



Event

Capturing the agony and humour of dementia

One of the most unsettling aspects of a family member or other loved one developing dementia is how they can physically appear exactly the same on the outside, yet transform beyond all recognition on the inside as their mind disintegrates, their memory evaporates, and their personality changes. That dissonance between body and mind was captured perfectly by *All Change*, a one-act play staged by Smokescreen Productions at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the world's largest arts festival. *All Change* was written by Toby Marriott during an emerging writers' course at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre (Bristol, UK), and was developed as a play with five actors through performances at Eastbourne College (Eastbourne, UK), The Alma in Bristol, and the Brighton Fringe Festival (Brighton, UK). Its run at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe marked the play's premiere in its current form as a two-hander, a format that worked especially well, capturing the intimate connection between a widower and his only child.

While Ivor may appear healthy from the outside, dementia has already ravaged his mind; Lily, his daughter, has come to visit him to pack his case and prepare him for life in a care home, with the main narrative of the play following their conversations as she tidies around him, interspersed with a series of flashbacks to points in their life before dementia struck. The humour in the play is very gentle, with scenes reminiscent of a classic Brian Rix Whitehall farce—in the opening stages of the performance, Ivor drops his pen on the floor and goes looking for it under his desk; when Lily enters, he doesn't know she's there, and so shuts her outside again when she goes back out to her car. Ivor and then Lily each enter the performance space from an outside door, making the most of The Box, the metal container in which the play was staged. The jokes centring around Ivor mishearing Lily and then flitting from topic to topic in their conversation will have a painful pathos for anyone who has personal experience of dementia.

While the laughs may be gentle, the meat of the play is anything but. Lily is dying and has returned to see her father to try and "put things right". In a soliloquy, she reflects on what each of us would do if we knew the clock was ticking and we only had a certain amount of time left to live, and she questions why we leave everything to the last minute. Lily's mother died when she was still a child and Ivor sent her to a boarding school; the experience gave her confidence and she later moved to the USA to study for a master's degree and to work, ultimately being away from her father for seven years. While, at the time, her father no doubt embraced his daughter's newly-found independence, the loneliness he felt without her comes to fore as the dementia removes his inhibitions. Perhaps the most uncomfortable scene in

the play comes at the very end; once Lily has left, Ivor is left sitting at his desk calling for her, leaving the audience with the disturbing notion that perhaps his daughter hadn't been there at all; that she was already dead and the conversations were simply imagined. The only aspect of the play that didn't hold together was the train connection in its title; although Ivor sat with two model engines on his desk and spoke briefly to Lily about a journey from London Bridge station, railways appeared only briefly in the dialogue, leaving a theme that could have been further developed, which would have created more of a solid thread to run through the script.

Both Tim Marriott (the playwright's father), who played Ivor, and Stefanie Rossi, who portrayed Lily, were left in tears at the end of the debut performance, clearly touched by the raw emotions expressed through the piece. "As a production company, we always want to start conversations, not end them", Marriott told the audience after he and Rossi had taken their applause. Speaking outside The Box after the show, Marriott explained: "My family has personal experience of dementia, but this isn't our story, it's much broader than that." Rossi added: "My grandfather had dementia and one of the hardest parts was him not knowing himself at the end. One of my friends also died when he was 25 and so I remember the pain his mother went through losing her son." Marriott—who starred as Gavin in all seven series of the BBC sitcom *The Brittas Empire* as well as appearing in *'Allo, 'Allo*, *The Bill* and *Doctors*—has recently returned to the stage after taking a 17-year break from acting to become an English and drama teacher. Although Marriott chose not to go into detail about his family's experience of dementia, the raw emotions portrayed in the play will have struck a chord with anyone in the audience who has lost a loved one to the disease.

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Published Online
September 3, 2018
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422\(18\)30326-0](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422(18)30326-0)

All Change
The Box, Assembly George Square
Edinburgh Festival Fringe
Edinburgh, UK
Aug 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 2018
<http://www.smokescreenprods.com/>

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