

Review

Tuesdays With Morrie starring Jamie

Farr at Stage West Calgary until Nov. 7.

Rating 4 out of five

What is it about storylines where one of the lead characters is dying that ultimately makes the narrative so darn life-affirming? Mitch Albom's autobiographical book Tuesdays With Morrie chronicling the popular Detroit sports columnist's reconnection with his dying college professor followed that philosophy, and became a worldwide sensation after its initial release. The book eventually captured the attention of Oprah Winfrey, who turned it into a TV movie starring the late Jack Lemmon -- ironically (and a bit like the title character) one of his own final film roles.

In the current Stage West production of the play adaptation of Tuesdays With Morrie -- halfway through its local run -- college professor Morrie Schwartz is played by the instantly recognizable but somewhat greyer Jamie Farr. Schwartz is suffering from ALS, or Lou Gehrig's Disease -- the devastating disease is illustrated graphically in one scene, as he struggles to lift a small spoonful of egg salad to his lips, and is forced after much frustration to give up the ghost. A simple, everyday task he can no longer perform on his own.

What he is able to maintain, and provide in abundance, is life advice to his former student Mitch (Rejean Cournoyer), who is driven by the demands of his own success, and the fear of ambitious, younger colleagues aiming to claw their way into his fiercely guarded publishing and broadcasting career.

Both actors ably serve to propel this drama along. The banter back and forth between the two men infuses snippets of warm, real-life humour to allow the audience to get to know them. Throughout, Morrie strives to correct Mitch's life course, with observations on how he's facing his own mortality. During one of their weekly Tuesday visits, he regales Mitch with a story of the "living funeral" he hosted for himself, so that he could hear all the nice things people would say about him after he was gone. Why wait until you've taken your last breath, he asks of his student, to tell someone how you feel about them? Why wait till you're gone, and miss hearing it?

As Morrie progresses further along to the end of his days, Mitch realizes he's taking one last class with his old professor. Like Mitch, you'll probably be looking around for a box of Kleenex, or some other handy absorbent cloth. Make no mistake, this true story is intended to pull on your heartstrings.

While there is some humour to lighten proceedings along the way, the ultimate aim of his production is to instil urgency in the audience's lives -- ultimately, your entire life can change in a heartbeat, so live for today, ensure you're happy doing what you do, and if you're like the title character, maybe you can make a life-changing difference in someone else's life.

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