



Master and servant: how Tania Bruguera is using Beckett to dismantle power

Artist Tania Bruguera knows about power struggles: she's been jailed and says she'll run for the Cuban presidency. So the co-dependency in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* makes it the perfect play for her directorial debut

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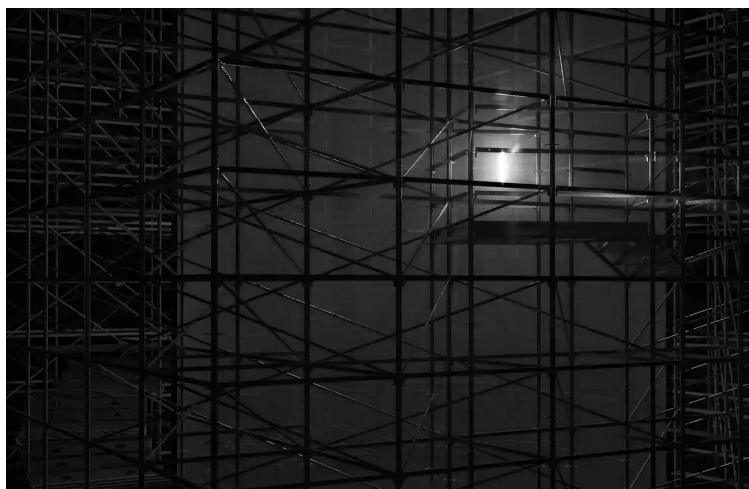
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Later this month, visitors to a 17th-century monastery in Porto, Portugal will venture through a forest of scaffolding, climb stairs to take their seats and place their heads through holes in a giant piece of fabric. Below this circle of disembodied faces, an actor will stare out from the stage, pause and laugh.

This elaborate performance of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* is the directorial debut of Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera, who has had plenty of seismic geopolitical changes to occupy her of late. Her 2008 work *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, a live microphone inviting the public to participate in one minute of free speech, led to her detention by the Cuban authorities in December 2014. Last April, she raised over \$100,000 (£80,500) via crowdfunding for Cuba's first Institute of Art Activism. In October, she announced she would run for president of Cuba when Raúl Castro steps

down in 2018, to highlight the island's lack of democracy. Now, she turns from the state abuse of power to Beckett's skewed take on dependency in personal relationships.

"I'm interested in how *Endgame* brings power dynamics into our everyday lives," she says. "It feels relevant to see this piece today, when the world is seduced by so-called strong political figures and when democracy is abused instead of enacted. It feels like the end of a chapter."



The set for Tania Bruguera's *Endgame*. Photograph: Dotan Gertler Studio @ Estudio Bruguera

A friend gave Bruguera a copy of *Endgame* to read for the first time in 1998. "I read the play 12 or 14 times in a row, and kept going back to it over the last 20 years," she says. "I was fascinated that I could visualise the play so clearly, but I couldn't understand the power dynamics among the characters. Every time I read it, it looked like a different power struggle scenario, one between a father and son, a master and slave, a boss and an employee, a privileged person and an underprivileged one. In terms of agenda and knowledge, I imagined so many different outcomes and saw the relevance of the piece every time."

The one-act play, which premiered 60 years ago this month, pivots around the repetitious bond between seated Hamm and his servant Clov. Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, periodically appear from lidded bins. Taunted and emotionally manipulated by Hamm, Clov frequently warns Hamm that he'll leave him. Historic interpretations have dwelled on the play's disavowal of meaning - "understanding it can mean nothing other than understanding its incomprehensibility," wrote the German philosopher Theodor Adorno - but Bruguera's perspective focuses on the power imbalances between its characters. "This version is a portrait of power and the complexity of dependency," she says. "It's a story of how one person can intervene in someone else's mind. Maybe I see the piece as a revenge against totalitarian dictators - the person who is in power only has power as long as the person serving decides to serve. The domestic ambience of the piece becomes a metaphor for how easily we are trapped in these dynamics."

