

James & Jamesy In the Dark

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Jamesy: "Are you there?"

Favourite Fringe performers James and Jamesy take a daring and radical new direction in their latest show *In the Dark*. Gone are the tweeds, Jamesy's cozy parlour and even the tea set. Instead, the two take us into the darker, minimalist world of an empty unlit stage. The duo are no longer two ordinary but imaginative British chaps – one talkative, one taciturn – but rather, as it seems, two humanoid aliens from another world. Yet, fans of the duo's previous shows will find that the James and Jamesy they love are still there. The new, abstract setting has merely allowed them to explore the very essence of what lay behind such shows as *2 for Tea* seen in Toronto in 2013 and *High Tea* seen here in 2015.

2 for Tea focused on how two people of apparently opposite personalities come to be friends and come to be aware they are on a stage being watched. The line between performer and audience became blurred when the two invited audience members on stage to play costumed roles. *High Tea* focused on the contrast between James, who breaks the fourth wall from the start and Jamesy, who doesn't understand what James is doing. Once Jamesy comes to understand the world James lives in, the world of the theatre, the two enter the audience and orchestrate the entire audience's participation in their story from its seats.

Both plays dealt with differences of perception between James and Jamesy and the encouragement of play (or activity for the sake of enjoyment) in the audience. The same is true in *In the Dark*, but the piece proceeds through much more rigorous stages in detailing the nature of perception and of play.

The very costumes the two wear reinforce the show's emphasis on perception. Both wear identical grey suits and identical helmets. The helmets look rather like the huge helmets the first undersea divers used to wear with the significant difference that built into the top of helmet is a large old-fashioned lampshade positioned directly forwards, its open bottom covered by a translucent disc to diffuse the light. The costume makes the two look like retro humanoid versions of Pixar's Luxo lamps. We understand from their gestures that all either can see is what the head-lamp illuminates.

In the Dark begins with a loud noise when a cone of light shines down from somewhere high above the stage. In the cone one of the duo appears with a chair. He places it precisely on the stage, gets into position behind the chair, calls out "Ready", the cone light shines down and the character seems to be drawn upwards by the light. This action occurs several times in succession with James (Aaron Malkin) and Jamesy (Alastair Knowles) alternating in the duty of the chair placer or chair remover. For what seems a long time, "Ready" is the only word we hear from either of them. Then comes a change. One calls out "Ready" and no cone of light appears. Then the same happens to the other leaving the two stranded on stage together for the first time.

Apparently, neither has known of the other's existence since their first reactions on seeing each other are fright and shock. As in *2 for Tea*, we see how two beings first come to know each other and then come to know how to play together. Here, however, the two are not of opposite temperaments, but rather apparently exactly the same. That means that when one

tries to understand what the other looks like and how he reacts, he also, gradually, comes to understand what he himself looks like and how he reacts. Interaction with an "Other" thus increases knowledge of oneself.

This point becomes especially clear when one says he can see the back of the other. Without mirrors one can't see one's own back, so we understand that each one of the two actually needs the other to have a fuller understanding of what he is.

When the two turn off their head-lamps as if with a chain pull and are fully in the dark, they experience the panicked feeling that the other has disappeared. The question both ask, "Are you there?" is no longer a trivial question but an existential one. The minimalist dialogue with its frequent repetitions has already made the play seem much like a sci-fi version of a play by Samuel Beckett.

Now with the question whether things and beings exist when they cannot be seen, James and Jamesy enter into one of Beckett's favourite subjects – "esse est percipi" ("to be is to be perceived"). This is the central tenet of the philosophy of the Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753) and Beckett used it as the motto for his one film simply called *Film* from 1965. One of the main preoccupations of characters in Beckett's plays is whether they are seen. In *Waiting for Godot* (1953), Vladimir and Estragon insist that the messenger boy from the absent Godot tell his master that he has *seen* them so that Godot will at least know that they exist. In later plays Beckett's characters depend on the sound of a voice, often their own, to give them proof that they exist. In *In the Dark* James and Jamesy don't reach that final stage of aloneness. They come to learn that hearing the voice of the other is proof enough that he is still there.

Once the two have established that each is just like the other and have become used to their

mutual dependence, the show takes the same turn that it does in *High Tea*. The two aliens suddenly become aware that across the gulf separating the stage from the audience's seats there are other people and the people are watching them. The greatest excitement of the show is when the two enter the audience and Jamesy examines us to see what we're like and if we know how to play the game of the walking finger-man that both he and James play.

After that excursion, they bring that knowledge back to the stage with them and something magical happens. This part of the show is so surprising I do not wish to give it away. Let me just say that through an inexplicable combination of eye-contact and gesture, the duo manages to elicit and control the audience's audible reactions. People often speak of "the magic of the theatre", but this is truly magical. How we have established such a bond with them and they with us is unknown but somehow the two have taught us a game and we have learned to play it to our own infinite amusement and wonder.

Teaching the audience to play again is part of *In the Dark* as it has been in James and Jamesy's previous shows. But *In the Dark* looks more deeply at the subject. For theatre to work it must be observed. For people to know more fully about themselves they need other people. The theatrical experience is based on our perception of others on stage while we learn more about ourselves by observing these others. In *In the Dark* James and Jamesy demonstrate step by step why both play and plays are necessary both for enjoyment of life and for self-knowledge. *In the Dark* is still as comic as the duo's previous plays. But this is comedy at its profoundest and most essential. It may be a play on words but it is also true – *In the Dark* is a play that enlightens. Anyone interested in the ultimate nature of theatre must see it.