



## Theatre

### The awakened girl



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Landscape/A kind of Alaska

Written by Harold Pinter  
Directed by Jamie Lloyd  
Harold Pinter Theatre,  
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The publication of Oliver Sacks' book *Awakenings*, in 1973, reminded the world that survivors of the big encephalitis lethargica epidemic that had occurred between 1915 and 1926, were still alive and lay forgotten in the wards of chronic care hospitals. With time, surviving the original acute forms of encephalitis lethargica had turned into a new tragedy as the severe manifestations of post-encephalitic parkinsonism progressively engulfed patients transforming them into living statues, preventing any communication with families and health-care personnel. Constantin Von Economo, the first neurologist to describe encephalitis lethargica, defined these patients as extinct volcanoes, because they would lay motionless and speechless on their chairs or beds all day. 50 years after the epidemic of encephalitis lethargica, these patients and their sad story had faded from the collective memory. It was the experimental use of levodopa (L-DOPA) on these post-encephalitic patients by Sacks that provoked their sudden awakenings detailed in his book. Sadly, the apparent recovery of function and speech in the patients was followed in most cases by the development of further problems when the instability of the response to the drug became evident. The sad story of a patient, Rose R, reported in *Awakenings*, prompted British playwright Harold Pinter to write *A kind of Alaska*, a one-act play describing the experience of a post-encephalitic patient in 1982. The play is currently on stage at the eponymous Harold Pinter Theatre, London (UK).

*A kind of Alaska* tells the story of Deborah (superbly acted by Tamsin Greig), a post-encephalitic patient who is awakened by her doctor with an injection of an unnamed

drug after 29 years of apparent sleep. Struck by encephalitis lethargica when she was aged 16 years, once awakened, Deborah is unaware that almost 30 years have passed and still believes that she is a young girl on the cusp of womanhood. Her questions about her parents and sisters and her girlish attitude lead her doctor to explain that, in those 29 years, Deborah's mother has died and her father has become blind. Deborah cannot believe that she has been absent for all those years and struggles to believe what her doctor is saying. What really forces Deborah to acknowledge her age and the fact that almost 30 years have actually passed is the arrival of her younger sister, now aged herself, in her room. The play is particularly sensitive to the tragedy of a woman who has lost a good part of her life because of encephalitis lethargica and must face the outrageous reality of her own ageing. However, the play also offers a sympathetic insight into the drama of Deborah's sister, who has made huge sacrifices to be near her over the years, and does not receive the expected gratitude from Deborah.

In *A kind of Alaska*, Pinter focuses on the psychological drama of waking up and discovering that the best years of one's life have disappeared, as could happen to someone after a very long coma. However, the reality of Rose R's case, and the other post-encephalitic patients described by Sacks in *Awakenings*, was much more complex and tragic; despite their apparent withdrawal from the world (most of these patients could hardly speak or move for decades), these patients were aware and observant, at varying degrees, of what was happening around them. The post-encephalitic parkinsonism had blocked their movement and speech so the patients could only voice their anger and disbelief about their situation to Sacks after the initial treatment with L-DOPA. What made Rose R stand out among the patients awakened by L-DOPA at the Beth Abraham Hospital in New York (NY, USA) was that she refused to accept that her severe form of post-encephalitic parkinsonism had deprived her of 40 years of her life (she was aged 61 years when she received L-DOPA for the first time). In her meetings with Sacks, Rose made clear that she was aware that the years had passed: she could remember the date of the attack on Pearl Harbour and the assassination of President John F Kennedy. However, those events, which had been registered by Rose, appeared to be immured in a remote world of her own and did not seem real to her. Her mind resisted the idea that it was 1969 when she received L-DOPA, and in the brief period in which she responded to the drug, she continued to behave as if she was still the vivacious young girl that she was back in the 1920s. In the play, it is not known whether Deborah will accept in the long term that her youth has



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passed or whether she has willingly erased her memories of time passing.

*A kind of Alaska* does not touch on another key aspect observed by Sacks: the dramatic and unpredictable impact of L-DOPA on post-encephalitic patients. Their response to the drug initially led to improvements in movement and speech, and ultimately the revelation of full personalities hidden by the disease for decades. However, most patients quite rapidly became both dependent and hypersensitive to L-DOPA, oscillating between uncontrollable festination, tics, torrents of thoughts, and anxiety, and the catatonia in which they had lived for decades. In the play, the audience sees Deborah in the moment when she has been restored to her former self, but it is left to the imagination what actual manifestations of post-encephalitic parkinsonism would have been destabilised by the long-term use of L-DOPA.

*A kind of Alaska*, however, does accurately portray another problem faced by family members of post-encephalitic patients. Families provided essential support and company for these patients and, because of an emotional component in the manifestations of post-encephalitic parkinsonism, sometimes their presence was enough to generate a temporary respite from the most severe manifestations of the disease. However, for family members

who remained close to their dear ones who had the long-term consequences of encephalitis lethargica, the lifetime role of carer had acquired a central meaning in their lives. When L-DOPA administration generated the awakenings in the patients who had survived the acute phase of encephalitis lethargica, some family members reacted negatively because their role of unique carer for every need of the patients was jeopardised by the unexpected, albeit temporary, recovery. In the play, when Deborah is awakened, her sister faces the drama of seeing her years of care, which destroyed her marriage, unappreciated and her role as carer put into question. Moreover, Deborah's sister is forced to make a decision between telling her the truth about what had happened in those 29 years and maintaining the illusion that things had not changed.

Highly praised by Sacks at its opening at the National Theatre, London, in 1982, *A kind of Alaska* remains a seminal play that captures a dramatic moment of self-awareness in a survivor of the encephalitis lethargica epidemic. Thanks to Greig's touching performance, audiences are made fully aware of the pain of awakening in a world that has not waited for those who had fallen asleep.

Marco De Ambrogi

## Lecture

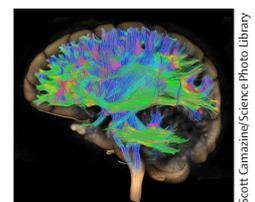
### Individuality rooted in the brain's development

"What makes you, you?" This is a question about the individuality of humans that has long been pondered. Are our brains and our behaviour shaped by nature or nurture? Kevin Mitchell (Trinity College Dublin, Ireland) advocates for the nature side of the argument, guiding his lecture audience through the various processes involved in the development of the brain. Beginning with the basics—the DNA code and how it is transcribed and converted into proteins—he explained how cells differentiate and develop, and how the brain advances in the womb and continues to change throughout life.

After setting this foundation, Mitchell described how these stages of development contribute to the individual differences seen between humans, using twin studies to demonstrate his points—for example, monozygotic twins who grow up in different environments share the same behavioural traits (eg, neuroticism, extroversion) as twins who grow up in the same environment, suggesting that these traits are highly heritable. According to Mitchell, this evidence emphasises that the wiring of our brains dictates innate traits; environment can reinforce and amplify these traits, contributing further to behaviour.

Mitchell's knowledge of the various aspects of genetic development is broad, and he did well to answer the audience's questions, including some more controversial topics regarding brain differences between the sexes and the concept of free will, by linking the basic science concepts with more complex behaviour. One aspect that could have been covered more, which is discussed in Mitchell's new book, *Innate*, was emerging genetic technologies and the implications of using these technologies in medicine. Is the ultimate goal to be able to manipulate human genes to eradicate certain neurodevelopmental disorders such as schizophrenia? When discussing genetics, ethical questions are always at the forefront, and it is clear that as these technologies progress, questions such as this need to be answered and some legal boundaries need to be determined. However, Mitchell's lecture presented a sophisticated explanation on a fascinating subject and highlighted that the nature versus nurture argument is perhaps more inextricable than ever.

Sophie Woolven



Scott Gamazine/Science Photo Library

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**How the Wiring of Our Brains Shapes Who We Are**

Portland Hall, London, UK  
Oct 24, 2018

#### Further reading

Mitchell, KJ. *Innate: How the Wiring of Our Brains Shapes Who We Are*  
Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 2018