

# Endgame at walkerspace

PHILIFOR & PHILIMOR's production of *Endgame*, which ran from March 20 to 30, 2002 at walkerspace in lower Manhattan, began with the text – alone. Its director, designers, and actors explored, deciphered, grappled with, abandoned, and ultimately returned to the words on the page. A note that I sent prior to rehearsals to the cast and to producer Annie Campbell urged them to

read this play ... i want us all to get past our first impressions and great ideas. if this play is scary i want it to seem old hat, if it appears deep i want it to shallow out, and if it's oh so clear i want it to become murkier and murkier. wherever you are with the text, whenever you're making choices and are sure of something or other, read yourself out of it. don't ignore the ideas and impulses and thoughts, just continue to read so that they lose importance, so that something else supercedes then it too falls away ... this text is incredibly alive ... it is constantly changing and we are constantly changing it ... don't focus on your character, don't try to figure it out, just read the text – a lot ... so you're sick of it, throw it up, then lap it back up, then gag, then swallow, then digest, then shit, then smell, then fertilize, then plant, then tend, then grow, then harvest, then cook, then eat, then sick ...

There was (and is) such a wealth of information laying (“lying, you mean”) in the text – the question was how to fill it all, bring the entirety into three dimensions.

Obviously, the set would be an integral part of the answer to this question. Hector Fernandez, our set designer, was interested in bringing *Endgame* to the stage without recycling the usual choices (old clichés!). After considerable talk of what the text implies or could suggest, as well as what would best serve our particular production with regard to actors and space, we settled on a cylindrical space with a single, deep (in terms of thickness) wall upstage where both windows and the door were located. The stage itself, which had its highest point downstage, raked backwards, thus creating a floating effect by exposing the space beneath the playing area. The result was a confined, isolated space that echoed the cyclical, repetitive nature of the text, that confined and defined Clov's movement pattern, and that, to a degree, both complemented and stood apart from the space of the theatre.

As a clearer picture of the set began to emerge, Maggie McBrien began to tackle the costumes. She, too, took as her starting point a close reading of the text; in fact, her design followed the text to such an extent that Clov, Nagg, and Nell all appear shirtless and Hamm is without the robe that has appeared in every previous production I have seen. Maggie also drew attention to Beckett's dichotomy of earth and sea in the color schemes for Clov



Hector Fernandez' innovative set design for *Endgame* at walkerspace.

and Hamm's costumes respectively. Sails for the sheets and old fishing nets for the rug evolved out of the numerous textual references to the sea.

In the meantime, I had immersed myself in theoretical and critical readings – as well as an extensive examination of much of the Beckett canon – to establish a basic vocabulary that I could draw on when in rehearsal with the actors. I was looking to piece the endgame together (“grain upon grain”). The process with the actors, too, centered around building a vocabulary that would help concretize movement, vocal patterns, habitual responses, exchanges of dialogue, and silences. Beckett referred to the repetitions in the play as “echoes.” I came to think of the games, exchanges, stories, etc. as remnants. These echoes and remnants dictated much of our work. For example, during one rehearsal, Zach Steel (Clov) accidentally breathed in before Alex (Hamm) said “Clov,” and quickly responded “Yes.” We then decided to echo this physical gesture in each repetition of the “Clov” — “Yes” exchange. We also decided that Hamm—in the final monologue in which he returns to the story that he had been recounting earlier— has lost the forms and the impetus so that only a remnant of his previous attempt remains.

Another key to the development of our production was limited movement. The actors worked a good deal on letting the limitations help to gain, rather than to hinder, access to their characters. Michelle Rosenfield (Nell) was the first to discover the power of simply changing her eye focus. We all began to concentrate on the necessities. Nagg (Danny Brink-Washington), too, brought his world into the realm of head and eye movement: his story consisted of three points of focus, that's all. Clarity became the key. Clov's gestures were stripped away (with a few notable exceptions), and he was left only with a floor pattern which repeated (with variations) throughout the play. With Hamm, gesture (of face, head, hands, and arms) was everything, but we worked with a heaviness and deliberateness, interrupted by momentary bursts of activity.