

► **THEATRE**

# Sleeping partner gives Bates a wake-up call

**Life Support**  
**Richmond Theatre**

THE SET is stark and clinical. The patient is lying immobile, rigged up to a collection of drips and bottles. A monitor screen beeps softly. No explanation is needed.

The background to the scene (and the two main characters) – the wife comatose in bed, the husband at her side is, aptly, drip-fed during Simon Gray's thought-provoking play.

Gwen (Georgina Hale) was stung by a bee while she and her travel writer husband JG (Alan Bates) were on a far-flung cycling holiday. A seemingly trivial incident, but it resulted in Gwen lapsing into a vegetative state. Her destiny is an interminable stretch on life support. In many ways, his destiny is the same.

*Life Support* charts the changing moods, pressures and feelings of the partner of a persistently vegetative patient. The laid-back male nurse Pat (Frank McCusker) acts as a sounding board for JG's emotions, while the truth of the couple's relationship – day-to-day trivia, exalted highs, humdrum lows – emerges through JG's

glorious conversations with himself in which he speaks his wife's imagined responses.

In many ways it's very touching, and although there are inevitable echoes of *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* Gray largely steers clear of the debate about whether the plug should be pulled, concentrating instead on the effect of a long coma on the 'surviving' partner.

Grim, black humour peppers the script, but it's sometimes hard to laugh.

Bates is magnificent, and director Harold Pinter has also coaxed a tremendous performance from Georgina Hale in the hospital bed.

But the ending is staggered and disappointing, as if Gray (still, you sense from the odd remark, affected by Stephen Fry's famous desertion from *Cell Mates*) couldn't make his mind up, and bunged in every alternative.

*Life Support continues until tomorrow (Sat). Performances 7.45pm, Sat matinee 2.30pm. Tickets £7-£17. Bookings: 0181 940 0088.*

**Tim Harrison**

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Sun, Nov 6, 2022