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On the Anguish of Going: An Actor's *Endgame*

"If *Godot* is the anguish of waiting *Endgame* is the anguish of going."

(Jack MacGowran)

Every now and then a theatrical production comes along that illuminates a familiar text, bringing parts of the story into a new focus or revealing other parts hitherto unseen. It might be the casting, the design, the directorial vision, but something in the combination of actor, space, director, and script brings a new understanding to a text that you thought you knew well. *New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley writes of these productions, "You go to see a play you've seen a dozen times before—thinking 'Not you again, you old warhorse'—and it's as if you were witness to a rebirth" (par. 4). *The Endgame Project*, conceived by veteran New York actors Dan Moran and John Christopher Jones, is one of these revelatory endeavors. In this conception of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, Clov and Hamm, two characters with diminishing physical abilities, are played by Jones and Moran, two seasoned actors who are both living with Parkinson's disease. Directed by Joe Grifasi and documented by filmmaker Jim Bernfield in the documentary film *Me To Play, The Endgame Project* creates a powerful joining of Beckett's script and the Parkinson's disease that holds the principal actors in its grip.

Endgame

Beckett's *Endgame* is a play in one act set in an empty room with two small windows. Outside, the world appears barren of life and movement, dying or perhaps already dead. Inside, the blind Hamm rules the household from his armchair on castors (he longs for a proper wheelchair with big wheels) as his servant Clov resentfully carries out the tyrant's orders wanting only for it to be "finished" (Beckett 8).

Hamm's parents Nell and Nagg, the "accursed progenitors" (Beckett 16), live in two dust bins at the side of the stage. They reminisce, dream of sweets, and wait. They wait for a biscuit, they wait for their sawdust to be changed, they wait for darkness to descend as their lids close for the last time. Clov, with his "stiff, staggering walk" (Beckett 7), is the only character who can move about the stage. Hamm, struggling with his memory, plays the raconteur, shares a few stories, tells a few jokes, but mostly he bickers with Clov and expresses his contempt for everyone else. The characters end the play essentially where they began and nothing much seems to have changed.¹

The seeming lack of action and repetitious dialogue baffled critics when the play was first produced in New York in 1958. *New York Times* theater critic Brooks Atkinson ended his review of the original New York production of *Endgame* with this assessment:

What Mr. Beckett has to say is contrary and nihilistic. But he is a writer. He can create a mood by using words as incantations. Although the dialogue is often baffling, there is no doubt about the total impression. We are through, he says. Nature has forgotten us. The jig is up . . . 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. (X,1)

Over the years *Endgame* has spawned numerous critical responses attempting to unlock the meaning of the text through a series of philosophical or psychological lenses. Some see an allegory for nuclear Armageddon, others a proof that God has abandoned humanity, still others see a macabre vaudeville being played to stave off death. A few caution that there is no ultimate meaning to be unlocked and that, paradoxically, the impossibility of reducing the play to its meaning is part of, well, its meaning. Literary critic Richard Goldman observed that

Endgame “is always more than we can make of it” (33). Goldman continues, “*Endgame* provides the exegete with both a field day and a dead end. He may trace the chess metaphor, note the allusions to Shakespeare and Baudelaire, remark on the Christian reference; but after he has done so, he finds himself with a variety of keys, new, old, some beautifully shaped, but with no locks to try them on” (33).

Despite Goldman’s warning, most scholars have latched on to Brooks Atkinson’s initial interpretation of *Endgame* as a nihilistic assertion that “the jig is up” for these characters and by extension for all of us” (1). For many critics, Clov and Hamm’s disabilities serve as metaphor, and the characters’ decreasing options for mobility become an allegory for an existential crisis in the face of the inexorable decline of humanity. But is it useful, or even critically valid, to view disability as a metaphor in a play that so clearly features characters living in impaired bodies? In *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*, Ato Quayson argues that the critical impulse to subsume Beckett’s disabled characters into metaphor keeps us from focusing on the disabled bodies by erasing them and replacing them with philosophical abstractions:

As can be seen from the vast scholarship on Beckett, it is very rare that his impaired characters are read as disabled, even though their disabilities are blatant and should be impossible to ignore. Rather the characters are routinely assimilated by critics to philosophical categories and read off as such. (28)

Specifically, Quayson notes that physical disabilities in *Endgame* have been interpreted as “ciphers of the frailty of the human condition and [are] not to be read as disabilities” (83). In this narrative prosthesis,² critics have deduced that *Endgame*’s disabled characters represent a fundamental breakdown of humanity, thereby losing sight of what the disabled bodies are

actually doing on stage, and how they manage to do it. Reading Clov and Hamm as ciphers for a non-disabled audience's existential crisis, and not as bodies that experience epistemic injustice, ignores the "blatant" disabilities Beckett wrote for these characters and dilutes the full impact of the play. When the actors performing the disabled characters are disabled themselves, like Jones and Moran, we should be able to resist the narrative prosthesis and engage with the characters as they are embodied.

The Endgame Project is not the first production of *Endgame* to cast disabled actors in the roles of Clov and Hamm. Hannah Simpson notes that Beckett plays in general, and *Endgame* in particular, have "attracted a striking range of disability performances," in which one or more of the actors is disabled (27). However, Simpson argues that even though these productions may foreground disabled bodies, the performances often evoke a negative critical reaction when the reality of the actor's disabled body intrudes upon the metaphorical expression of able-bodied angst so often attributed to Beckett's disabled characters:

Disability performances are often critiqued—or disallowed entirely— because of anxiety that the access measures which enable performance come at the expense of textual integrity, or that the disabled body onstage will introduce a new dimension to the performance that distracts from the 'real' concerns of Beckett plays. (Simpson 27)

In other words, the desire to accept the narrative prosthesis of disability as metaphor is so strong, that these critics cannot, or will not, see that a "'real' concern" of the play may well be the ingenuity and artistry with which the disabled characters engage in the endgame they are playing. And here is where the *Endgame Project*, and the specificity of the actors' Parkinson's

disease invites us to recognize the adaptability and resolve that keeps both characters and actors playing on stage even as energy wanes, mobility decreases, and memory fails.

Engaging with Goldman's key metaphor, I propose that there is a lock embedded in *Endgame*, albeit one that does not narrow the play to a singular meaning or interpretation, and that lock is Parkinson's disease. When Jones and Moran bring *Endgame* to life in the *Endgame Project*, their "key" slides into this lock and the interplay between the characters, the actors, and their Parkinson's disease, illuminates all three in a distinctive and compelling embodiment. It is my contention that the actors' Parkinson's disease, far from "distracting from the 'real' concerns" of Beckett's play, makes visible the determination, intelligence, and interdependence that allows Hamm/Moran and Clov/Jones to command the stage even as they try to envision an exit on their own terms. When I am referencing this relational embodiment between actor, character, and disease in the *Endgame Project*, I will use the term *charactor*. When an actor portrays any role, there is always a joining of actor and character. After all we are experiencing the character through the actor's body, voice, and intellect. I use the word *charactor* to describe a more complex intermingling between character and actor in a relational embodiment that merges the fictive world of the drama with the actor's lived experience.

Parkinson's Disease

Parkinson's disease³ is a neurodegenerative disorder that can be temporarily managed with medication but has no cure. Its symptoms vary from person to person, and it may go unnoticed for many years. Generally, Parkinson's presents as a movement disorder starting with a slight tremor in the hand. Over time the patient's movement slows down significantly (this is called bradykinesia) and the patient's ability to perform simple motor skills diminishes.

Eventually muscle stiffness occurs resulting in a stooped posture and unsteady balance.

Movements that were once automatic like blinking or smiling can take tremendous effort, and it feels as if the body is not following the brain's commands. As Jones explains, "It can take me an hour to get from the bathroom to the bedroom, trying to think up strategies to get myself going forward" (*The Endgame Project*). Parkinson's disease gradually diminishes the physical body. Slowly, progressively, Parkinson's strips the body of movement; steps become shorter, simple tasks become difficult, rising from a chair takes a monumental effort.

It can take years for the symptoms to advance from a small tremor to the full-blown bradykinesia of the advanced patient. There are medications to help control the symptoms of Parkinson's, but none can slow the inevitable progression of the disease and eventually all of the medications will lose their effectiveness as patients take progressively higher doses. Day by day the disease solidifies its control of the body until the final cessation of motion. It is a waiting game.

CLOV. (*fixed gaze, tonelessly*):

Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. (Pause.) Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap. (Pause.) I can't be punished anymore. (Beckett 8)

Beckett was intimately familiar with the "grain upon grain" pathology of Parkinson's as both his mother May and his aunt Cissie were diagnosed with the disease. Hugh Culik has explored references to Parkinson's in Beckett's first novel *Murphy* and in the play *Footfalls*.⁴ In *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, James Knowlson gives us a glimpse into May Beckett's life with Parkinson's disease and its impact on her son. Beckett would visit his mother every summer and "each year he found her noticeable deterioration from Parkinson's heartbreaking"

(Knowlson 333). In the summer of 1950 Beckett's brother wrote to tell him that their mother's disease was progressing rapidly and that she was deteriorating in both mind and body. When May fell, breaking her leg, Beckett rushed home to Dublin to find his mother had been moved to a nursing home:

But a broken leg was the least of her problems. For the dementia that had been brought on by Parkinson's disease worsened rapidly after her accident and, by July 24, Beckett could write that medical opinion confirmed that she was dying. No one however would, or perhaps could, say how long death would be in coming. "Most of the time her mind wanders and she lives in a world of nightmares and hallucinations," he wrote. (Knowlson 345)

Writing to his friend, the painter Henri Hayden, Beckett reflected on what felt like the continual wait for the elusive but desired end. "My mother's life continues its sad decline. It is like the decrescendo of a train I used to listen to in the night at Ussy, interminable, starting up again just when one thinks it is over and silence returned forever" (Knowlson 321). May died not long after that letter was written, but by then Beckett had been witness to the inexorable progression of Parkinson's diminishment. It is hard not to see a connection between Parkinson's ever tightening constriction of movement and the evolution of immobilized characters in Beckett's plays.⁵

The Endgame Project

The initial idea for *The Endgame Project* came from Dan Moran, an actor who has made a career out of playing highly physical roles on stage and television for over thirty years. About eight years after his initial diagnosis with Parkinson's, Moran noticed "it got harder and harder

to move” (Apocalyptic). He also began to experience the facial “masking” that affects Parkinson’s patients whose facial muscles become immobilized, leaving them with a blank expression. While facial masking, bradykinesia, and rigidity limit the actor’s nonverbal expressiveness, issues with speech can make the nuanced vocal work of an actor impossible. Moran began having trouble remembering lines and his speech began to slur. His long-time agent dropped him, and he was no longer getting auditions for theater, television, or film. “For an actor, the question is what’s next?” he said “It’s always what’s next? And I can’t do that anymore. Physically I can’t. It’s the end of your life . . . it’s the end of your career” (*Me To Play*).

One night, while dealing with the relentless insomnia brought on by his Parkinson’s medications, Moran grabbed a book from the bookshelf; it was Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*. Though he had read the play many times before, this time as he reread the script, Moran sensed something painfully, exhilaratingly . . . familiar:

As I was reading Hamm, I just felt like this guy is just talking about my life here, about Parkinson’s. That’s what it really felt like—especially when it got to the part “*Have you not had enough?*” and Clov says “*Of what?*” “*Of . . . this . . . this . . . thing.*” And I thought Parkinson’s, fuck and I thought the room . . . they’re locked in this room and I thought Parkinson’s and I thought one guy can’t walk, one guy can’t sit, you know . . . Parkinson’s! The more I read it, it just seemed like Parkinson’s to me. Being locked in a room with my body. I’m not getting out. (Apocalyptic)

Moran’s agent, casting directors, and even his own body were telling him it was time his career as an actor ended. But when he got to Hamm’s line, “*Enough, it’s time it ended, in the shelter too. (Pause.) And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to . . . to end. Yes, there it is, it’s time it ended and yet*

I hesitate to — (he yawns)—to end” (Beckett 9) he suddenly thought, “Screw these people who won’t hire me” (Apocalyptic). It was ending, but it hadn’t ended yet.

Moran reached out to fellow actor John Christopher Jones who had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s at age fifty-five. The two had met in 1995 when they shared a dressing room during a Broadway production of *A Month in the Country* starring Helen Mirren. Jones had a distinguished career as a classical actor and was well known for his precise physical humor and animated face. Ten years into his Parkinson’s diagnosis Jones, like Moran, found he had less and less control over his body and voice. As his Parkinson’s had progressed his movements had slowed, and he had begun to exhibit facial masking:

Acting has changed a lot for me...The image I give people is that if you take a pebble and you throw it into a pool of water there is a ripple that goes out from it. Well with my body if you take a stone and throw it into a pool of water it just goes “thud” like it is in a bed of sand. There is no ripple. (Jones *Me To Play*)

Moran proposed that they perform together in Beckett’s *Endgame*, but at first Jones was not sure that he was up to what he thought was the “monumental” challenge of the play. Over the next year, the two actors read the play, switching characters, and delving into the script. In the end, Moran convinced Jones that *Endgame* was “the perfect play” for them that would actually “play to our strengths” (Moran *Me To Play*). Their experience navigating the world with Parkinson’s would provide them with what Carrie Sandahl has called “epistemic privilege” (237). Non-disabled actors who play disabled characters, Sandahl argues “understand the disability experience primarily through stereotypes available in mainstream media, while disabled actors have access to the lived experience of disability as both a social identity and a

physical condition" (236-7), and this gives them a source of "generative knowledge" (228). Jones and Moran's experience living with a neurodegenerative disease like Parkinson's, gave them a unique access to understanding and embodying the progressive constrictions experienced by Beckett's characters and the impact it has on their sense of self. For example, Moran recognized his own loss of control in Hamm, "I feel myself slowly slipping from being the 'guy in charge' to being the 'guy in the way'" (*Me To Play*). While Jones felt that his Parkinson's helped him understand Clov's biggest challenge, "the struggle to maintain, the will to endure in the face of relentless diminishment" (*Me To Play*).

By the time they decided to commit to the project, Jones was having more difficulty with movement and Moran was having more difficulty with speech. "Choosing to stare into the danger" (Moran, *Me To Play*), they decided to lean into their challenges and have Moran play the verbose Hamm while Jones would play Clov, the character who could not sit. Today Jones reflects:

The truth is we would have had challenges with either part. Looking back on it, I am glad that I spent my time on Clov. I have specialized in characters that have a compulsion to talk, those suffering from logorrhea. My Hamm would be in love with the architecture of his lines. As the narrator he would build his house with words. (Jones, email interview)

With Clov, Jones was tasked with creating a character who spoke very little but whose physical and facial reactions to Hamm's monologizing conveyed much of the humor in the play. Though the facial masking of his Parkinson's impacted his range he also found that there was an unexpected benefit. "What's kind of extraordinary is that people say about my acting these

days ‘It’s so economical! You don’t do anything, it’s so pure!’ But of course, it’s just that way because that’s the only way the toothpaste comes out of the tube. (laughs) I have no control over it really!” (*Me To Play*)

Moran approached longtime friend and filmmaker Jim Bernfield about the possibility of creating a documentary about two actors with Parkinson’s performing Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*. “The idea was for us to do a performance, one night only—and put-up Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* and tie it into our daily lives” (*Me To Play*). Bernfield’s own father had died soon after being diagnosed with Parkinson’s and so he was drawn into the project on both a professional and a personal level. With Bernfield on board, Moran and Jones connected with actor/director Joe Grifasi who had played Clov in the 1984 Off Broadway revival of *Endgame*. Grifasi saw the actors’ Parkinson’s as an asset and joked with them that they came prepared for the roles because they already had “the equipment” (Grifasi, *Me To Play* panel discussion). Beckett’s characters are notoriously difficult to embody because of the extreme limitations he puts on them. “No playwright before Beckett has made his actors so consistently uncomfortable on the stage: the positions they are asked to assume and the words they are made to recite force them to experience a level of absurdity specifically designed to ‘dislocate’ any conventional notions about stagecraft itself” (Brater 199). But in this case, there was no dislocation for Jones and Moran, they knew exactly where they were. If *Endgame* challenges able bodied actors to imagine disability by limiting their movement in extraordinary ways, it simultaneously opens itself up to the disabled actor saying, “your body understands this character,” come, inhabit it.

Grifasi signed on to direct the project and rehearsals began. Moran said they were not playing the characters as if they had Parkinson's, but they were letting their own Parkinson's blend with the characters Beckett had created. As Clov and Hamm started to emerge through Jones' and Moran's bodies it was hard not to appreciate the intersections. At its most basic, in *Endgame*, we see two characters who have lost control over their motor skills: Hamm, immobile, cannot walk and Clov, always in motion cannot sit down.

HAMM. *Sit on him!*

CLOV. *I can't sit.*

HAMM. *True. And I can't stand.*

CLOV. *So it is.*

HAMM. *Every man his specialty.* (Beckett 17)

The primary symptoms of Parkinson's disease impact the motor systems, but it can manifest itself differently in different patients. One person might experience muscle rigidity and bradykinesia, while another might be in a constant state of tremor, in other words, one person with Parkinson's may appear quite different from another. Moran and Jones also manifested the disease differently, with Jones experiencing more of the postural instability and Moran having more difficulties with memory, tremors, and speech. The specific manifestations of their disease added depth and sometimes humor their final performance as will be noted later in the essay. *Every man his specialty.*

Beckett's friend, painter Beatrice Lady Glenavy, wrote, "When I read *Endgame*, I recognized Cissie [Beckett's aunt] in Hamm. The play was full of allusions to things in her life even the old telescope which Tom had given me, and I had passed on to her to amuse herself with by watching ships in Dublin Bay or seabirds feeding on the sands when the tide was out. She used to make jokes about her tragic condition, she once asked me to 'straighten up the

statue' she was leaning sideways in her chair and her arthritis had made her body heavy and hard and stiff like marble" (Knowlson 367). Unable to move his own chair, Hamm is aware of being off center, not being in the right place, and unable to find the right placement of his chair within the space. His balance is off, and he has no power to right himself, but rather depends on Clov to get him to the center.

HAMM. *I feel a little too far to the left.*
(Clov moves chair slightly.)
Now I feel a little too far to the right.
(Clov moves chair slightly.)
I feel a little too far forward.
(Clov moves chair slightly.)
Now I feel a little too far back.
(Clov moves chair slightly.)
Don't stay there.
(i.e., behind the chair)
you give me the shivers.
(Clov returns to his place beside the chair) (Beckett 33)

Like Hamm, or Beckett's Aunt Cissie, many people with Parkinson's need assistance in initiating movement, straightening their body, or maintaining their balance. Though the character of Hamm feels perpetually off center it was Jones, playing Clov, who was unable to stand straight off stage, and who was developing "pisa syndrome" as his body started leaning further and further to the side. Jones noted that the struggle it took for him to remain upright during rehearsal was exhausting. Clov's "stiff staggering walk" and the effort it takes him to accomplish the physical tasks demanded of him by Hamm, foregrounded the increasing difficulty Clov, and Jones as Clov, experienced initiating and completing movements. Sometimes, though Clov has announced his intention to move, like a Parkinson's patient whose body is not responding to the brain's instructions, he simply cannot not.

HAMM. *All right, be off.*

(He leans back in his chair, remains motionless. Clov does not move heaves a great groaning sigh, Hamm sits up)

I thought I told you to be off.

CLOV. *I'm trying.* (Beckett 21)

Though there were many physical resonances between the characters' actions and the actors' Parkinson's disease, a more interesting awareness for Jones came when he started to interrogate Clov's emotional journey. Jones recalled that after the first read through with the cast and creative team he felt he had done a terrible job. "I'm the black hole of this production," he told Grifasi (*Me To Play*). Suddenly the stakes felt too high, and Jones asked himself, if this was going to be the day that he realized he could no longer do what he had always done, that he was no longer a working actor. "What happens to my sense of myself if we get to the performance stage of this and I find out that I couldn't cut it?" he asked himself (Apocalyptic). Shaken by that first read through, Jones went home and reread the play that night. He understood that Clov was depressed, "but you can't play depression:"

I realized I had made a mistake in thinking about Clov . . . The black hole does not let any light escape and therefore it cannot be seen. I began by thinking that Clov didn't want to be seen or to be in the situation he was in. He did not want to participate in the routines that Hamm fostered. And since I was basically saying that I wanted no part in the festivities, I played my scenes as though I did not want to be on stage. My mistake was in thinking that as Clov became more and more sure that the END WAS DRAWING NIGH, he would succumb to the forces of entropy. But he didn't. He doesn't. (Jones, email interview)

Everything in the play tells Clov “the end is nigh” just as Jones and Moran were being told by their industry that the end of their time as professional actors was nigh. Jones realized that he had to find “a powerful reason to stay,” and for him, it was to perform. To play. There would have to be an exit eventually, but before that happened the *charactors* would do everything in their power to keep the game in play. With his “stiff and staggering walk,” Clov/Jones stands, climbs, carries, laughs, folds, stoops, looks, shakes, puts things in order, hums and sings, and plans his escape. Without rising from his chair, Hamm/Moran yawns, dreams, follows his routines, asks questions, pees, tells stories, asks for forgiveness, pleads to be kissed and touched, remembers the past, and tries to predict the future.

The *charactors* resist, with tremendous ingenuity, and no small amount of humor, their inevitable exit. Beckett may well have translated his mother’s slow death from Parkinson’s into Hamm and Clov’s imprisonment where the future is both bleak and inevitable. But he did not leave the characters languishing, rather he gives them a multitude of ways to keep playing and to be present for each other in their prison. They talk about their history, they play games of one upmanship, they argue, and they remind each other that their story is evolving. “We breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our blooms! Our ideals!” (Beckett 18). Joe Grifasi shared that many hours of rehearsal were spent bantering and sharing stories about their lifetime in the theater. “We’d be talking and laughing and then someone would say, ‘shouldn’t we get started?’ and I’d say ‘what do you mean? We already started!’ I think part of the preparation for this play was to tell old theater war stories and then rehearse a little bit” (Grifasi, panel discussion *Me To Play*). Grifasi’s comment acknowledges the powerful intertextuality between the script, Parkinson’s impact on Moran and Jones, and the trajectory

of their careers as actors. This intertextuality heightens all of the theatrical references in *Endgame* letting us see two actors contemplating their exit from the theater while knowing there is a later, more final exit to come. “What is there to keep me here?” Clov asks. “The dialogue,” replies Hamm (Beckett 66).

On July 13, 2012, the Classic Stage Company presented *Endgame* starring Chris Jones and Dan Moran. The invited audience were friends, family and colleagues who had known the actors both pre- and post-diagnosis. Many were actors, directors and designers who had worked with Jones and Moran at different points in their careers, and with so many theater professionals in the house, the audience was particularly tuned into the multitude of theatrical references scattered throughout *Endgame*. Whether it is allusions to Shakespeare, the physical schtick of the vaudeville house, or the conventions of asides and soliloquys, the script is delightfully metatheatrical, even giving a nod to the audience’s part in the story:

HAMM. *This is deadly. (Enter Clov with the telescope. He goes towards ladder.)*

CLOV. *Things are livening up. (He gets up on ladder, raises the telescope, lets it fall.) I did it on purpose. (He gets down, picks up the telescope, turns it on auditorium.) I see . . . a multitude . . . in transports . . . of joy. (Pause. He lowers telescope, looks at it.) That’s what I call a magnifier. (He turns toward Hamm.) Well? Don’t we laugh? (Beckett 36)*

The documentary *Me To Play* allows us to see backstage on this one night only event. Both Moran and Jones experienced moments of doubt wondering if they would be able to perform the play. “It’s clear that *Endgame* is brilliantly written but it’s not clear that we can do it. We were looking at potential failure in front of an audience, in front of our peers” (Jones, personal interview). The dress rehearsal had not gone well, and both Jones and Moran were

nervous as the house began to fill with family and friends “Everything seems familiar, but I don’t belong here,” says Moran. “I’m gonna fuck it up” (*Me To Play*). Grifasi recalled that the audience was fully aware that Moran and Jones were “going up Everest,” and there was no guarantee they would reach the top (Grifasi, panel discussion *Me To Play*).

I was fortunate to be in the audience that night and whatever their fears may have been, from the moment the lights came up, these veteran actors fell into the familiar rhythms of their craft. Some of us had come to the performance anticipating that the actors’ Parkinson’s disease would impede their ability to perform the play as they might have pre-diagnosis. But what the audience experienced was two actors with superb comic timing and a facility with word play, creating a powerful performance that came into being *because* of their Parkinson’s not in spite of it. Charlotte McCormick is Chris Jones’ younger sister, and an actor and director in her own right.⁶ We shared our memories of the performance and she recalled how powerful it was to experience *Endgame* simultaneously through the characters’ points of view and the actors’:

This is a play about the end times and the actors have a disease that has no cure. It really underscored their mortality. But at the same time, they are also amazing actors, amazing comic actors . . . so there’s this moment when Hamm tells Clov to hurry and Chris is already walking at a snail’s pace, the way he has to walk really, and Clov says ‘I’m moving as fast as I can!’ And it’s so funny. But it hurts too because you know Chris can’t walk any faster than that. Everything that has comic value also has a razor’s edge of reality that cuts. (McCormick personal interview)

McCormick identified the particular power that lay in the interplay between the characters and actors noting that each reference Clov or Hamm made to physical pain, memory loss, or depression had its counterpart in Jones and Moran's own experience of Parkinson's. In his essay on the documentary *Me To Play*, Patrick Bixby noted that this oscillation between character and actor opened a window for the audience to understand what living with Parkinson's might be like:

Hamm's reflections on morality and compassion became, at least partially, Dan's statements to the audience on those themes. In the process, the play worked to increase awareness and represent the experience of living with Parkinson's disease; at the same, the performance worked to challenge the enduring assumption that the condition should only be understood in terms of medical diagnosis, or physical diminishment or emotional despair. (125)

And as I felt the "razor's edge" under Beckett's humor, expertly performed by these disabled actors, I felt a clarity in the play that was new and exciting. Far from being "purposeless" as they are often read, Clov and Hamm refuse to give up or give in. With their many references to ending and finishing, the simple reality is that they go on. When one falters and suggests the time has come to "end it", the other keeps the story going. This happens time and again in the script. The fact that Jones and Moran were also refusing to give up—claiming the theater as their rightful space and choosing to go on being actors in the face of inevitable loss—amplified the "anguish of going" in ways a performance by able-bodied actors could never do.

Niall Buggy, Olivier Award winning Irish actor who had performed with Jones in Brian Friel's *Aristocrats*, was also in the audience that night. After the performance he sat with Jones

in the dressing room telling him, “It was the clearest I’ve ever known the play to be. It made complete sense” (*Me To Play*). When I asked Jones why Buggy thought this was the “clearest” production of *Endgame* he responded:

If I were to speculate on what he meant by that, I am pretty sure that I would offer the following: No matter how bizarre the plot and dialogue are in this play, we performed it so that the audience could follow it. That is to say we captured the theatricality of the piece. The jokes. The routines. The savage twists and turns. The poetry. The rhythms.
(Jones email interview)

Tony award winning actor and master clown Bill Irwin has been drawn to Beckett throughout his career. In 2018 he created *On Beckett*, an (almost) one person show exploring his fascination with Beckett, that premiered at the Irish Repertory Theater in New York. After watching the documentary, *Me To Play*, Irwin wrote:

Watching Dan and Chris made me think about the play anew. I could imagine it again . . . I still feel this sense of illumination—and challenge—thinking back to seeing ME TO PLAY. The characters in ENDGAME are challenged with memory—its difficulty and its pain – as they face the question of an end—and then these two actors carry a challenge into the work beyond what the rest of us have in facing the play—it was just a very moving look at the actor’s craft . . . I would have to dedicate the shit out of any future work I might ever do with that play to the two of them . . . every actor who approaches the play should. It is such a deep testament to the theatre. And I felt so proud, and so scared, paradoxically, to be an actor. (Irwin, email interview)

Reflecting on the whole experience Jones stated, “Dan? I think he’s sort of a hero. Why? Because he was looking into the abyss, and he didn’t give up. He could have said I can’t do this. But he persevered” (Jones, personal interview). And what of his own contribution to *The Endgame Project*? Whenever Jones approaches a new role he wonders, “Who will I meet in the person of me in this project? Who will I find in the room when I work on the material? I was pretty proud of who I found in this one. If you stare unblinkingly at the truth, you sometimes find something in yourself you hadn’t seen before which is in its way, a new beginning” (Jones personal interview).

In *The Endgame Project*, Beckett’s tightening endgame is not figurative but literal. Moran and Jones are diminishing and when they reach the curtain call, they will not be able to suddenly stand straight and stride across the stage for their bow. Their bodies will continue to weaken. The final words of the play are “You . . . remain.” They remain locked in their Parkinson’s *and* they remain actors showing us that they had a life in the theater, that they are alive in the theater, performing as fully now, if differently, than in their prime.

HAMM. *The end is in the beginning and yet you go on.*

[Pause]

Perhaps I could go on with my story, end it and begin another. (Beckett 77)

¹ Evan Horowitz writes an interesting analysis of the opening and closing moments of *Endgame* in “*Endgame: Beginning to End*,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 27.4 (Summer 2004) 121-128.

² Narrative prosthesis is the term developed by David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder to theorize the pervasive use of disability in narratives that functions as “an opportunistic metaphorical device” (222).

³ The Parkinson’s Foundation provides a wide range of resources for those living with, caring for someone living with, or simply interested in Parkinson’s Disease. <https://www.parkinson.org/>

⁴ See Culik, Hugh. “Neurological Disorder and the Evolution of Beckett’s Maternal Images.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*. 22:1. 1989. 41-53.

⁵ Patrick Bixby argued that “disability became a significant presence in Beckett’s writing after [his] personal experiences with Parkinson’s disease, as he developed more and more intently an aesthetic that rejects images of bodily health and physical integrity in favor of a vision of corporeal difference and human variation” (120).

⁶ Charlotte and Chris recently lost their brother Jeff Jones to Parkinson’s in September 2020. They also had a maternal grandfather and a paternal grandmother with Parkinson’s so she reflected that the disease may be in her future as well.

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