

Tuesdays With Morrie
By Jeffrey Hatcher & Mitch Albom
Based on the book by Mitch Albom

A Guide to the Play
By Mark Claxton



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How to Use This Guide

This study guide is intended for anyone who would like to enhance their appreciation and understanding of Globe Theatre's production of *Tuesdays With Morrie* by Mitch Albom and Jeffrey Hatcher. The guide contains background information about the play, but also explores the artistic vision and choices behind this particular production.

When deciding how best to make use of the guide, ask yourself this question: If you were to participate in a backstage tour, would you prefer to meet the actors, see the sets, and chat with the director before the show, or afterwards? That may inform your use of this guide, which is intended at least in part to take you 'behind the scenes' and can serve equally well as preparation for the show, or as further exploration after you've already experienced it.

Important note: Some of the guide's content may give you information about the play's plot that you'd rather discover yourself while experiencing the show. If you'd rather avoid any potential spoilers, you might want to wait until seeing the play before reading any further.

Teachers who are preparing their students to experience *Tuesdays With Morrie* can provide them with the Questions for Discussion ahead of time -- or simply allow them to experience the play and then use the questions or other sections of the guide to launch discussion in the classroom. The recommended resources at the end of the guide may also be useful for further exploration.

I hope this guide is both helpful and enjoyable to read. I welcome your comments and suggestions at markclaxton@sasktel.net

The Persistent Afterlife of Morrie Schwartz

Nearly 15 years after Morrie Schwartz succumbed to Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), his words continue to enjoy vigorous health in contemporary consciousness.

Schwartz, a sociology professor who was diagnosed with the fatal disease early in his retirement, first gained the attention of U.S. television viewers when he was interviewed by Ted Koppel of ABC's Nightline. Nightline viewers responded so positively to Schwartz's philosophizing about life, death, and their meaning, that he was brought back for several encores.

In the meantime, one of Schwartz's former students was startled to see his favourite professor on his television screen. Mitch Albom, by then a well-established Detroit sports columnist, had taken several classes with Schwartz at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. After learning of Schwartz's illness, he paid his old professor a visit at Schwartz's home in Boston.

The visits became a weekly ritual until Morrie Schwartz died in November of 1995. Albom, who had recorded many of their conversations, arranged the material in novel form, and *Tuesdays With Morrie* was published by Doubleday in 1997. Four years later, it was still on the New York Times bestseller list, and a 1999 TV movie adaptation had attracted millions of viewers and earned veteran actor Jack Lemmon an Emmy for his portrayal of Morrie. (It was Lemmon's last screen performance; he died in 2001.)

In November of 2002, *Tuesdays With Morrie* gained new life as an off-Broadway play, co-written by Albom and playwright Jeffrey Hatcher. The play had premiered the previous summer with New York Stage and Film in Poughkeepsie, New York.

In a 2005 interview with Seattle Repertory Theatre, co-author Jeffrey Hatcher spoke about some of the key differences between Albom's original novel and the stage adaptation. Hatcher said some of the play's material was based on anecdotes shared by Albom that hadn't made it into the book, while other scenes are taken almost directly from some of the recorded sessions between Albom and Schwartz.

Finally, Hatcher said, "I added a lot of humour. Morrie was a funny guy. You can hear it on the tapes. He's more acerbic, especially about politicians. I knew levity was going to be very important to what is otherwise a very painful tale."



Set design by Peter Hartwell

Tuesdays Through Sundays With Morrie

A Conversation with Director Andrew North

After reading the scripts last year for the Globe's planned 2009|2010, season, Andrew North wasn't planning on doing any directing.

And then he took one more look at *Tuesdays With Morrie*.

"I remember being moved by it the first time I read it. I cried," North said. "I read it again and I thought, 'This might be something I can sink my teeth into.' Some of the ways the play is stylized I didn't really care for as a theatre practitioner, but the underlying story was so engaging."

As he read more closely, North also began to spot an uncanny number of commonalities between his life and that of the play's narrator, Mitch Albom.

"Mitch's uncle in the play dies of cancer. My father died of cancer six years ago. It was pancreatic cancer in both cases," North said. "Mitch takes seven years to propose to his wife. So did I."

Beyond those details, many of the questions Albom found himself asking during his encounters with Morrie Schwartz were questions with which North was wrestling as well.

Moved and excited by the story of Mitch and Morrie's friendship, North took on the director's role. And since early January, he and actors Richard Binsley (Morrie) and Geoffrey Whynot (Mitch) have been spending full rehearsal days immersed in a script that asks many profound questions and proposes many profound answers.

Whynot said the work has been rewarding and intense, with the actors and director often running out of emotional steam at nearly the same moment.

"Playing in a two-hander (a play with only two characters) is always a challenge, but this one really never lets up," he said. "There's no sentence that's insignificant."

"Because of the subject matter, I sometimes feel like I don't want to go there," concurred North. "It gets so emotional, I think, 'Maybe we should just stop.'"

In his approach to playing Morrie, Richard Binsley said it was important for him to get through the emotional impact of the story so that he could reach an honest portrayal of the title character.

"He's worked his way through a lot of that stuff before he approaches the subject matter with Mitch," Binsley said. "It's not for Morrie to dwell on the profundity of what he's saying. He's simply sharing it with a man he loves."

A Conversation With Set/Costume Designer Peter Hartwell

Q: After reading the script of Tuesdays With Morrie, and studying Globe Theatre's space, what initial challenges or choices came to mind for designing the set?

A: All the stage directions are clearly written for a proscenium arch stage. The fact that the shape of this theatre is what it is, meant you could just disregard all the stage directions. They're applicable to other circumstances. Andrew (North, the play's director) and I both agreed on disregarding all those stage directions, and then it just became a question of editing furniture. He said it should feel like Morrie's room, and we took it from there.

I supplied Andrew with way more furniture than he actually needed, in model form, then it became about deciding what was critical and what wasn't. I think he's done a really fine job of honing it down.

There was a time between finishing the model and sending it out to Regina, that I was playing with a model with really generic furniture pieces, really neutral, as characterless as possible. That would have worked as well. But this set looks like it should succeed well.

Q: What kinds of adjustments have you had to make along the way?

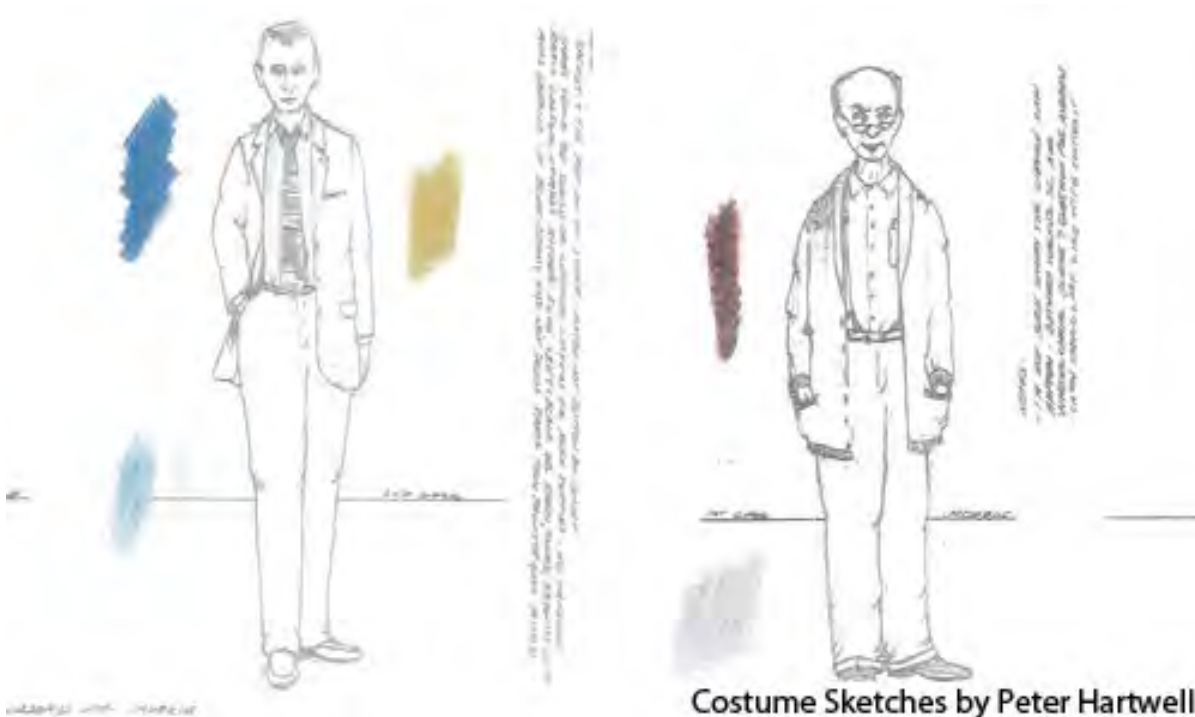
A: Just the shape of the furniture. It has to be such that you're not blocking sightlines. Inevitably, you have actors sitting down with the backs of their heads to the audience for some part of the play. What you don't want is for the audience not even to be able to see the backs of their heads. We had to look at chairback heights and locations of pieces.

Q: Anything interesting come up in regards to costumes for this show?

A: You could choose to have a lot of costuming, try to indicate the time period that the story's passing through. There is a reference to Mitch's mortarboard and blue graduation gown. There's a reference to his grey sweatshirt. We see Morrie at an earlier stage in his life, and then we see him on his death watch.

But I think I've given the actor a break if, when they go offstage, they're not having to do complete costume changes. They can think about what they're walking into next, and not 'Where are the cufflinks' or 'I've got the wrong tie clip on.'

So the costume pieces are used to denote mood, not a specific time period.



***Tuesdays With Morrie* Scene by Scene**

Although *Tuesdays With Morrie* is not divided into acts or scenes, the play's narrative can be broken down as follows:

"I hope one day you'll think of me as your friend."

Mitch Albom introduces us to his old professor, Morrie Schwartz, and remembers his days as a student in Morrie's sociology classes. He recalls their mutual affection and his graduation-day promise to stay in touch -- a promise he fails to keep.

"The past was the past; forget it."

After graduation, Mitch faces the trauma of the terminal illness and death of his favourite uncle, whom he idolized and who had always encouraged him in his endeavors as a musician. Mitch eventually gives up music and turns to journalism. He has nearly broken completely with his past when he sees his old professor on a segment of *Nightline* with Ted Koppel.

"It's not a matter of years."

We learn from Morrie that he has been diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, a fatal disease of the nervous system. He hasn't long to live. After an initial surge of grief and despair, Morrie resolves to truly live, for as long as he has left.

"Dying is only one thing to be sad over. Living unhappily is something else."

Upon learning the news, Mitch flies to Boston to visit Morrie. During this first session, Mitch is unsettled and overwhelmed by Morrie's candid comments about his disease and impending death. He is also put on the defensive by his old professor's relentless questions about his personal life and his own happiness.

"How about every Tuesday?"

Haunted and upset by Morrie's probing questions, Mitch eventually returns for a second visit. This session is no more comfortable for Mitch, who finds himself having to physically shift his declining friend into a more comfortable position. Morrie convinces him, however to return every week for a question-and-answer session. Mitch promises to return every Tuesday, until Morrie's journey reaches its end.

"Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live."

Mitch brings a tape recorder to his third visit with Morrie, but shuts it off when Morrie becomes upset at remembering the death of his mother when he was a young boy.

"A network will not hug you."

After helping Morrie reply to some of the thousands of letters he receives, Mitch -- still running on his career at full speed -- gets lessons from Morrie on what really matters in life.

"We must love one another or die."

Morrie's physical condition is quickly worsening, and Mitch arrives to find a spilled pitcher and glass of water. After the mess is cleaned up, the conversation eventually turns to relationships and family. Morrie challenges Mitch on his reservations about love and commitment, until the younger man angrily ends the conversation.

"The wise and wonderful things you want to say at the end are the kinds of things you should say all your life."

After helping Morrie through a frightening choking spell, Mitch recounts the illness and death of his favourite uncle. Morrie shares a difficult secret about his own response to his mother's fatal illness.

"Honey, the next voice you hear will be Morrie Schwartz."

When Mitch phones his wife Janine to let her know he'll be catching a later flight home, Morrie asks for the phone and, to Mitch's dismay, invites her to come visit. Mitch realizes a part of him has been afraid of these two important people in his life coming together to 'compare notes.'

"Janine! Call me Morrie!"

Mitch is amused by Morrie's flirtatiousness with Janine. Morrie has already learned that she is a singer, and the visit ends with him losing himself in her rendition of 'The Very Thought of You.'

"...but don't hold on too long."

Mitch receives a phone call from Morrie's wife, Charlotte. Morrie is 'not doing well.' When Mitch arrives, he finds Morrie bedridden in his room. The two share a long, emotional conversation, during which Morrie urges Mitch to "forgive everyone everything" -- including himself.

"You live inside the hearts of everyone you've ever touched."

Morrie is dead, but Mitch has come to understand that he isn't really gone -- that he lives on in his impact on the people he cared for. Mitch carries out Morrie's final request: on a Tuesday not long after Morrie's death, he packs a picnic lunch, pays a visit to Morrie's resting place -- and begins to talk.

Questions for Discussion

1. a) Morrie Schwartz was fond of "aphorisms", brief expressions of his philosophy and principles. How many of Morrie's aphorisms from the play can you recall and write down?

b) Do you have a favourite among the sayings you could recall? What's meaningful about that saying for you?

2. Imagine that Morrie asks you the same question he asked Mitch: "Are you at peace with yourself? Are you trying to be as human as you can be?" How would you answer? What do you think it means to "be as human as you can be?"

3. If, like Mitch, you could bring Morrie a list of questions, what would be the first one on the list? What do you imagine his answer might be?

4. Like many plays, *Tuesdays With Morrie* began life as a book -- in this case, a book based on true events. In your opinion, how well does this story work as a play? If you were the playwright, are there any ways you might have told the story differently?

5. Discuss the performances of each of the two actors. Were they convincing in their roles?

6. The play's set was designed to represent Morrie's home. Was it effective? If you were designing the set, would you have used more detail? Or less?

7. If you could get back in touch with a former teacher, or a friend from your past, who would you choose, and why?



For Further Exploration

Books

Tuesdays With Morrie by Mitch Albom. Estimated to have sold 15 million copies, Albom's memoir is now taught in high schools and universities around the world.

Morrie in His Own Words by Morris Schwartz. Published in 1995 as *Letting Go* before *Tuesdays With Morrie* became a cultural phenomenon, these are Morrie Schwartz's words of advice and comfort to others facing terminal illness.

A Grief Observed by C.S. Lewis. Morrie Schwarz observed and recorded his own physical decay with as much objectivity as he could muster. C.S. Lewis, most widely known as the author of the Narnia children's books, adopted the same approach to grief after his wife, Joy Gresham, died of cancer. In this 1961 memoir, Lewis records his emotional and spiritual journey toward acceptance, all through the lens of his Christian faith.

Film/Video

Tuesdays With Morrie (1999), directed by Mick Jackson. Starring Jack Lemmon as Morrie and Hank Azaria as Mitch, this Oprah Winfrey-produced film won an Emmy for Outstanding Made for Television Movie.

Morrie Schwartz's Interviews on Nightline have been compiled as a nine-video series at this YouTube address:

http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=2656BAC7D66B106C

Online

<http://www.alsa.org/als>

Information about amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's Disease) from the ALS Association.

<http://www.doollee.com/PlaywrightsH/hatcher-jeffrey.html> for a complete list of Jeffrey Hatcher's published plays, including an adaptation of Henry James's classic psychological thriller *The Turn of the Screw*.