Whenever the subject of cloning human beings is raised, images from cinema science fiction are never far behind. With herds of mindless, robotic replicants - whether the smooth limbed Aryans in Blade Runner or the nasty battalions of squelchy orcs in The Lord of the Rings - they invariably equate cloning, or some similar form of duplication, with mass production and the machinations of evil-doers. But what if cloning was for much more likely human reasons - to replace a loved one who has died, a child for instance, and what if there was only one?

In Caryl Churchill’s recent sixty minute one-act play that is the plan. Except there is not just one clone, there is A Number, nineteen more to be exact. In this astute, sparsely written drama Churchill, for thirty years one of Britain’s leading playwrights, brings her distinctive originality to the question of identity and its origins.

In State Theatre’s production, director Marion Potts and designer Gaelle Mellis have focused on the particulars of the situation with a simple decor - literally a square of carpet and two unmatched chairs with a somewhat cryptic large negative photographic image of an unmade bed looming behind the action.
The task for the actors - Frank Gallacher as Salter and Marcus Graham, Bernard and two of his carbons - is to deliver Churchill’s dense and thrifty text. There is a touch of Mamet or Pinter in her compression but it is also splendidly lucid and has no need for fidgety gesticulation and, in Graham’s case, such exaggeration of London accents to differentiate the Bernards that I was starting to think B1 had been cloned from Ian Dury.

I hope these excesses will settle as the season progresses because they mar the overall strength of the performances. Gallacher’s Salter is disturbingly indifferent to the enormity of his parental failure and Graham strongly captures the anxiety of a child without a sense of valued uniqueness. In a number of ways State Theatre has given us a fine production of a most intriguing play.