

ARTS AND LEISURE DESK

How to Steal a Scene By Just Raising a Finger

By SUSAN DOMINUS

SOMETIMES A FINGER CAN STEAL a scene. Now appearing in Samuel Beckett's "Endgame," the 79-year-old theater veteran Alvin Epstein compels the audience with little more than some careful movement of his hands, which peek out from the tin can that his character, the ancient Nagg, inhabits for the duration of the play. Exploring the uncertain world outside the safety of the can, those digits pique our curiosity. Like characters in their own right, they scramble meekly, but with a visible, desperate energy, around the can's rim, like hungry mice, distracting the audience from all the other action taking place on stage.

Mime is considered more of a punchline than an art form these days, but to watch Mr. Epstein -- who studied the craft alongside Marcel Marceau more than half a century ago -- is to appreciate the lingering finesse it can lend an actor's work.

Like most of Beckett's plays, "Endgame" is filled with delphic pronouncements and a carefully prescribed physicality, which challenge its actors to find the humanity amid the abstract. Mr. Epstein, considered a consummate Beckett actor, played Lucky in the first American production of "Waiting for Godot," in 1956, and then two years later played Clov, the limping submissive in "Endgame." Almost 30 years after that, he directed and starred as Hamm in another production of "Endgame," a production that went on to play in three different theaters.

"Alvin knows the material so well, it gives him the confidence -- the courage, really -- to do what's right," says Charlotte Moore, director of the "Endgame" revival at the Irish Repertory Theater. "He doesn't hit anything with a hammer, because he doesn't have to."

The dizzying dialogue between Hamm

and Clov fires back and forth until Mr. Epstein's Nagg pops up comically, releasing a cry of hunger, besting language with a show of physical need. "Me pap," he cries, drawing it out like

a baby's wail, flapping his tongue rhythmically, pursing his lips, constantly moving his mouth as if he'll eventually work his way up to sophisticated speech. Courting Nell, his beloved, his mouth contorts into a rapidfire series of kisses, which seem less like romantic gestures than a clumsy evolution of his earlier grimaces. Mr. Epstein brazenly summons the unchecked sensuality seen in the very young and the enfeebled old, the discomforting obscenity of the innocent. "Accursed fornicator," Hamm accuses Nagg, and from Mr. Epstein's performance, it's possible to see in the infant the seeds of a future fallen soul.

When Mr. Epstein first performed in "Waiting for Godot," Eisenhower was president, American critics considered Beckett an amateur crank and Mr. Epstein was a young man. Now on the brink of 80, he says he better appreciates Beckett's wit, finding more humor in even the post-apocalyptic "Endgame." "This play is not really about dying," he says. "The play is about trying to stay alive while you're alive, and not giving in to death."

From a practical point of view, it's also about not giving in to sleep. "You're slightly



Alvin Epstein and Kathryn Grody in "Endgame."

oxygen-deprived, and it's dark," Mr. Epstein says of his time in the can, where he's submerged for most of the hour-and-a-half play. Devotees of the acting craft might be disappointed to learn that Mr. Epstein doesn't spend that time in character but instead lets his mind wander. "I think of everything and sometimes nothing," he says. And what would be so bad if he dozed? "I want to be alive for the end," he says. "And who knows, maybe I'll snore."