

Why Theatre is essential in our Life

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Not long ago I was at the Ensemble Theatre to see a play Tuesdays with Morrie. Perhaps you have seen this play, or read the book by Mitch Albom that formed the basis of the play. The play itself is no more than two people talking, an old man, Morrie, who is dying of motor neuron disease, and Mitch, a man in his thirties who had been Morrie's student. At its simplest and most obvious level, the story that emerges is that Mitch, having been hurt by the death of his uncle, the only person who really cared for him and whom Mitch loved, resolved never to love anyone again. Through their conversations Morrie shows Mitch that this is a very foolish decision because it will inevitably lead to a lonely, unhappy life. At this level, the play is sentimental, even trite. Yet all plays, in terms of their basic plot, are trite. Take, for instance, the play where two teenagers from feuding families fall in love and, after a series of mistakes and misunderstandings, kill themselves. Their parents are distressed and end their feud. Yet most plays aren't trite. Most plays have the richness and complexity that comes with the portrayal of the characters' motives and feelings. The audience isn't presented with these directly. They have to search for them. A character might say, 'I am in love', but he may be lying, or he may be mistaken about his feelings. Juliet's love for Romeo is from the beginning real and intense, but Romeo first plays at being in love and then he discovers that he actually is in love. Yet Shakespeare doesn't tell us this directly. We have to work that out for ourselves. Many plays have no depth, especially the multitude of dramas written for television. The people who commission such plays assume that their audiences don't want to have to think. In this they underestimate their audience. For most of us, working out what other people think and feel is what we do all the time. We find a play without depth utterly boring. However, there are people who cannot understand or do not want to understand that other people have feelings, and that we have reasons for what we do. An acquaintance of mine told me that her husband was depressed and was consulting a psychiatrist. In tones of great amazement, she said, 'The psychiatrist wanted to see me. I didn't know why, but I went along, and do you know what he told me? He said that other people had feelings. I didn't know that.' I could understand why she always read the shallowest of novels and never went to see a play. I also understood why she had no sense of humour. A sense of humour requires the ability to see the incongruities and the sheer ridiculousness in what people feel, say and do. Characters like this woman are often portrayed in comedies where the comedy is based on the fact that the character is quite unaware of his or her effect on other people. In Twelfth Night Malvolio was easily tricked into wearing yellow stocking cross garters. The television comedy series One Foot in the Grave had Richard Wilson portraying the ultimate in grumpy old men who, like all grumpy old men, was unaware of his effect on other people. We laugh at these characters when they are on stage, but, when we encounter them in real life, we discover how painful it is to be at the receiving end of the utter selfishness of the totally self-absorbed person. I think that the woman I described was one of those people who truly do not know that other people have feelings. Such people had the most unfortunate infancy in that, in those first few months when a baby forms a bond with one mothering person, no such person was available for them. In the first months after birth, our brain sets itself up much in the way that a computer has to be set up, but the setting up software for the young brain is the environment around the baby. That environment must contain the right elements so that the baby's brain learns how to enable the baby to learn how to see, hear, touch, smell, taste, and form bonds with other human beings. All this has to be done within a certain window of opportunity. Miss that window, and the baby's brain never learns how to perform these tasks. If, say, a baby's eyes happen to be obscured, perhaps by a cataract, during the window of opportunity, the baby never learns to see because, during the window of opportunity, the visual cortex has been taken over by the other senses. In the same way, if a baby is born during a conflict such as in Gaza at present, or a natural disaster like a tsunami, or to a woman who does not know how to mother and no else is able to take her place, the baby is likely to fail how to learn how to form a relationship with other human beings. Such babies grow up thinking that the world is full of objects, some of which walk and talk. They also fail to develop a conscience. Psychiatrists label such people 'psychopaths', but not all psychopaths are criminals. Many of them are lawyers, politicians, CEOs, and hedge fund managers. Those of us who did form a bond with some mothering person do grow up understanding that other people have feelings, but we can be very wrong in the feelings and motives we attribute to other people. For instance, vast numbers of people tell themselves and others that their enemies are dirty, wicked, and lacking all human feelings, unlike themselves whom they see as being clean, virtuous, and possessing all the finer feelings. It is this lie that creates and maintains all the terrible conflicts in the world. Many people lie to themselves about their own feelings. If you have been brought up in the family where anger is seen by your parents as being totally unacceptable, or where the parents express their anger aggressively, you can become so frightened of your own anger that, when you do become angry, you call what you feel 'fear'. Unexpressed and unrecognised anger does not dissipate, and so, if you lie to yourself about your anger, you spend your life being a martyr to your constant anxiety. Many people, particularly men, tell themselves that they have no feelings, and that this is the mark of manliness. Mitch thinks that he had killed off his need to love and be loved. Close to death, Morrie scores a triumph when Mitch cries. Ordinary plays show us the lies people tell one another, but good plays reveal the lies we tell ourselves. Good plays can also teach us, not only that we have reason for everything we do but that there are reasons behind our reasons. Many people do not understand that. A popular novelist whose novels are racy but shallow discussed with me the plot of her new novel. Her story concerned a young woman who had gone back to her home town in order to unravel the mystery of her father's life. I asked, 'Why was it important to your heroine to find out about her father's life?' The novelist was nonplussed. She had given her heroine a motive to return to her home town where, as the plot unfolded, she would find romance, but she had no idea that we

have reasons for our reasons, and reasons for those reasons, until we get to the one reason that underlies everything that each of us does. Our ultimate reason is that we have to survive as a person. So important is surviving as a person is to us, that, in an heroic act or an act of suicide, we let ourselves die in order to be the person we know ourselves to be. In less extreme circumstances but feeling that our sense of being a person is in danger, we will carry out the most stupid or outrageous acts, or believe the most nonsensical things. Shakespeare knew that the need to preserve our sense of being a person is the essence of tragedy. To be himself, Hamlet had to avenge his father. To defend herself against the living death of marriage to Paris, Juliet had to refuse the marriage, suffer her parents' rage, and ultimately kill herself. Macbeth thought that he needed power in order to be himself, but, in gaining power, he destroyed himself. Shakespeare's plays have layer upon layer of meaning. Tuesdays with Morrie lacks that depth, but it does have a truthful simplicity that can demonstrate to us how we operate as human beings. But to understand this, we have to understand what it is to be a human being. Everyone should know this, but many people don't. I stand here it seems to me that I'm here and you're over there and it's all real. But actually, what I'm seeing is a picture that my brain has created in my head. My brain has played a clever trick on me, and has persuaded me that the picture is not in my head with me all around it, but I'm in the middle and the picture is all around me. Your brain has played the same trick on you. What you're experiencing is the picture inside your head. If each of us could take a print of our picture out of our head, and hang it on the wall so we could walk around and look at all of them, we would see that no two pictures are identical. There might be enough similarity for us to recognise one another's pictures, but there would be differences in the depth and distances, in colour, and, most of all, differences in what each of us had noticed and what we have ignored. This is because our brain has constructed our pictures out of our past experience, and, since no two people ever have the same experience, no two people ever see anything in exactly the same way. If we weren't like this, if we could look directly at the world and see what was there, we would have no media and no arts. There would be news reporting, but no analysts and commentators. No Gerard Henderson, no Phillip Adams. There would be no plays or novels because everyone would see everything in the same way and behave in the same way. If religion existed, there would be just one religion, and, presumably, no religious wars. Because there is such variety in the way we interpret what we experience, there is such a large variety of religions, each proclaiming, 'We, and we alone, are in possession of the Absolute Truth!' Out of such foolish pride come the cruel, devastating religious wars, such as we see in the Middle East at present. To know an Absolute Truth we would have to be able to see reality directly. If we were able to see reality directly, what we would see is hard to imagine. As it is, we live in a human-sized world. Elephants live in an elephant-sized world. Ants live in an ant-sized world. If we were capable of seeing reality directly, we would live in a particle-sized world, and we would no longer possess the ability to impose on this ever-moving, ever-changing chaos the familiar divisions of things and people. I wouldn't be able to perceive you, and you wouldn't be able to perceive me. All the time our brain is constructing a stream of images and ideas. Some of these are conscious, most are not. This stream of images and ideas flows all the time, and, like a stream of water, it forms eddies and whirlpools. Early in our life one of these whirlpools becomes our sense of being a person — what you call 'I', 'me', 'myself'. When we look at a whirlpool in a stream, we can name it as a thing, but we know that, if we tried to lift it out of the stream, it would disappear because it doesn't exist on its own. It is part of the stream. It is the same with our sense of being a person. We talk about ourselves as if we are separate from our body, and all religions assume that there is a soul or spirit that is separate from the body, but, alas, neuroscientists have no evidence to support such a belief. Our sense of being a person and our brain are one. Something we all know but rarely talk about is how easily our sense of being a person can be threatened with disintegration. We know that when other people treat us as being objects of no importance, when they betray or humiliate us, we can feel that we are shrivelling, disappearing. Whenever we discover a serious discrepancy between what we thought our life was and what it actually is, we feel ourselves shattering, crumbling, even disappearing. What is shattering and crumbling are some of our ideas, but, since our sense of being a person is made up of ideas, this feels as if we are shattering and crumbling, even disappearing. These experiences are so terrifying that we do whatever we can to protect our sense of being a person. Often what we do is stupid in the extreme. As much as Capulet loved his daughter Juliet, he was prepared to use her or to destroy her in order to pursue 'an ancient grudge' between his family and that of Montague. He had built his identity on the need to defeat the family of Montague. As part of this, he wanted to give Juliet in marriage to Paris. When she refused, he told her she could 'hang, beg, starve, die in the streets, For by my soul I'll never acknowledge thee.' Lady Capulet, whose identity depended on that of her husband, saw her daughter as a threat, and rejected her, saying, 'Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word, Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee.' Mitch's parents wanted him to be a lawyer, not a jazz pianist. He defied them, went to live with his uncle in order to pursue a musical career, but, when his uncle died a horrible death from cancer, Mitch faced the terrible chasm between what he thought his life was and what it actually is. He and his world fell apart, and he was terrified. He survived this experience, as we all do, because after all it's only ideas that are falling apart. However, if we don't understand that we have to abandon the ideas that no longer fit our situation and that we need to create new ideas, we proceed to creating defences against another such experience. As many people do, Mitch said to himself, 'If I hadn't loved my uncle I wouldn't have suffered so much. I will never love anyone again.' All ideas have consequences. If we don't love, we never suffer loss. However, if we don't love, we are lonely. The pain of loneliness can be as great as the pain of loss. All ideas have consequences. Plays are concerned with the consequences of the ideas their characters hold. No idea, and no action that follows an idea has entirely beneficial consequences. There is no set of religious or philosophical ideas which invariably lead people to a secure and happy life. Every belief system has painful consequences. Many plays end happily, but we would be foolish not to recognise that 'happily ever after' is simply a comforting fantasy. Comforting fantasies are essential to help us get through the many difficulties that life presents to us, but, if we tell

ourselves that our fantasies are truths, we create enormous difficulties for ourselves. Fantasies need have little connection to the real world, but truths can always be tested against our experience, in the way that a scientist tests an hypothesis or a judge examines the evidence. If you say, "My belief is true", we are entitled to ask, "What is the evidence for your belief?" We use fantasy to fill in the gaps in our knowledge. For instance, all we know for certain about death is that a living person grows strangely still. We don't know what happens after death. We fill in this gap in our knowledge with a fantasy, either the fantasy that death is the end of my identity or the fantasy that it is a doorway to another life. Whichever fantasy we choose, we use it to assure ourselves that that most important part of ourselves, our sense of being a person continues on. People who choose the fantasy of death being a doorway to another life see their sense of being a person continuing on as a soul or spirit. People choose the fantasy that their identity ends in death see something of their sense of being a person continuing on in their children, or their work, or in the memory of those who know them. There is considerable evidence that the last of these is true. When someone comes to matter to us, we create an image of that person and we take it inside us so that it becomes an integral part of the person that we are. In his last conversation with Mitch, Morrie instructed Mitch to visit his grave and talk to him. "You talk, I'll listen," he said, and as Mitch told the audience after Morrie had died, "In the little phrase I finally figured out what Morrie knew that I didn't. If you lead your life as Morrie did, with people the priority, making memories, giving of yourself, then when you die, you're not really gone. You live inside the hearts of everyone you've ever touched. So when they visit a cemetery or when they're walking alone or when they're playing the piano you taught them to play, they can hear everything you've ever given them." Plays are fantasies, but, if they're good plays, they can teach us truths, but only if we're prepared to learn.