



Event

One day in the life of Martin



Brian Coyle

Published Online
September 3, 2018
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422\(18\)30328-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422(18)30328-4)

Timeless
The Hen & Chickens Theatre,
London, UK
Aug 10–11, 2018

Next showing Oct 1–4, 2018 at
Theatre N16, London, UK

The stage is set as a living room, with a chair, a carpet, table, TV remote, and two photos. A man enters; unshaven, scruffy, wearing baggy jeans and a Manchester United Football Club T-shirt. A part of the Camden Fringe 2018 season (London, UK), actor John Rayment delivers a powerful 50-minute solo performance as London cab driver Martin in *Timeless*. Martin has anterograde amnesia and cannot create any new memories since going to the dentist for a root canal 10 years ago; it is a horrifying thought that plays on a commonly experienced dentist phobia. Over the course of the play, the audience learns how Martin is rooted in a timeless present, where recalling memories beyond a few hours is challenging. He does have memories from the time before his brain injury, but they are an assortment of unconnected images and sensations that he believes belong to him, but cannot be sure.

“You have a problem. You have a condition called anterograde amnesia.” Martin reads this message every morning on his smartphone, as instructed by his wife Tracy. Eager to communicate with an audience, Martin seductively pulls the audience into his world for a day—an emotional rollercoaster of flashbacks and flashforwards. The intensity is heightened by a single searing spotlight that hangs above him, but also glares uncomfortably into the eyes of the audience. As Martin jumps between memories and the present, each shift in time is marked by an auditory cue as Martin stands up to reposition himself; it’s a simple but effective mechanism that allows the audience to travel with Martin through time. The last thoughts or words he remembers before his amnesia, about his fear of the dentist, the unpleasantness of root canal work, of taking the day off, are repeated throughout the play, but each time more words disappear, suggesting an erasure of Martin’s identity while providing the audience with context for the immersion into a cyclical repetition experienced and immortalised in the blockbuster movie *Groundhog Day*.

Martin’s identity as someone with a working memory pivots on passing the London black cab drivers exam known as The Knowledge—one of the hardest memory tests there is. Still remembering the routes is some comfort for Martin as an anchor to his past, but there is a futility attached to it. He cannot work, and so the memory has no real value.

The elusiveness of memory is, to some extent, an everyday phenomenon for everyone; people forget where they put something a minute ago, for example, or cannot access memories from early childhood. Distributed processing goes some way in explaining memory loss and retention, but it is a complex encoding system that has

not yet been deciphered by scientists. Notwithstanding its mysterious nature, *Timeless* bypasses the basic science of memory to explore the extent of which it is integral to our existence, how it gives us hopes and expectations based on our experiences, and how it gives us a sense of our identity by shaping our future, explaining our present, and capturing and reflecting on our past. The play itself isn’t sinister, but as Martin ruminates, self-placates and becomes agitated through his storytelling, you can’t help but feel that your own fears around memory loss are staring you straight in the eye.

Timeless is based on a real event, so Martin the cab driver is actually a real person living somewhere with this condition, but you wouldn’t necessarily know this as there is no announcement about this fact at any point during the performance. Rayment is a very credible Martin; bewildered, curious, angry, soft, and broken. Playwright Brian Coyle has created a story out of a medical anomaly; there are no esoteric musings or philosophical explorations of memory and identity. Instead, the audience is likely to develop a connection to Martin, because he is authentic. For instance, he divulges his extra-marital affairs and the burden of dishonesty to his wife but, of course, she has been hearing his confession on a daily basis for 10 years, and the play has a touch of tragicomedy in this respect. Painfully, he discovers his best friend is the father to his son, and that his wife wants to leave him, but nothing is of any lasting consequence for Martin because he has no recollection, and nothing will stick. The next morning, he will wake up and read from his smartphone: “You have a problem...”

Timeless does succeed in commenting on the intrinsic relationship between our memory and our identity, but equally explores the bewildering repercussions of memory perceived as a concept: why do we remember certain events, smells, snapshots, places, and sounds when they can appear trivial and fragmented? It is unlikely that any algorithm could ever exist to understand or predict memory formation and recall and, even if it could, memory is personal; it belongs to its maker.

From Rayment’s anguish about his condition, to his love of telling a tale or two, his searching is with the audience, as well as within himself. The play sort of ends well for Martin; his wife has not left him, at least not yet. But it could be interesting to write a follow-up play from Tracy’s perspective, who remained invisible in the flesh, but very much part of Martin’s story. What is it like for her? How can she leave him, but how can she stay?

Jules Morgan