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Finding Truth in ‘Tuesdays With Morrie’ Onstage in West Hartford

By David DeWitt

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Truths are not in ideas; truths are in people.

I was a teenager when I absorbed that sentence from a Cornell University professor, Charlie Russell, as he led a summer journalism workshop. I can picture him saying it at the front of a narrow, deep and brightly lit classroom; I can hear the sprightly lilt in his voice, the heavy but gentle emphasis on the last word.

I found my thoughts flipping back to my teacher, given how well his words apply to the lovely production of “Tuesdays With Morrie” at Playhouse on Park in West Hartford. Directed with ease and coherence by Sasha Bratt and convincingly acted by Chris Richards and the lovable Gannon McHale, the show is a surprisingly sublime and funny experience that still led many audience members to weep.

A confession: I was not a big fan of the best-selling 1997 book “Tuesdays With Morrie,” written by the Detroit sports journalist Mitch Albom. In it, Mr. Albom describes his reconnection with Morrie Schwartz, his college sociology professor, as he is dying of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig’s disease. The book is well-intentioned (it helped pay for some of Schwartz’s medical bills) and a fine enough quick read, and who am I to carp about a memoir that’s loved by millions? But I’m not the only one who found it a mite insubstantial. Mr. Schwartz’s questions of Mr. Albom — “Are you trying to be as human as you can be?” — are meaningful, but they roll out a little generically in the book’s short, simplistically digestible chapters.

But here’s where my teacher’s words help explain the phenomenon happening at Playhouse on Park. I could skim through the book’s familiar advice on the page, but I would have not wanted to miss a bit of what Mr. McHale and Mr. Richards — live in person — offered me onstage.



The play, adapted from the best-selling book by the same name, adds more emotion and depth to the 1997 memoir by Mr. Albom, a sports journalist in Detroit. Meredith Atkinson

That’s partly because the script, by Mr. Albom and the capable playwright Jeffrey Hatcher (“Compleat Female Stage Beauty”), is in some ways an improvement over the memoir. It opens with shared narration from Mitch and Morrie, avoiding the book’s single perspective for something less easily reductive. It gives Mitch — who isn’t particularly developed in the memoir — an active tie to his youthful passion by having him play the piano onstage, sometimes quite affectingly. And in its primacy of dialogue, the script is perhaps the right form for this material’s interplay of student and teacher, living and dying — the circular experience of what goes on between Mitch and Morrie.

Morrie is the heart of the play, and, as interpreted by Mr. McHale, he’s a joy. The actor displays an exquisite comic touch, with just the right blend of Buddhist detachment and engaged love in his conversations with Mitch. Mr. McHale receives energy and gives it. His increasingly knotted body conveys the arduousness and pain of A.L.S., too (though it does seem as if his condition gets worse, then better,

then worse again instead of progressing in a linear decline). It's an unfussy performance and a great one of a potentially sketchy role, full of lively percolations of insights.

Mr. Richards is strong as well, giving the busy-busy-busy brain of the even sketchier role, Mitch, a yearning for something more, even as he's walled in by various denials. His Tuesday lessons with Morrie lead him to changes, in both his comfort with death and his perceptions of life.

The sessions play out in Morrie's home, and Christopher Hoyt's mostly bare but suggestive set has a clock — the inevitability of passing time — in a place of prominence. Hardwood floors, jutting from a back corner and falling incomplete past midstage, are mirrored in a back-wall skyline at a lightly orange dusk, for Morrie's passing — or is it dawn, for Mitch's rebirth? Mr. Richards, thankfully, doesn't oversell how he's been affected by the deathbed stopping for Morrie; instead, he's quietly moved, subtly enriched.

True, you have to bring an open heart to "Tuesdays With Morrie," but you might find your heart opening despite yourself. There is the sentimentality that can come with a beloved character's passing, but there's also something deeper, almost archetypal, here about the relationship of students and teachers. I'd try to spell it out, but instead I'll return to Professor Russell: The truths are in the people. These two are worth the visit.