

Beyond the Humor: Exploring Tuesdays
~Matt Kessler, Literary Assistant

Tuesdays with Morrie, based on playwright Mitch Albom's relationship with Morrie Schwartz, is acclaimed for its life-affirming humor, compelling plot, and memorable characters. The play is also thematically rich and its effect is deepened by its subtle ideas and symbolism.

Without a doubt, Morrie Schwartz was a brilliant man. Just as his intellect is vital to the storyline, so too is the Japanese maple tree, visible on the stage, vital to the set. In fact, these two, the maple and Morrie, are inextricably linked from the early moment when Mitch first sees the "small old man under a Japanese Maple" until the finale, when Morrie dances under the tree, hinting at Buddha's meditation below the boughs of the Tree of Wisdom. The coupling compares Morrie's flourish before death to leaves that ripen before falling. Interestingly, Japanese maple leaves, noted for their brilliant and evocative color changes, become rich reds and yellows before they are shed. Similarly, the play details the last period in Morrie Schwartz's life, when his wisdom reaches its zenith.

Music also plays an important role in the play, symbolizing Mitch's divergence from his youthful passions and from Morrie's initial guidance. When Mitch plays jazz, he is striving towards his dreams. When he quits, he becomes increasingly detached from humanity. Generally, music is associated with a soulful way of living. Those who accept music and its rhythms live well, those who reject it are sterile, evidenced by Mitch's dissatisfaction with the corporate world and Morrie's love for dancing. As Morrie's teachings sink back in, the necessity for Mitch to revisit the piano heightens into a proof that he has rekindled forgotten and important feelings. That Mitch is heard on the piano at both the opening and close of *Tuesdays* proclaims his progress from start to finish.

Specifically, there are two musical works that pervade the text. One, the jazz standard "The Very Thought of You" floats through the script, appearing here and there, most importantly at the play's beginning, when it is sounded by Mitch on the piano, and near the finale, when Mitch's wife Janine sings it for the dying professor. The lyrics easily coincide with Morrie's lessons on love and caring, and in this way, too, Mitch's wife becomes part of the Morrie-Mitch dynamic, adding complexity and depth to their relationship by allowing Morrie into the more personal side of Mitch's life.

The other important musical work in *Tuesdays with Morrie* is Puccini's famous opera *La Boheme*, which chronicles a circle of friends struggling to make ends meet in 19th century Paris. The opera closes when Mimi, a poor seamstress, dies from consumption, cutting short her love affair with the poet Rodolfo. As Rodolfo focuses on the dying Mimi, he asks (to paraphrase), 'Must you really go?' Mimi replies, 'I will always be with you,' a sentiment that similarly

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reverberates through the finale of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, when Mitch despairs over Morrie's impending death until Morrie reassures him that their conversations will continue in Mitch's head and heart for years to come.

Consumption (now called tuberculosis), a disease that progresses in stages like amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), primarily affects the lungs and respiration. Morrie suffers from ALS, also a condition that, among other things, affects breathing. In fact, many ALS patients die when their lungs become unable to take in oxygen. *La Boheme*, concerned with relationships, illness, and death, is a tragic but symbolic opera of choice for Morrie, who embraces the beauty of its music while embracing the beauty in dying.

Morrie, a professor to the end, alludes to books, songs, and poems, each offering insight into his character. In a few places, he recites from "September 1, 1939," W. H. Auden's famous response to World War II, exclaiming, "And no one exists alone; / Hunger allows no choice... / We must love one another or die." The last line, "We must love one another or die," is the central thought of this passage and central to Morrie's lessons for Mitch, who has forgotten, in his years since college and jazz, how to find comfort in others and enjoy life. For Morrie, love is life's light, not *one* of the finer points, but *the* finest. Mitch, who is afraid of the helplessness and attachment associated with strong feelings, must come to terms with Morrie's lesson that love *is* the point so that he can avoid the spiritual death referenced in Auden's poem.

Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, which appears in the play as required reading during Mitch's university days, is a philosophical take on human relationships. Buber posits, as Morrie does, that life is made meaningful by interpersonal relationships. Simply stated, a person who perceives others to be empirical objects, who fails to see and embrace humanity, is, in Buber's terminology, an "I-It" (Mitch). A person who embraces humanity and the individuality of others is an "I-Thou" (Morrie). Mitch, a sportswriter, judges athletes by their capacity to produce points, rebounds, steals, and homeruns. When Mitch publicly criticizes a basketball player for skipping practice, Morrie questions his motives, reminding him that even a ballplayer is capable of hurt feelings, regardless of salary. This small lesson, emblematic of Mitch's need to move from life's impersonal statistics to a re-affirming humanistic embrace, typifies the "I- It" vs. "I-Thou" interplay of the script.

Erik Erikson's psychological study *Identity: Youth and Crisis* coined the term "identity crisis," which refers to pivotal time periods in life when a person must choose between two divergent identities. In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, there are two recognizable identity crises. One, which occurs when Mitch is a young man, results in his becoming a writer. The second, also about Mitch, shows the struggle between the corporate unemotional sportswriter, and the jazz musician with love to give. It is through this second crisis that R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self* relates to the play. Laing's study of schizophrenia explores the notion of a "Real Self" and a "False Self." Mitch is by no means schizophrenic, yet the duality in his character, similar to Laing's concept of real and false

selves, haunts him from his college days to the play's present—the time period we see depicted onstage.

The result of the conflict between Mitch's two selves can be summed up in one word: angst. Early in the play, Mitch and Morrie discuss angst, and it follows that this feeling of anxiety is the driving force behind two of Mitch's most important decisions: his past choice to give up jazz and his present resolve to re-evaluate life with Morrie's help. So, while angst creates inner turmoil and ill-feelings, it is also a catalyst for change. Young, angst-ridden Mitch Albom quits jazz after the death of his uncle. Middle-aged angst-ridden Mitch questions his hustle-bustle lifestyle, and matures.

Finally, food is a significant element in *Tuesdays with Morrie*. The important focus is not simply *that* it is eaten, but *how* it is eaten, or even *if* it is eaten at all. During Mitch's university days, Morrie's singular eating style, emblematic of his bright spirit and personality, worked itself into Mitch's memory. Years later, when Mitch begins his Tuesday visits, it is not without a little bit of the past brought in the form of Morrie's favorite foods. The only problem is that Morrie, deteriorating from ALS, is unable to chew. He accepts Mitch's offerings, not wanting to trouble his former student, and stores them where they will never be eaten. Finally, near the play's end, Mitch discovers the uneaten goodies. In this way, while hinting at a carefree past, food reminds Mitch that Morrie is dying, that things will never be the same, and that it is imperative for him to come to terms with these issues before Morrie passes away.

Tuesdays with Morrie is an intricately crafted theatrical synthesis of the five months that Mitch Albom and Morrie Schwartz spent talking about life. The playwrights, Albom and Jeffery Hatcher, have drawn from disparate literary and musical sources, and imbued everyday objects with significant meaning. Based as it is on Albom's life, it also inspires the question, "Is this play an example of life imitating art, or art imitating life?" In effect, *Tuesdays with Morrie* thought-provokingly blurs the distinction between fiction and reality. The script may seem simple, but it is deceptively so.