



Alan Bates, with Georgina Hale, never strikes a false note

## Bates's kiss of life fails to save the day

ALAN BATES spent a fraught hundred minutes last night valiantly struggling to deliver the kiss of life to a new Simon Gray play, which washed up in the West End — looking more dead than alive. Mr Bates is well known for his sort of rescue work. Only last year at Chichester he managed, almost single-handed, to resuscitate another moribund Gray drama by sheer force of acting. But time he could not manage this time with it, not even Harold Pinter, that most frequent and eloquent director of Gray's enigmatic, earlier, plays, was able to provide more than palliative first aid.

Life Support, set in a private room of a London hospital, is preoccupied by death and dying. Bates's Jeff Golding, or JG as they affectionately call him, is a popular travel writer, attending the bedside of his wife Owen who's mysteriously reduced to a vegetative state by a bee's sting. Speaking to her as if she were conscious, JG summons up her voice in his imagination to speak out long and rattle a store of memories of their shared, childless life together. Bates, always at his best playing inscrutable men, wears a look of glacial distraction, while preserving a placid calm.

There is, however, no real theatrical line of development. No situation or character changes. JG's actor-brother, Jack, his agent and ambiguous amour Julia (Carole Nimmo) and a young doctor with an undercover mission are all platonically employed to show by what a host of lies many lives are possessed. But there's no conflict over these strands of plot and plotting. At least, though, direction interestingly fills the play towards the terrain of fantasy: Eileen Dick's hospital room design is framed by windows looking out on perpetual night. Gray's weakness for low-grade, conservative humour, for patronising banter and flippancy, keeps spilling the high pathos of Owen's situation. JG's gay, therapist brother Jack — played by Nicholas Grace — puts in an appearance, thereby allowing

an unsuccessful actor's existence, hounded by mob theatre and hotel life. Bates's performance, with first verbs of great shattering, his facade of frontal darkness does not strike a single false note — though JG himself turns out to be a man who has traded on deception as writer and husband. Yet Gray provides no piercing reminiscences when JG talks to Owen — for when Georgia Hale memorably provides a voice-of-overhears, the intensity of JG's guilt or devotion has to be based on truth. It's also unclear what happens to the wife and if JG bears some responsibility for her condition. Although Life Support lasts only 100 minutes, it feels longer. Pinter nicely points the play's occasional comic touches and the actors make a few neat sketches from Gray's very basic characterisations. But Pinter cannot disguise the play's aimlessness. Bates's face becomes Life Support's small fortune because it hints of a youth of feelings never brought to light or life.

Reviews: No stars — adequate  
★ good ★★ very good  
★★★ outstanding ★★★★★ poor  
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Life Support  
The Aldwych

by Nicholas de Jongh

# Life Support de Jongh Standard



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Sun, Nov 6, 2022