized their responses to the affair. When the curtain finally comes down, following the stage direction “Spot off. Blackout. Five seconds,” we come right to the word “REPEAT.” And now the whole cycle is repeated!

When Play opened in London in June 1963, its first review, written for the Observer, was by Barbara Bray, the former BBC script editor who, having fallen in love with Beckett a few years earlier, moved to Paris to be near him. This move evidently made the playwright so nervous—he guarded his privacy very carefully—that he decided it was time to legalize his union with his companion of more than two decades, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil. They married in 1961 and remained together even though the marriage did little to change the status quo: Soon Sam was seeing Barbara again. And she later made no bones about being the model for the Other Woman in Play.

Given this situation, Bray’s Observer review seems admirably detached and good-humored. “All three characters,” she writes, “are ordinary, mediocre, lamentable: in short painfully familiar. The man, scooting breathlessly back and forth between the two women is perhaps the worst of the bunch: all need and weakness and feeble, if amiable.
duplicit. Of all Beckett’s works so far, this is the one that most openly approaches the everyday experience of any audience. . . . Here are people in all their funny, disgraceful, pitiable fragility, and all the touchingness, in spite of everything, of their efforts to love one another and endure.”

Parodic send-up of the clichés of everyday life? This is how _Play_ is usually perceived, but there is a curious twist. Watch and listen carefully, especially the second time around, and you will become aware of the difference between the man and his two women. While both of them continue to bicker back and forth, the man whom Bray calls “the worst of the bunch” becomes more and more aloof and contemplative, finally murmuring, “To think we were never together.”

What can this mean? M has already admitted that he and W2 have been much together and he has obviously been together with W1, his wife. M’s next line is:

Never woke together, on a May morning, the first to wake to wake the other two. Then in a little dinghy—

And with the repetition of the “little dinghy, on the river, I resting my oars,” M seems to withdraw into his own memories. “Such fantasies,” he remarks, ignoring W1’s complaint about “hellish half-light” and W2’s accusation: “A shade gone. In the head. Just a shade. I doubt it.” “We were not civilized,” M remarks tersely, and a moment later he repeats, “Such fantasies. Then. And now—,” his ruminations leading up to the question, “Am I as much as . . . being seen?”

Being seen by whom? As the drama winds down, M no longer seems aware of either of his two women: His memories have carried him elsewhere. Indeed, M’s references to “dinghy,” “face,” and “such fantasies” recall the language and imagery of _Krapp’s Last Tape_ (1958), _Words and Music_ (1961), and the late television piece . . . _but the clouds . . . ,_ the title of which is taken from one of Beckett’s favorite poems, W. B. Yeats’s elegy for lost youth called “The Tower,” in which death is dismissed with some bravado as “but the clouds of the sky / When the horizon fades, / Or a bird’s sleepy cry / Among the deepening shades.”

In her absorbing memoir _How It Was_, Anne Atik, whose husband, the artist Avigdor Arikha, was one of Beckett’s best friends in Paris, recalls that when Sam came to dinner,
he frequently recited “The Tower,” which he knew by heart. He was especially taken by the stanza:

Does the imagination dwell the most
Upon a woman won or woman lost?
If on the lost, admit you turned aside
From a great labyrinth out of pride,
Cowardice, silly over-subtle thought
Or anything called conscience once;
And that if memory recur, the sun’s
Under eclipse and the day blotted out.

What Yeats meant here is that the most painful of memories is that of the love one could have had but rejected because of caution or cowardice. Beckett picks up on this theme again and again, as in these lines from *Words and Music*:

She comes in the ashes
Who loved could not be won
Or won not loved . . .
Like in that old light
The face in the ashes.

And now comes the cryptic line: “The face. [Pause.] The face. [Pause.] The face. [Pause]. The face.”

*The Face*. In *Play*, where only faces are visible, this motif comes to a head. It is a face that haunts M, but hardly the face of W1 or W2. Fond as he is of both, his memories of them cannot compare to the memory of the love felt for a third woman—the “woman lost,” whose “slit” eyes haunt the protagonist of *Krapp’s Last Tape* and . . . but the clouds . . . In the latter, the protagonist asks, “For had she never once appeared, all that time, would I have, could I have gone on begging all that time?”

According to the biographers, Beckett’s “woman lost” was probably Peggy Sinclair, the young woman he renounced because she was his first cousin and a hopelessly unsuitable match. Peggy was to die of tuberculosis when she was only 23 and Sam 28. The beautiful irony of Beckett’s *Play*, in any case, is that, even as the two women vociferously compete for M, his heart is with a third party. “To think we were never together.” The phrase, repeated again and again, applies to all three characters because none of them are ever truly “together.” Like the prisoners in Dante’s First Circle of Hell, they are fated to repeat their lines again and again, never escaping their “urn burial,” the spotlights that pursue them, or their inner selves. There’s a lot of comedy and cliché in *Play*, but in the end, its love story is only too real.

Marjorie Perloff teaches and writes on 20th- and 21st-century poetry and poetics, both Anglo-American and from a comparatist perspective, as well as on intermedia and the visual arts. She is professor emerita of English at Stanford University and currently scholar-in-residence at the University of Southern California.
Beckett’s Stages

By Emily Hoffman

In 1984, after failing to block an unfaithful American production of Endgame, 78-year-old Samuel Beckett insisted that the following note be inserted in the theater’s performance program:

Any production of Endgame which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me. My play requires an empty room and two small windows. The American Repertory Theatre production which dismisses my directions is a complete parody of the play as conceived by me. Anybody who cares for the work couldn’t fail to be disgusted by this.

Beckett had not seen the production himself (he visited the United States only once in his life, in 1964); friends had tipped him off about the offending design—a bombed-out subway tunnel. Among the charred remains of subway cars and piles of refuse, the major elements of the world as described in Beckett’s text were in place: Hamm in a chair on casters at center, Nagg and Nell in their ashbins.

Bare interior.
Grey light.
Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn.
Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture.
Front left, touching each other, covered with an old sheet, two ashbins.
Center, in an armchair on castors, covered with an old sheet, Hamm.

But for Beckett, unforgivable license had been taken.

Robert Brustein, the artistic director of A.R.T., defended JoAnne Akalaitis’s design in a printed rebuttal: “To threaten any deviations from a purist rendering of this or any other play—to insist on strict adherence to each parenthesis of public text—not only robs collaborating artists of their interpretive freedom but threatens to turn the theater into a waxworks.” Brustein might have hit on Beckett’s intention: As a theater-maker, he was a sculptor of the highest order.

Beckett was legendary for his fastidiousness; since his death, his estate has taken up the mantle. Many productions do manage to slip under the radar: “We believe that this production . . . observes the spirit and the text of Mr. Beckett’s great play—far more so, in fact, than a number of past productions, which to our knowledge evoked no public
protest from Mr. Beckett’s agents,” Brustein objected in his program note, perhaps referring to the 1973 *Endgame* at the Manhattan Project that placed the audience in chicken-wire cages or the 1983 production at Théâtre Varia in Brussels performed on a flooded stage. Even so, contemporary theater history is littered with cease-and-desist notices from Beckett and his estate. The productions to which they’ve objected include: a 1988 French production of *Endgame* that replaced the gray walls with Francis-Bacon-esque orange; a slew of all-female *Godot* (when one such production was protected by a Dutch court in 1988, Beckett banned all future productions of his work in the Netherlands); a 1994 production of *Footfalls* with Fiona Shaw that cut and/or reassigned five lines; and a 2011 parody video game of *Waiting for Godot*, to name but a few.

Playwrights will always have their scruples; Beckett’s are particularly instructive. Taken together, they tell the story of an artist ever in pursuit of control, the holy grail of a certain type of minimalist project.

Beckett began writing *Waiting for Godot* (his second play) because his novels had begun to feel too sprawling: He switched to drama “to get away from the awful prose I was writing at the time, from the wildness and rulelessness,” as he put it. Little did he know how rule-less the theater would prove to be, how it would frustrate and shape his art. At the time, by his own admission, he knew precious little about theater, and in early rehearsals for the first production of *Godot* he was hesitant to interfere with Roger Blin’s direction. He thought Vladimir and Estragon should wear bowlers and he had a hunch Lucky should have long hair; the other costumes were determined by Blin, with Beckett’s consultation. For the set, Beckett wanted a tree on an otherwise empty stage and a moon that would rise at the end of the first and second acts; that was all.
Essentially, he gave Blin and the actors a big open space on which to play. He would never again allow such freedom.

Even with *Godot*, however, Beckett was absolute about certain moments: for example, Estragon losing his trousers in the play’s final tableau. As written, Vladimir suggests that they hang themselves with the bit of string Estragon uses to hold up his pants. Estragon hands him the string, at which point his trousers fall to his ankles. Tragically, he doesn’t notice until Vladimir tells him to pull them up. Famously, Pierre Latour, the original Estragon, after being laughed at during the dress rehearsal, refused to let the trousers fall all the way down and insisted on catching them around his knees. Beckett begged Blin to talk to Latour; when that didn’t work, Beckett himself pleaded with the actor. Latour finally agreed. When Beckett’s partner, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, sent him a report of the opening night performance (Beckett never attended his own openings), he learned, to his great dismay, that Latour had caught the pants. Beckett sent a telegram to Blin courteously offering his congratulations, but continuing:

> There is one thing that disturbs me, that’s Estragon’s frock. I naturally asked Suzanne if it falls well. She tells me that he stops it halfway. He absolutely must not, nothing could be more wrong. . . . As for the laughs that its falling all the way might provoke, to the great detriment of this touching final tableau, there is absolutely nothing to object to there. . . . The spirit of the play, to the extent that it has one, is that nothing is more grotesque than the tragic, and it must be expressed up to the end, and above all at the end. . . . This must seem stupid to you, but for me it is essential.

In one gesture—a man losing his pants—Beckett saw his entire dramatic project.

After the frustrations of *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett began *Endgame*, the play that, according to Beckett biographer Deirdre Bair, “marks the beginning of his preoccupation with dramatic exactitude, his need to specify every nuance and gesture that may take place on his stage.” No longer an empty stage, the habitat ensnares the players. “Each actor has his own home on the stage,” Beckett once said. “He finds it and he keeps to it.” Two are stuck in trash cans, one is immobilized in a chair, and the last is mobile but directed down to the turn of his head by the text:

> Clow goes and stands under window left. Stiff, staggering walk. He looks up at window left. He turns and looks at window right. He goes and stands under window right. He looks up at window right. He turns and looks at window left. He goes out, comes back immediately with a small step-ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down, takes six steps (for example) towards window right, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window right, gets up on it, draws back curtain.

**OPPOSITE** Estragon (Gregory Wallace) loses his pants as Vladimir (Peter Frechette) feigns delicacy in A.C.T.’s 2003 production of *Waiting for Godot*. Photo by Kevin Berne.
The business about the steps (“takes six steps [for example]”) presages the staggering exactitude of one of Beckett’s late plays, *Footfalls*, which calls for an actress, walking back and forth in a strip of light, to take exactly nine steps in each direction, turning “rightabout at L, leftabout at R,” for the 30 minutes of the performance.

*Footfalls* came toward the end of a line of ever-narrowing stage designs, the artist’s aperture closing in. After *Endgame*, there was *Happy Days*, with Winnie buried in a giant mound of earth up to her waist in the first act, her neck in the second. In his next, *Play*, Beckett lingered on the face, enclosing three actors’ bodies in urns, each head illuminated in turn by a swiveling, interrogating spotlight. In *Not I*, only a woman’s mouth is visible, a pin spot trained on the flapping orifice, compelled to speak at a dizzying pace by some unseen force (the legendary Billie Whitelaw trained for the role in 1972 by crisply counting to ten between each tick of the clock that began the BBC’s *Nine O’Clock News*). Following *Not I*, Beckett wrote a number of plays in which voice is decoupled from the body, further simplifying the action: In *That Time*, only a man’s face is visible, as three voices recount the story of a life; in *Rockaby*, a woman sits motionless in a rocking chair that rocks without her pushing it, listening to a flat, pre-recorded voice (her own) recounting events from her life.

To some, each of Beckett’s plays is more inscrutable than the last. To others, they become more pure, the last short pieces almost “ghost-plays, hauntings,” in the words of director Xerxes Mehta. “Characters do not enter from somewhere and leave to go somewhere else; stage space does not connect in the mind’s eye with the world’s space,” writes Mehta. “On the contrary, the visual and sonic images that appear in late Beckett seem to me to be the first wholly successful examples in theater of the great modern-
ist project: to make art that, in formal terms, is not about life, but, rather, in Flaubert’s words, ‘about nothing but itself.’"

Paradoxically, the ghostlier the plays became, the more that worldly matters intervened in their staging. *Happy Days*, for example, poses an enormous challenge for the actress playing Winnie. “It is hard to describe what it does to someone to be locked inside an unmovable wedge of dirt for hours and hours every day,” writes director Carey Perloff of her 1990 production of *Happy Days*, starring Charlotte Rae at Classic Stage Company. “Eventually, your mind snaps. It becomes unendurable. And then the play begins.” Perloff and her production team, in her words, “wasted a great deal of time trying to make the mound comfortable for Charlotte to sit in, incorporating foot rests, back supports, and so on. Eventually, we realized that, no matter what we did, Beckett was always going to have the last laugh. He had created this hostile environment so that the actress playing Winnie didn’t have to act being suffocated and constricted; she actually *lived through* these emotions every time she rehearsed or performed the play.” Perloff continues:

There were some days when Charlotte would sit in the mound and weep because she felt so completely impotent. But what we quickly learned was what a gift that set was to an actor. If you are given the impossible acting task of communicating your life’s experience with no one to talk to, no physical movement, nothing but (in Act ii) your facial muscles and your voice available as tools, you begin to treasure every tremble of the lips, every turn of the eyes, every quiver of the nose, because that is all that is left. Charlotte said afterward that she couldn’t imagine doing a play again in which she sat around on regular furniture talking to other actors; it would all seem so excessive and imprecise!

*Play* offers similar difficulties (and triumphs) to actors. The urns in the first production (Germany, 1963) were squat and large enough for the actors to sit in; when Beckett wrote to Alan Schneider (his primary American director) on the eve of the New York production, he sent drawings and asked Schneider “to make the urns taller and thinner than they had been in the German production,” writes Bair. “Also, he cautioned Schneider to make sure that the actors were either standing or kneeling, but not sitting inside them, as if some degree of actual physical discomfort had to accompany the sense of disorientation he wanted the actors to convey.”

The difficulty of *Play* pales in comparison, however, to the difficulty of performing *Not I*, the play with nothing but a mouth. In order to isolate the mouth on the stage, and to have it float eight feet in the air as Beckett describes, it is necessary to strap the actor into a chair, her feet off the ground, blindfolded, and hooded or with dark paint on her chin and around her mouth. Billie Whitelaw, who was Beckett’s most beloved actress, famously fainted during a rehearsal of *Not I*. She writes of the experience:

If you are blindfolded and have a hood over your face, you hyperventilate, you suffer from sensory deprivation. It will happen to you. And I hung on and hung on until I couldn’t any longer. I just went to pieces because I was con-
vinced I was like an astronaut tumbling out into space. And I thought I can’t be tumbling out in space, but I am tumbling out in space and that’s when I fell down; I couldn’t go on. They lifted me down and, I think Jocelyn [Herbert, the designer] or Robbie [Hendry, the stage manager] or somebody, got me a brandy and milk and I remember Sam walked down the central aisle of the Royal Court saying, “Oh Billie, what have I done to you, what have I done to you?” And I drank the brandy and the milk and said, “Okay, that’s another barrier cracked. Back up in there, but can we have a little slit in there and a little blue light so that I know I’m here, because I can see that?” So the reason for the breakdown had nothing to do with the play or the rehearsal, it had to do with the pure technicality of being blindfolded, hooded, speaking at great speed, and hyperventilating.

The pure technicality is far from beside the point. Beckett was interested in creating scenarios in which the actor didn’t have to act, but could simply be. “Beckett does not want his actors to act,” said an aggravated Jean Martin, the original Lucky in Waiting for Godot. “He wants them to do only what he tells them. When they try to act, he becomes very angry.” From his actors, Beckett wanted simplicity, purity—exactly what he wanted in his own writing. He wanted nothing faked, nothing put on.

Slowly, Beckett began to take more and more control in the rehearsal room, often serving as director in everything but name. His first production as official director was a 1967 Endgame in Germany. When asked by his German assistant, Michael Haerdter, why he had decided to direct, Beckett answered, “I saw photographs of the first Berlin production [of Endgame]; everything is wrong in it.” To prepare for the production, Beckett memorized the entire text (in German) down to the last punctuation, to avoid the frustration of having to look up and down from the page. In his notebooks, he drew elaborate diagrams of the precise movements Hamm and Clov would need to make.

Beckett once wrote of Godot, “If they did it my way they would empty the theater.” He meant no one would come, but he might as well have been describing his ideal aesthetic. For Beckett, writes S. E. Gontarski in the introduction to Beckett’s theatrical notebooks, it was always about “disencumbering the work’s theatrical shape.” Control, in the end, was a vehicle to arrive at simplicity. “We have to retrench everything even further,” he told his German cast on the first day of rehearsal. “It’s got to become simple, just a few small precise motions.” Beckett wrote in his notebooks: “I have progressively simplified situations and persons . . . toujours plus simple.”

Endgame’s Reception

By Emily Hoffman

From the first, Endgame (originally titled Fin de partie) had a special place in Beckett’s heart. After struggling through the first draft, he concluded, “It has turned out a three-legged giraffe . . . and leaves me in doubt whether to take a leg off or add one.” Yet by the time Endgame was finished in 1955, Beckett felt he had wrestled it into something far more artful than his first produced play, Waiting for Godot, and far more significant. “For you,” Beckett wrote to his French director, Roger Blin (to whom the play is dedicated), in a note accompanying the finished typescript in 1956, “if you really want it, but only if you really want it. Because it really has meaning, the others are only everyday.”

Blin loved Fin de partie, but the French producers to whom he shopped it around wanted nothing to do with it. Their disdain came as a shock, considering Beckett’s newfound celebrity as the author of Godot, which producers had also notoriously rejected in 1953. Godot had been a succès de scandale, according to critic Martin Esslin. “Whenever Waiting for Godot opened after its first night in Paris . . . it became the topic of conversation. Was it not an outrage that people could be asked to come and see a play that could not be anything but a hoax, a play in which nothing whatever happened! People went to see the play just . . . to say at the next party that they had actually been the victims of that outrage.” Some critics recognized Godot for the watershed it was (French dramatist Armand Salacrou celebrated, “We were waiting for this play of our time. . . . An author has appeared who has taken us by the hand to lead us into his universe”), while others were grossly disparaging (Irish literary critic Vivian Mercier dismissed it as “a play in which nothing happens, twice”). Regardless, Beckett had become the next big thing.

Still, Théâtre des Champs Élysées, Petite Marigny, Théâtre des Oeuvres, and others remained unwilling to take a risk on Endgame. One theater agreed to allow Blin and company to rehearse in its building, only to evict them once they began. Beckett was devastated.

At the Royal Court Theatre in London, however, George Devine was impatient for Beckett to finish translating Fin de partie for its English-language premiere. He hoped, in fact, to produce Endgame before any French-language production (which, considering the French theaters’ hesitation, seemed entirely possible). After Beckett twice missed his deadlines for finishing the translation, however, Devine decided he’d rather have it in French than not at all: He invited Beckett, Blin, and the French actors to perform Fin de partie in the original at the Royal Court. With pleasure, they agreed.
The London critics, by and large, were completely flummoxed when *Endgame* premiered in April 1957. Critic Kenneth Tynan, who two years earlier had received *Waiting for Godot* positively, called *Endgame* “facile pessimism . . . not only the projection of a personal sickness, but a conclusion reached on inadequate evidence. I am ready to believe that the world is a stifling, constricting place—but not if my informant is an Egyptian mummy.” In addition to his full review, he published a parody of the play titled *Slamm’s Last Knock*:

> Foreground figure a blind and lordly cripple with superficial mannerisms . . .  
> Sawn-off parents in bins, stage right, and shuffling servant over the stage . . .  
> slamm: Is that all the review he’s getting?  
> seck: That’s all the play he’s written.  
> slamm: But a genius. Could you do as much?  
> seck: Not as much. But as little.

English theater critic Harold Hobson, however, called *Endgame* “magnificent” and wrote that it had “outraged the Philistines, earned the contempt of half-wits, and filled those who are capable of telling the difference between theatre and a bawdy-house with a profound and somber and paradoxical joy.”

Beckett did not particularly like the London production. To Alan Schneider, his American director, he wrote, “The creation in French in the Royal Court was rather grim, like playing to mahogany, or rather teak.” The setting was too grand, too slick, too commercial. The subsequent Paris premiere later in April was much more to his taste. Excited by the critical commotion in London, the Studio Champs Élysées agreed to stage *Fin de partie* in their much more intimate space. Smaller and simpler, the French production was a great success and played to packed houses for 97 performances. French critic Jaques Lemarchand called the play “a poem in dialogue, full of surprises and verbal successes, a play that moves and progresses, despite its immobile protagonists and subtle repetitions, towards a poignant and beautiful ending.” Marc Bernard, however, writing for *Les nouvelles littéraires*, was less certain of the play’s journey: “Intoxicated with this nothingness, Beckett indulges in it with a masochistic voluptuousness . . . There is no doubt that Beckett had a great deal of fun writing *Endgame*. For the spectator at the Studio des Champs-Élysées, things turn out less well, for the author’s amusement doesn’t always reach the audience.”

From Paris, *Endgame* climbed to ever-greater acclaim, though each new premiere carried with it a wary critic or two. Not nearly as dismissive as Tynan, but with a not-dissimilar sentiment, Brooks Atkinson, reviewing the 1958 New York premiere, concluded, “Under Mr. Schneider’s bustling and perceptive direction, inside David Hays’s stage design of doom, Mr. Beckett is getting an intelligent hearing. This is how he feels. The actors have given him the privilege of saying what he feels with no equivocating. No one on the stage is asking him to be reasonable.”
Over time, critics and audiences have accepted Beckett’s vision as more than the unreasonable ravings of a pessimist. Scholars have found in *Endgame* echoes of Lear, Hamlet, and Noah and his ark. The set has been interpreted as the interior of a skull and, more often, a bomb shelter in the wake of nuclear holocaust. Some take Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell to be the last people on earth. Some see Hamm and Clov as Prospero and Caliban, the play about the terrible bond between masters and slaves. Many call *Endgame* a chess game, with Hamm, the cornered king, playing out an unwinnable endgame strategy, simply deferring the inevitable.

Beckett, by and large, refused to provide interpretations of his plays. This tendency, according to Charles R. Lyons, “must derive from his own awareness that the significance of his dramas depends upon their exercise of indeterminacies. . . . The radical simplicity of the environments he creates and the ambiguous nature of the time he imitates force his spectators to confront the very uncertainties that plague the minds of his characters.” For the audience sitting in the theater, wondering what the play means and when it will ever end isn’t beside the point. It’s the very crux of the drama.

**Sources**

Beckett’s Thoughts on *Endgame*

According to Actor Jack MacGowran

*Beckett was involved with four productions of Endgame. The first strongly marked by his direction was the English Theatre in Paris’s 1964 production, in which Jack MacGowran played Clov. Below are excerpts from Richard Toscan’s 1973 interview with MacGowran, first published in Theatre Quarterly.*

What was Beckett’s interpretation of the play as he approached it from the point of view of a director?

Interdependency—that man must depend upon his fellow man in some way no matter how awful; a love-hate relationship between Hamm and Clov which exists right through the play.

So he put the major emphasis on their relationship, rather than the “something” that’s taking its course outside?

Yes. Harold Pinter came to see it one night. He dashed around afterwards—he’s an honest man, Pinter, and a very good playwright influenced by Beckett’s work. He said to me and Pat Magee [who played Hamm], “You know, it’s not what you were saying to each other, it’s what was happening in between that gave me tickles up my spine.” So, you see, the relationship was working. This is what Sam made sure would happen—that the relationship he wanted between Hamm and Clov was taking place. Clov takes an insane delight in saying, “There’s no more pain-killer,” and when he wheels Hamm to the center, he *doesn’t* wheel him to the center. Clov is constantly *not* doing what Hamm wants him to do. Hamm knows he’s not in the center; he has a sixth sense for knowing. He places a terrible curse on Clov when he says, “One day you’ll be blind like me . . . except that you won’t have anyone with you.” This hurts Clov, this worries him a lot. So they hurt each other mentally. They’re mentally both very damaged people anyway.

Did Beckett ever talk about what it was that has decimated the population and left only Hamm and Clov?

No, never. It’s some vision—there is a visionary in Beckett. The seeds of *Endgame* are in fact in Lucky’s speech—“In the great deeps, the great cold on sea, on land and in the air”—referring to the return of the world to its former state of a ball of fire, or
the glacial age which will get rid of all the population and perhaps, by sheer luck, two people will remain. Lucky also says, “In the year of their Lord six hundred and something . . .” Beckett can’t remember the actual date, but he read it somewhere, and it was nearest the glacial age the earth ever got in mankind’s time. I have part of the original manuscript of this scene; it’s much longer than the English translation and Clov talks at great length about what he’s seeing outside. But Beckett wanted to leave a doubt about the existence of human life and he cut that sequence out, so as to make Clov less sure of going. Hamm says, “I don’t need you anymore.” Clov doesn’t like the fact that he’s not needed—he must be needed. That is why he never leaves.

In Hamm’s story, he refers to the baby who was brought to him by the man who came crawling . . .

I played it as if Clov was the person who was brought there by the man, so that the story is not really fiction at all. It’s a retelling of those early years, which Clov may or may not remember because he has been there so long.

What was Beckett’s attitude toward Hamm’s parents who were in the dustbins?

I think he feels that’s the way most of us, in later life, treat our own parents—we put them into homes and we give them the minimum kind of treatment to keep them alive for as long as we can. The human race generally does that to an aging parent and this was his conception of how stark it could be—putting them into dustbins and giving them a biscuit or a biscuit and a half a day, anything to keep them going just for a while . . .

I gather that Beckett would dismiss the critical approach to *Endgame* that says it takes place in the mind of one man and the parents in the dustbins symbolize subconscious repression.

He would reject that idea completely. People may think that because the play makes it possible to think that way. But I know for a fact that that’s not Beckett’s idea of what’s happening.
**Endgame Glossary**

**Anemometer**
An instrument used to measure the force and velocity of the wind. “A hundred by the anemometer” would mean winds of 100 miles per hour—enough to tear down trees, flip cars, and topple telephone poles.

**The Ardennes . . . on the road to Sedan**
The Ardennes is a forest region spanning parts of Belgium, Luxembourg, and France that hosted three major battles: the Battle of the Ardennes in World War I and the Battle of the Bulge and the Battle of France in World War II. Sedan was a commune in the Ardennes in Northern France and the site of two major battles: In 1870, Napoleon III was defeated at the First Battle of Sedan, and in 1940, the French army fell to the Nazis at the Second Battle of Sedan.

**Bonny**
Pleasing to the eyes.

**Crablouse**
A parasite infesting the human body in the pubic region.

**Endgame**
The endgame is the third and last division of a chess game. During a game’s opening, strategies are set in motion by the positioning of key pieces; during the middle game, opponents organize their moves, readying for an assault on the king. During the endgame, explains Beckett biographer Deirdre Bair, “there is either a conversion of the advantage into a win, or else an attempt to nullify the disadvantage incurred in the middle game—also in search of the win. Usually in the endgame, there are no longer enough pieces left on the board to initiate an attack upon the king. This is when both kings are free to come to the center of the board, to confront each other, seemingly uncaring, as they execute the few limited moves still possible.”

Although chess influenced even Beckett’s early writings, around the time of his 1938 novel *Murphy* (in which Murphy and the suicidal Mr. Endon play a crazed chess game), chess became one of Beckett’s abiding passions. He frequented Parisian cafes where the best chess players congregated, and he followed his friend Marcel Duchamp’s chess column. He also read Duchamp’s *Opposition and Sister Squares Are Reconciled*, his contribution to chess literature that deals primarily with the endgame. Beckett argued, according to Bair, that “once the pieces are set up on the board, any move from then on will only weaken one’s position, that strength
lies only in not moving at all. . . . From the very first move, failure and loss were inevitable.”

Scholar Ruby Cohn recalls a statement Beckett made while directing a 1967 production of *Endgame* in Berlin:

Hamm is a king in this chess game lost from the start. From the start he knows he is making loud senseless moves. That he will make no progress at all with the gaff. Now at the last, he makes a few senseless moves only a bad player would. A good one would have given up long ago. He is only trying to delay the inevitable end. Each of his gestures is one of the last useless moves which put off the end. He’s a bad player.

Throughout the play, there are a number of lines that can be interpreted as references to a chess board, chess pieces, or strategy.

**Flora! Pomona! Ceres!**

Roman goddesses of nature. Flora is the goddess of flowers and blooming plants; Pomona is the goddess of fruit-bearing trees and fruit harvests; and Ceres is the goddess of agriculture and grain. Each has her own springtime festival of harvest and fertility.

**Fontanelles**

The soft, membranous gaps between the forming cranial bones on the skull of a fetus or infant.

**Gaff**

A staff or stick with an iron hook; sometimes used to spear fish. Hamm tries “wielding it like a puntpole,” a staff used to move a boat.

**Grain upon grain . . . suddenly, there’s a heap**

The heap puzzle is attributed to the Greek logician Eubulides of Miletus (born in the fourth century B.C.E.): Given that one grain of sand does not make a heap, it would seem to follow that two do not, thus three do not, and so on. In the end it would appear that no amount of sand can make a heap. This puzzle belongs to a class of paradoxes called sorites—derived from the Greek word *soros*, meaning heap—also known as little-by-little paradoxes. “They disprove the reality of mass,” Beckett told American director Alan Schneider.

**Have you had your visions?**

Hamm’s question to Clov is “an ironical allusion to Acts 2:17,” according to Beckett:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

Earlier in the play, Hamm says he has dreamt of forests.

**Heliometer**

An astronomical instrument used to measure the diameter of the sun, but more recently used for measuring the distance between two stars. It was largely replaced by photographic methods.
Hygrometer
An instrument used to measure the level of humidity in the atmosphere.

I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter—and engraver.

Some suggest this might be a reference to Romantic poet, painter, and printmaker William Blake, who, at the age of 14, apprenticed under James Basire, engraver to the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society.

I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything anymore, teach me others. Or let me be silent.

Clov is echoing Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, 1.11.360–62: “You taught me language; and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!” Caliban is a native of the island that the banished king Prospero rules over. Prospero has forced Caliban into servitude and taught him language and Christianity.

Lake Como
A popular retreat in Italy, located between Milan and the Swiss border, with many villas and several palaces on its shores. The lake, which Nell remembers seeing the bottom of, is the deepest in Italy.

Laying doggo
Playing possum, i.e., playing dead.

Like the millet grains of . . . that old Greek

“The leading Sophist, against whom Plato wrote his *Dialogue*, was Protagoras [born around 480 B.C.E.] and he is probably the ‘old Greek’ whose name Hamm can't remember,” Beckett told American director Alan Schneider. The millet-seed puzzle—“A grain of millet falling makes no sound; how can a bushel therefore make a sound?”—however, is generally attributed to a contemporary of Protagoras: philosopher Zeno of Elea, who wrote a book of paradoxes. Beckett explained that one purpose of the recurring image of the millet-seed paradox and the heap paradox in the play “is to suggest the impossibility logically, i.e., eristically, of the ‘thing’ ever coming to an end. ‘The end is in the beginning and yet we go on.’ In other words the impossibility of catastrophe. Ended at its inception, and at every subsequent instant, it continues, ergo can never end.”

Lumbago
A painful condition of the lower back that can result from a muscle strain or a slipped disk. The symptoms often become worse in heat or humidity.

Meerschaum
A tobacco pipe with a bowl made of hydrous magnesium silicate, a white, clay-like material that can be found around the Mediterranean.
And what do you see on your wall?
Mene, mene?

“Mene” means “numbered.” Chapter five of the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament contains the story of King Belshazzar’s feast. The king and his guests praise material idols and drink wine from the golden vessels that Belshazzar’s father took from the holy temple in Jerusalem. Suddenly a detached hand appears and writes on the wall. The spooked king asks many wise men to interpret the writing, but none can—except Daniel. Daniel tells Belshazzar that the writing is a warning from God to the unfaithful king for his lack of humility:

“This is the inscription that was written: mene, mene, tekel, parshin. Here is what these words mean: Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” Then at Belshazzar’s command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom. That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of 62.

Our revels now are ended.
Hamm quotes Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. In Act iv, Prospero has just given Ferdinand permission to marry his daughter, Miranda, and as characters are celebrating, Prospero hears Caliban outside. Prospero ends their revels, remembering that Caliban is plotting to kill him to regain freedom and control of the island.

Pap
A kind of soft food, such as bread in milk or water, usually given to infants.

Spratt’s medium
Around 1860, James Spratt introduced the world’s first commercial dog biscuits, Spratt’s Patent Meat Fibrine Dog Cakes, a baked mixture of wheat, beet root, and vegetables bound together with bovine blood. This line in *Fin de partie* simply reads “biscuit classique,” so an American English translation might replace “Spratt’s” with “Milk Bone” or the like.

Stancher
Someone, or something, that prevents the flowing of blood.

Vesta
A kind of wooden match, taking its name from Roman mythology. Vesta was the goddess of home and hearth.

Whelp
To bring forth by giving birth. Used especially in reference to the birth of a dog.
Questions to Consider

1. What story would be torture for you to tell again and again for all eternity?

2. Where are the characters in *Play*? Why do they speak so rapidly? What effect does this have on the audience? Why does Beckett call for *Play* to repeat after the actors have gone through it once?

3. In *Play*, what does M’s final question—“Am I as much as being seen?”—mean to you?

4. What is your understanding of the world of *Endgame*? What has happened to the world—and to these characters—leading up to the events seen in the play? How do you think Clov came to live with Hamm?

5. What, if anything, changes over the course of *Endgame*?

6. What effect does *Endgame*’s humor have on your understanding of its heavy themes?

7. What does Hamm want? What does he fear? Why can’t Clov leave Hamm? Do you believe he will eventually leave?

8. Why did Beckett include Nagg and Nell in *Endgame*? What is their function in the play?

For Further Information . . .

*As No Other Dare Fail: For Samuel Beckett on His 80th Birthday by His Friends and Admirers.* London: John Calder, 1986.


