

“The Hedgehog”

By Gerard Dunning

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With thanks to the many Directors and Actors for their guidance.

Meet *The Hedgehog*, a prickly, manic, and endlessly self-important man in his later years, scrambling to write his own eulogy after a terminal diagnosis. With a pen in hand and a whisky glass within reach, he conjures a heroic, chaotic, and outrageously exaggerated version of his life, loves conquered, battles fought, work victories immortalized.

But nothing is ever simple. Stylized memory fragments, ex-lovers, colleagues, school friends, and neighbours, flicker in and out, offering glimpses of the real events, often contradicting his grandiose claims. Oblivious to these truths, the Hedgehog spins every minor slight into epic drama, every mistake into triumph, and every failure into comic legend.

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The Hedgehog

A one-act play in five scenes

Setting

A single space that transforms subtly over time. An environment that feels both like a cluttered study and the inside of The Hedgehog's mind.

Characters

The Hedgehog: (late 60s or older) A bundle of contradictions wrapped in manic energy. He is self-aggrandising, quick to exaggerate every minor triumph into legend, and fiercely defensive whenever his fragile grandeur is threatened. In his own mind, he is brilliant, an unrecognised genius whose wit and charm should have secured him a grand legacy, but to others he often comes across as prickly, combative, and absurdly dramatic. He thrives on attention, forever pacing, gesturing, and punctuating his own words with explosive bursts of laughter, as if performing to an unseen crowd. His worldview is riddled with distortions: he is always right, and everyone else is a fool. Yet beneath the bluster, there is vulnerability, a man who knows his defences are spikes, but still hopes to be remembered.

Memory Fragments / Ghosts of the Past: Stylised, exaggerated, mostly short lines. They never fully contradict him but provide comic reality glimpses.

Old Flame: Sultry, glamorous, teasing.

Colleague: Office rival, sarcastic, muttering about his flaws.

School Friend: Mischievous, teasing, brief interventions.

Character at Lectern: Played by one of the Memory Fragments, or by a new, unknown character. Delivers the final eulogy in a stern judgemental manner.

Fragments flicker in and out, appear suddenly mid-sentence, heightening chaos and comedy.

Author's Note

The Hedgehog is a play that exists in the uneasy space between comedy and tragedy. At its core, it is a study of ego, memory, and mortality, and of the ways in which we mythologise ourselves even as our bodies and reputations fail us. *The Hedgehog* is not a hero, nor entirely a fool; he is a man desperate to be remembered, clinging to wit and exaggeration as armour against his own insignificance.

The play should be staged with a sense of theatrical imagination rather than realism. Fragments of memory, half-truths, and unreliable narratives hover around *The Hedgehog*, sometimes comic, sometimes cutting, always precarious. His world is one of heightened gestures and distorted perspectives, yet beneath the bluster lies vulnerability, a fragile life dressed in grandiose self-mythology.

The final scene pivots toward something more sombre: the manic performance collapses, revealing a man facing death, his story handed over to others to tell. It is important that the transition from comedy to pathos feels earned, not sudden. We must still laugh at him, but we must also feel the weight of his humanity as he fades.

Directors are encouraged to embrace contrast: humour and sadness, pomp and fragility, bravado and collapse. *The Hedgehog's* life is a balancing act of contradictions, and the staging should reflect that tension, moments of chaos giving way to stillness, moments of bluster yielding to silence.

Above all, this is not the story of a great man, but of a man who wanted greatness. Whether he finds redemption in the end is left deliberately unresolved. That question, of whether *The Hedgehog* was as awful as he appeared, or whether, in his final words, he found a gentler truth, belongs to the audience.

Scene 1 – Not Quite Dead Yet

(Lights up. A modest study. A desk, a worn chair, stacks of paper, pens, and half-empty cups. A single lamp throws a pool of light. HEDGEHOG sits slumped at the desk, scribbling half-formed lines, then crossing them out with a groan. He mutters, frustrated. Long pause. Silence is almost uncomfortable. He leans back, stares at the ceiling)

The Hedgehog: *(Quiet, reflective)*

It isn't enough... none of it. A speech? A memoir? Too small. Too ordinary. No one remembers ordinary.

(He toys with a pen, tapping it against the paper, lost in thought. A flicker of light at the edge of the stage - the first Fragment appears, a figure from his past, half-in shadow)

School Friend: *(Teasing)*

You always said you'd be famous... remember? Bigger than all of us.

The Hedgehog: *(Glances up, startled, then scoffs)*

Famous? Ha! Hardly. Infamous, perhaps.

(He chuckles to himself, then shakes his head, trying to focus on the page again. The FRIEND lingers, humming an old tune. Another flicker. A second Fragment steps forward - a Colleague)

Colleague: *(Weary, half-dismissive)*

You couldn't even finish a report without a tantrum. And now you want... what, a monument?

The Hedgehog: *(Bridling, defensive)*

Not a monument. Something... lasting. A mark. My mark.

(He drums his fingers. Fragments hover, half-watching, half-mocking. He scratches another line, mutters aloud)

The Hedgehog:

A story, perhaps. Yes... my story. Not theirs, not their lies... mine.

(Pause. He grows more animated, warming to the thought, though still restrained.)

The Hedgehog:

Something to be read aloud. Heard. Echoing in the air... like a performance.

(Old Flame fragment glides in, glamorous)

Old Flame: *(Amused, smiling)*

Darling, you could never resist an audience. Even now. Who would listen?

The Hedgehog: *(Grins, almost sheepish)*

Everyone. Eventually. They'd have to.

(He chuckles nervously, then grows thoughtful. He sits again, scribbling, the energy rising slowly. Fragments circle him, their voices overlapping — doubts, jibes, memories. Each line is like fuel, stoking the spark)

Fragments: *(Overlapping, murmuring, teasing)*

- Always exaggerating...
- Never finished what you started...
- A genius, in his own head...
- You can't help but perform...

The Hedgehog: *(Interrupts, suddenly louder, striking the desk with his hand)*

Yes! Perform. That's it. It isn't enough to live... it must be staged. Shaped. Told.

(He rises, pacing slowly now, not manic yet — more thoughtful, plotting)

The Hedgehog:

If I write it, I control it. Every detail, every memory... mine to choose, mine to shape. No one else decides how I am remembered. Only me.

(He looks back at the paper. The lamplight seems brighter. His pen hovers above the page. A small smile forms — the beginning of a dangerous idea)

The Hedgehog: *(Soft, almost to himself)*

Yes... I'll write it. My words. My account. Not yet... not fully. But... soon.

(Fragments edge closer, silent now, watching like an audience leaning in. The Hedgehog bends over the paper again. His hand trembles slightly as he begins to write, slower this time, deliberate. Lights fade to black)

Scene 2 – The Performance Begins

(Lights rise. The Hedgehog is at his desk, but the papers now form a semi-circle fortress around him. He holds one sheet aloft, declaiming like an orator. His voice is a little too loud for the empty room)

The Hedgehog: *(Loud, triumphant)*

“In the beginning...!”

(He freezes. Lowers the page. Reads it again silently. Frowns)

The Hedgehog: *(Flatly, muttering)*

No. Too biblical. Too... pompous.

(He crumples the page and tosses it. Immediately grabs another, tries again)

The Hedgehog: *(Performative, with a sweeping gesture)*

They said he was impossible... but unforgettable.

(From the shadows, School Friend fragment chuckles)

School Friend:

More like unbearable.

The Hedgehog: *(Unfazed, pointing at the voice)*

Yes! Unbearable but unforgettable! That’s the point — you can’t *ignore* me. Can’t be done.

(He scribbles on the paper, muttering quickly. Old Flame fragment drifts forward)

Old Flame:

Darling, you always thought you were the centre of the world.

The Hedgehog: *(Pauses, then grins with theatrical flourish)*

Yes! Exactly! Write that down — “the centre of the world.” That’s better than “unforgettable.” More poetic. More... eternal.

(He writes furiously, then stops. Reads it aloud with mock gravitas)

The Hedgehog:

“He lived at the centre of the world.”

(Pause. He winces. Crosses it out. Slams the pen down)

The Hedgehog:

No. Too vague. Centre of *whose* world? What world? Bah!

(He paces, muttering to himself. School Friend and Old Flame circle closer, trading remarks like echoes)

School Friend:

You never stayed in one place long enough to have a world.

Old Flame:

You wanted to be adored. Even when no one was watching.

The Hedgehog: *(Stops, considers this. Then, with a sly grin)*

Exactly. That’s it. Adoration. Not truth, not fact — but the *story*. The story is what lasts.

(He picks up a page and launches into another attempt, more confident)

The Hedgehog:

“They will say he burned with wit. That he dazzled. That wherever he stood, the world became a little brighter.”

(He pauses, basking in the image. Then undercuts himself with a laugh)

The Hedgehog:

Or... perhaps they’ll just say I talked too much.

(The fragments laugh with him. Hedgehog joins, though it sounds defensive. He paces again, gathering momentum.)

The Hedgehog:

But no matter. Whether dazzling or unbearable... at least they’ll remember me. And memory, my dear shades, is immortality.

(He writes feverishly. The fragments lean in, watching him like hungry spectators. Lights fade)

Scene 3 – Cracks in the Mask

(Lights up. The study has descended further into chaos. Papers crumpled, piled high. Hedgehog sits hunched at the desk, hair wild, muttering under his breath as he scrawls. A long pause. He reads aloud in a subdued tone)

The Hedgehog:

“He was a man of contradictions. Arrogant. Tender. Brilliant. Foolish.”

(Pauses. Scoffs)

Contradictions... that’s just a polite way of saying “no one knew what to make of him.”

(Colleague fragment steps forward, smug.)

Colleague:

They didn’t. Not at the office. Half thought you were a genius. Half thought you were a liability.

The Hedgehog: *(Snaps back, defensive)*

Yes, well... you don’t get remembered for being *reasonable*, do you? No statue was ever erected to “Mr. Sensible”!

(He pushes the papers off the desk with a sweep of his arm. They fall like snow)

The Hedgehog: *(Shouting now)*

They’ll remember the *spark*! The brilliance!

(He stops abruptly. Silence. The Hedgehog looks down at his hands)

The Hedgehog: *(Softer, almost to himself)*

What if they don’t remember me at all?

(Old Flame steps closer, voice warm, almost kind)

Old Flame:

I remembered you. For a time. Until you made it impossible.

The Hedgehog: *(Winces, bitter laugh)*

Yes. Yes, impossible. That's what they'll say. "He was impossible."

(He scrawls the word IMPOSSIBLE across a page in big letters. Holds it up, glaring at it. Then softer, almost tenderly)

The Hedgehog:

But "impossible" has power. Impossible means... more than ordinary. More than forgettable.

(School Friend joins, teasing but not cruel)

School Friend:

Or maybe it just means you never quite fit.

The Hedgehog: *(Stops. Looks at the fragments, voice quieter)*

Never fit. Yes. That's closer to the truth.

(He sits heavily. Silence. The fragments hover, their presence oppressive. A long beat)

The Hedgehog: *(Straightens, steels himself)*

No. No, no, no. Truth isn't enough. Truth is small. But the story — the story is grand. They will have my story.

(He begins writing again, faster, more feverish. Lights dim slowly)

Scene 4 – The Edge of Revelation

(Lights rise. The room is suffocating with paper, piled high, covering every surface. Hedgehog is on the desk, arms spread like a conductor addressing an orchestra. His voice booms, manic)

The Hedgehog: *(Declaring)*

“And so when the curtain fell, it was not the end... it was the crescendo! The final triumph!
A man too vast for this small stage of earth!”

(He pauses, chest heaving. Silence)

The Hedgehog: *(Shoulders drop. Voice cracks)*

Or maybe... just a tired man. Scribbling in the dark.

(The fragments drift closer, circling him like vultures)

School Friend: *(Quietly)*

You always wanted fireworks. Not a whimper.

The Hedgehog: *(Weak smile)*

Yes. Fireworks. Even if they burn out too quickly.

(Colleague steps forward)

Colleague: *(Mocking but faintly respectful)*

You never finished what you started. Always half-brilliant, half-chaos.

The Hedgehog: *(Bridles, then slumps)*

Yes. Chaos. But dazzling chaos. That’s something. That’s... something.

(Old Flame appears)

Old Flame: *(Tone gentler now)*

Maybe what mattered was never the fireworks. Maybe it was... being seen. Just once, truly seen.

(The Hedgehog freezes. Looks at her. For a long moment he says nothing. Then he sits, slowly, heavily, in his chair. He strokes a page in his hand as though it were alive)

The Hedgehog: *(Whispering)*

One more page. That's all. One more push, and they'll see.

(He looks out at the audience, direct, piercing, and vulnerable. Holds their gaze. His voice steadies, resolute)

The Hedgehog:

They'll see me as I wish to be seen.

(The fragments retreat into the shadows, silent now. The Hedgehog remains at the desk, pen poised. Lights fade to black)

Scene 5 — The Final Payoff

(Lights up. The Hedgehog sits at his desk, scribbling with renewed mania. His pen scratches loudly, almost violently. His face glows with feverish excitement — but his movements are slower now, more laboured. Fragments hover faintly, half-transparent, less intrusive than before)

The Hedgehog: *(Manic, muttering)*

Yes... yes, this is it. The final masterpiece! Every slight, every love, every stumble woven into glory... They will stand, they will weep, they will say, *what a life!*

(He scrawls, coughing. His hand falters, but he forces it onward. He clutches his chest, pauses, then scratches another line. The fragments flicker briefly, their lines overlapping faintly — less like mockery now, more like echoes of a fading mind)

Fragments: *(Soft, overlapping whispers)*

...He cried when he tripped...
...Never finished what he started...
...Stubborn to the last...
...Always dreaming...

(The Hedgehog pushes through, fighting the whispers)

The Hedgehog: *(Laughs, ragged)*

Yes! All of it... *all of it* makes the legend greater! The quills, the scrapes, the failures... they'll shine in the telling!

(But his energy drains. His pen drops from his fingers, rolling across the desk. His shoulders slump, his breaths grow shallow. Slowly, the light around him begins to dim. He withers before us, stylised, not collapsing, but shrinking into stillness as if becoming part of the shadows. The organ music begins, a low and mournful swell)

(A new pool of light appears downstage left, illuminating a lectern draped in black cloth, with flowers. It has not been seen until now. The Hedgehog's desk is almost fully in shadow. A figure, perhaps Old Flame, Colleague, or another fragment, now grounded and real, steps into the light. They hold a few papers, visibly uneasy)

Character at Lectern: *(Quietly, hesitant)*

He... he wanted me to read this. His words. Not mine.

(They shuffle the pages nervously, glance out at the audience, and then back down. A long pause)

Character at Lectern:

I don't know if it's... right. To end like this. To let him have the last word. He was... difficult. Proud. Impossible. But... he insisted. So... here it is.

(They clear their throat and begin to read. Their voice carries more weight than confidence, wavering at times, but committed)

Character at Lectern: *(Reading)*

"My name... well, some called me *The Hedgehog*. A stubborn creature, prickly, hard to love. I admit it: I chased grandeur. I wanted my life to matter, to echo. But most of my castles were made of paper. Most of my triumphs... imagined more than earned."

*(The reader hesitates, uncomfortable. Looks up at the audience as if silently asking, **Should I keep going?** Then sighs and pushes on)*

Character at Lectern: *(Reading, softer)*

"I loved, though not well. I fought, often foolishly. I dreamed... always beyond my reach. And if I was laughed at... perhaps I deserved it. If I left more confusion than clarity, well, maybe that too was my gift. Because I was here. I lived. I left... a few scratches."

(The character falters again, lowering the pages. They glance outward, conflicted. Their voice shifts, more personal now)

Character at Lectern: *(Quietly, to themselves almost)*

This... this doesn't feel like redemption. It doesn't smooth anything over. It's messy. Awkward. It's him.

(They steady themselves, straighten the pages, and finish reading)

Character at Lectern: *(Reading, trembling slightly)*

“So if you remember me, don’t remember the bluster, or the spines. Remember that I tried... always tried... to be bigger than I was. That I wanted to be loved, even if I made it hard. That I believed... perhaps foolishly... that my story mattered.”

(Beat. The character lowers the pages completely, standing in silence for a moment. The music swells faintly, then softens)

Character at Lectern: *(Soft, uncertain)*

That... was what he wanted said. His final words.

(They step back from the lectern, visibly unsettled, as though unsure whether they’ve honoured him or betrayed him. The Hedgehog’s desk is now in total darkness. Only the lectern remains in half-light, then slowly fades as the organ lingers unresolved)

(Blackout)