

Personal Perspectives Paper
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John Lithgow – Stories by Heart

The most recent live performance I viewed was the one-man show “Stories by Heart” written and performed by John Lithgow. I saw it at Lincoln Center’s Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre in New York on May 18, 2008. The show was about the art and impact of storytelling and human mortality.

I am a German graduate student at the Christian-Albrechts-University of Kiel, and I was traveling to the United States in May of 2008 to complete the shooting programme for an independent documentary about the American Jewish entertainer Al Jolson who was very popular on Broadway in the first half of the twentieth century. We had intensively studied American theater history and came across the actor John Lithgow. We immensely benefited from researching into his interesting career as an actor. It helped us to understand the cultural differences that had taken place since Al Jolson’s era, and I was eager to see Lithgow live on stage. Having a working class family background, I was particularly interested in the way John Lithgow was influenced by growing up with theater.

I had been to New York before, but I had never seen a theater performance there. Both I and my haperonage were very excited to attend a whole play in English because it is not our native tongue. Many Harvard graduates were among the audience that night. It supported our feeling of being outsiders. It completely disappeared during the performance, and it was amazing to experience an emotion of homogeneity amidst a hetergoneous crowd. Like in a thrust theater, the audience surrounded the stage on three sides. We were sitting in the middle of the fifth row in front of the stage. We had a tremendous view due to a stadium seating arrangement. Being able to see almost every other individual evoked an intimate and domestic atmosphere.

Some old carpets, a vintage arm chair, a floor lamp, a coat-rack, and a side table with a carafe and a glass of water were the set props. It had the charm of a grandmother’s living room. Lithgow entered the stage from the tribune as if he was naturally entering that living room. He started the performance as himself, jokingly mentioning that we were about to see another one of those one-man shows.

While he was speaking of the fact that some people enjoy to listen to stories while others rather enjoy to tell them, he spotted two empty seats in the room and said: “If I were Al Jolson, I would instantly leave the stage!” He said it with a wonderful sense of irony, and everybody was laughing about him reflecting on an actor’s vanity. It deeply touched us on a personal level because we have been researching Al Jolson for the last three years.

Hearing Jolson’s name in public is not very common anymore. Now we were even able to hear his name in a theater, moreover mentioned by someone with whom we have also dealt for quite a while. For us, it felt as if our work had come to a bigger sense.

After reminding the audience to switch off their cell phones, Lithgow spoke of his only hand prop, a family-owned book of tales. He mentioned that he had to convince his sister to lend it to him for this show. He then discussed his grandmother, Ida B. Lithgow, who had told stories to him and his siblings when they were children. Her ability to recite the longest poems by heart had thrilled him as a child.

Lithgow then started to recite himself, mentioning that the following poem was one of his

favorites during childhood: “The Deacon’s Masterpiece or, the Wonderful ‘One-Hoss Shay’: a Logical Story” by Oliver Wendell-Holmes (1858). Lithgow instantly switched from his everyday speech to poetic language. Shortly after starting to recite, a cell phone was ringing. Lithgow stopped reciting, grabbed in his pocket, pulled out his own cell phone and said: “Yes, mother, another guy who hasn’t managed to switch off his cell phone! Yes, how annoying!” He delivered that comment with so much charm that everybody was laughing out loud. It was amazing to see how quickly he was able to switch out of his role to improvise.

As a child, this poem had given him an idea of death. Like the wonderful “one-hoss shay” which had functioned faultlessly until it fell into pieces in its hundredth year, his grandmother was later suddenly dying without warning.

He then started to speak of his father, Arthur Lithgow, who was a stage actor, a director, a producer, and a founder of Shakespeare festivals. Lithgow described him as an energetic and passionate man until he became depressed after a perilous surgery with a 50% chance to survive. John Lithgow decided to move back in with his parents for a while to help his mother to take care of her husband. It was moving to share Lithgow’s sorrow when he found out how bad the situation was and to hear him remember how he changed his father’s diapers. It made me think of the circle of life, and I’m sure everyone else felt the same. Coming from a family in which all relationships are almost completely disbanded, this part of the play sadly reassured me of how family connections should be. I was always longing for that kind of closeness in my own family.

Lithgow then started to recite, or better to *act*, P. G. Wodehouse’s story “Uncle Fred flits by” (1935). It was amazing to experience how he started to read the story and then closed his book without stopping to continue to recite this long story faultlessly. He played 11 characters, including a battle ax and a parrot. His timing for the jokes was nothing but perfect, and his facial expressions were hilarious. The New York Times had described his acting as “effortless”. Our response to this part of the performance gave us a sense of what was about to come. While his father was lying in bed, enslaved by his depressions, Lithgow decided to recite this story to him, the way his father had done it years ago. Then, for the first time in months, he smiled as he saw his son perform this story to him.

Lithgow ended the play by addressing his parents: “Good night, mom! Good night, dad! I hope you are feeling better now!”

This performance intrigued me for several reasons. It was wonderfully written, staged, and performed. It perfectly understood to personalize love, sorrow, and joy, and it constantly appealed to my own experiences and emotions. It was amazing to realize that the most touching part of the performance, the smile of Lithgow’s father, had to be imagined. It must have been an emotionally moving situation to read stories to his own parents and to give something back of what he had received as a child. For me as a member of the audience, it was a wonderful situation to imagine.

To know that John Lithgow shared this personal family custom of storytelling along with his personal experiences and emotions with an audience, evoked something very special in me. I also had the feeling that the play was able to humanize arts and literature in a way that it eventually provided arts, a form of human expression, with an even greater significance. The play appealed to very deep, pure, and honest human emotions. It constantly combined the world of theater with the real world.

On stage, there was more than just this one actor: John Lithgow filled the stage with warmth and honest love, far from triviality. He was a hybrid that night; you could not detect where the *mench* descended and the actor appeared.

Personally, Lithgow was talking about something deep and emotional I will never experience in my own family. He fed my desires that had been quite apparent at that time. It was both painful and wonderful.

One and a half years later, I was able to see the show again, this time in London (Oct. 2009). It was Lithgow's 64th birthday, and instead of singing 'Happy Birthday', the audience sang the Beatles' song "When I'm 64" for him. It was a wonderful interaction to watch taking place before the play had actually started. Instantly, there was a wonderful sense of unity in this room of strangers. Lithgow was truly touched and ready to "die happy".

I wasn't healthy at that time, but I managed to make all the way from Germany to London (by car). I really wanted to see that show. I knew that Lithgow would include the story "Haircut" by Ring Lardner, a part I had not yet seen.

I felt very lonely and homeless during my time in London; however Lithgow not only made me feel as if I had finally arrived where I belonged, he also connected me with all these strangers in the theater. Having dealt with an autistic disorder throughout my life, the way Lithgow delivered those English stories made me feel much closer to the English language than to my own mother tongue. That was a unique and new emotion to me. It created a new access to myself and cleared the way for my interaction with others. I knew that this evening would have an enduring impact on me.

Lithgow's performance of "Uncle Fred flits by" was even more delightful than I had remembered it. The story about his father Arthur Lithgow was no less touching. I did not know that he had lost his own father at the age of 3, and I did not know that he had lost all of his siblings, too. Absurd or not, this made me even more thankful for the existence of John Lithgow.

Lardner's story about the sweetness and cruelty of small towns (although the story was located in a different time and culture) and the way John Lithgow presented this text (with an incredibly exact pantomime and an uncannily authentic creation of the character of that barber) strongly reminded me of my own childhood and the constant struggle with it. I had to fight a lot to get where I was at that time, and Lithgow's performance and personal inserts re-confirmed me that I was using my energy for the right thing – my own identity. I've never seen nor felt such an essential impact before. John Lithgow is pure magic. Always.