

THE TIMES

ARTS

an evening with a remarkable man

BARCLAYS New Stages often justifies its boast to be "a festival of the very best in cutting edge performance" — most recently, with Janice Galloway's *Trick is to Keep Breathing* — but seldom as literally as this. Photos of what appear to be long, serrated knives, representing broken nerves or their microbiological destroyers, are projected onto the stage's side-walls. Beside them is a young man who describes what it is like to live, day after day, feeling there are "a thousand pieces of glass piercing the bones, twisting and turning, digging deeper and deeper".

He is Graham Cunnington, who has suffered from rheumatoid arthritis as long as he can recall. The monologue *Pain*, which is performed by him and presented by a Glasgow company called NVA, lives up to its blunt, bald title in two ways. Troubling sounds and images — lurid whorls, pulsating cells, metallic bangs and grindings, even an upside-down figure spinning in the void — evoke the experience of being trapped by

Insights from a life of agony

Pain
Royal Court

pain. Meanwhile, Cunnington tells us his story in the tones, not of the desperate invalid, but of the dogged survivor.

His mother was drowned in the bath while she was pregnant. His father clearly struggled bringing up two children, one of them seriously disabled and bewildered by his own helplessness. Much of Graham's early life was spent hooked up to machines with bewildering names or being poked at by not-very-effective

doctors. But there came a point when he threw away his pills and, he says, refused to accept his status as victim.

He seems to have started thinking of his war with pain as the struggle of his capacity for love with a harsh, punishing world. This took the bizarre form of joining a band whose members biffed the iron detritus they found on abandoned industrial estates by way of protesting against Thatcherism; but the effect was cathartic and therapeutic.

Conventional criticism breaks down at this point. What can I say, except that Cunnington's continuing battle with an elusive, unforgiving disease is the more impressive because he does not ask for pity or even much sympathy. He seems to see himself as an explorer, forced by circumstances along cliff-faces he would rather avoid but rewarded by insights and feelings that have verged on the mystical. He and *Pain* merit unequivocal respect.

BENEDICT
NIGHTINGALE