

# REVIEW – Still Alice King's Theatre \*\*\*\*

Intelligent, empathic and reassuringly faithful, Christine Mary Dunford's authoritative adaptation of Lisa Genova's novel exploring the horrific impact of Alzheimer's disease brings two dynamically innovative and energised re-appropriations of time and character constructs.



Director, David Grindley runs with this with wily economy, intelligence and vibrancy. Though following Genova's sequential narrative where the author's point of view becomes disturbingly fractured as, Professor of Cognitive Psychology and Linguistics, Alice's condition worsens, Dunford goes much further.

We have literally a binary Alice manifested through two separate characters – Alice (Sharon Small) and *Herself* (Eva Pope) a dramatic conceit that both propels and defines this excellent production. Time is given compelling immediacy presented as a projection-screen two year monthly countdown as original symptoms, diagnosis and aggressive deterioration reach the present day. This is further emphasised by a calculated ninety-minute no interval running time. (Wendy Mitchel, author of *Somebody I Used to Know* acted as consultant. Herself, a fifty-eight year old, diagnosed with

young-onset dementia.)

The doppelgänger protagonists share a conspiratorial dialogue, *Herself* the guiding calm and rational pivot who struggles to keep Alice from spinning off into the incremental nightmare of her synaptic shredding vortices. But she can be fickle and damning as when hiding Alice's memory life-raft mobile-phone with her list of reminders, names and panic-rescue numbers in the freezer. '*I wish I had cancer,*' says Alice. '*Something I could fight back as myself.*' There is the ambiguous computer-file *Butterfly*.

Alice, resigned to the terminal consequences of the disease, leaves instructions for her near-future eviscerated self to take an overdose of sleeping pills. She had shrewdly insisted the doctor increase their prescription way back. In the novel it is an epiphanic moment of compelling pathos and intensity where the reader is immersed a conspiratorial, ambiguous *Go on Alice!/No Alice!* moral dilemma. As was this production's staging – albeit eliciting some nervous laughter of release when husband John innocently interrupts her.

Sharon Small's performance has a humane nobility.

The flailing outrage at being stripped of her dignity is utterly convincing rendering the flintiest of hearts to putty.

Eva Pope as *Herself*, part Jungian Self/Shadow, sometime Jiminy Cricket, part Mr Hyde, Caliban or Mephistopheles plays a feline-fluid lithe and fascinating familiar. Jonathan Fensom's set-design is a strictly structured mind-map of essential familiarity for Alice. All the more terrible when one day she can't find the bathroom. '*How can I be locked in my own house?*' The symbolism is as deep as the hideous imaginary chasm that opens up across her lobby floor.

Alice's husband John (Martin Marquez), faces a fundamental career decision. If Alice were fully cognisant – surely she would have wanted what was best for him? Son, Thomas (Mark

Armstrong) and daughter, Lydia (Ruth Ollman) eventually embraced the gravity of their mother's situation more so than dad does and familial sparks fly spectacularly.

Her intellectual, emotional psyche being lacerated by the shrapnel of exploding synaptic connections can she still remain Alice? A neuro/theological conundrum provokes the question, can malignant electro/chemical brain destroy the soul? Both Theatre Re's *The Nature forgetting* and Florian Zeller's *The Father* explore similar dilemma.

This opening night's performance has special poignancy following the morning's News that Cambridge University research scientists 'are on the brink of finding a cure for Alzheimer's disease. Within six years there could be a drug that attacks the toxic proteins called oligomers that destroy memory. A poignant serendipity indeed one that lends hope that every member of tonight's audience and those after will be allowed to remember Still Alice long in to healthy old age.

Would that she could have.