

## THE STAGE

### Lifers review



“Finds just the right tone”

[Reviews](#) Oct 7, 2025 by [Dave Fagnoli](#) Southwark Playhouse Borough, London



*Peter Wight in Lifers at Southwark Playhouse Borough, London. Photo: Richard Southgate*

#### Thoughtful, prison-set character study from Synergy Theatre Project

Poignant, honest and affecting, this thought-provoking drama from playwright Evan Placey and [Synergy Theatre Project](#) – who make work with current and former prisoners – picks apart some satisfyingly knotty ethical dilemmas. The story centres on long-term inmate Lenny, facing up to the prospect of dying in prison when his health deteriorates and he begins to experience memory loss. Around him, a believably drawn cast of fellow inmates and prison service providers respond with a mixture of support, empathy and callousness.

Placey pulls no punches and – at least until the more melodramatic closing scenes – resists sentimentalising his subjects. The smart text repeatedly leads us to make judgements about characters on both sides of the bars, then systematically reveals new details to make us re-evaluate our opinions of their behaviour and motivations.

Director Esther Baker's well-judged staging finds just the right tone, bringing the pleasingly dark humour to the fore without ever minimising the grim state of the prison system or the severity of the prisoners' crimes. Similarly, fight director Cristian Cardenas gives a scrap between two frustrated geriatric inmates just the right balance of slapstick comedy and cathartic violence – vicious in the moment, later giving way to pained, relieved laughter. Though the production as a whole can feel slow-paced, each scene feels natural and serves a clear purpose, allowing us time to sit with the characters and ruminate on their dilemmas.

Heading a likeable cast, Peter Wight sensitively conveys Lenny's slips of memory, zoning out mid-sentence or repeating himself, but trying to hide his growing confusion under affable bluster and whimsical – although evidently unreliable – anecdotes about his family on the outside. When he can no longer hide his frustration, he lashes out with sudden ferocity. Ricky Fearon is strong, too, as prisoner Baxter, projecting warmth and easy confidence, but always remaining guarded and watchful. He shares a prickly, antagonistic friendship with Sam Cox's Norton, another long-time inmate who has mellowed enough that his deep-rooted nihilistic nastiness barely shows.

Mona Goodwin is all jaded detachment as the prisoners' tough, seen-it-all-before doctor, while James Backway channels an opposite energy as idealistic young prison officer Mark. He wrestles believably with his role, caught between maintaining the cold detachment his job demands and offering Lenny the simple human care and dignity he so clearly needs.

The austere atmospheric set, from Katy McPhee, is suitably stark, with a series of brutal, squared-off archways clad in a rough, charcoal-grey texture suggesting interconnecting cells and concrete corridors. A slanted grille hovers claustrophobically low over the actors' heads, tilting down towards a vanishing point on an implied horizon to which none of the characters can escape.