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John Lithgow's Solo Show Has Artistry and Heart

David Sheward · Thursday, January 18th, 2018

The funniest moment on Broadway so far this season is not provided by a witticism from a beloved comic or a pointed political observation by an astute social commentator. It's the incredibly accurate recreation of a parrot's expression as it asks a roomful of stuffy British types if they would like to share a nut. The priceless simulation of avian inquiry is provided by the incomparable John Lithgow in his solo show *Stories By Heart*, presented now by the Roundabout Theater Company at the American Airlines Theater after previous versions had a short run at Lincoln Center and a national tour. Lithgow's eloquent mouth twists and curves into an elongated bill, his eyes bulge and twitch, and he emits a sound between a bark and a squawk.

The format of the show is simplicity itself: the actor performs two classic short stories, "Haircut" by Ring Lardner and "Uncle Fred Flits By" by P.G. Wodehouse (the parrot appears in the latter). Before each, he relates their significance during different points in his relationship with his father, also an actor and a director. It's an intimate celebration of the art of storytelling, the actor's craft, and the love of literature and family.



John Lithgow in his solo show *Stories by Heart*

Credit: Joan Marcus

Lithgow has always been an exemplary artist who could read the phone book and draw plaudits for his interpretation. The most striking example of his limning skill was his six-season run on the goofy NBC sitcom *Third Rock from the Sun*. He managed to take the gimmicky role of an alien posing as a university professor and turn it into a tour-de-force comedy turn, full of subtext and depth. His base material is of higher quality here, but he performs a similar feat of alchemy, transforming raw materials into theatrical gold.

He begins each act with a deceptively laid-back chat, explaining how each tale fit into his life. The Lardner was an early favorite read by his dad to young John and his siblings during their peripatetic childhood as Lithgow Senior eked a career as a director of Shakespeare festivals in the Midwest. The Wodehouse lark was read by John to both of his parents as they were suffering the advances of aging and he had temporarily moved in to care for them. He starts each by reading from the very anthology of stories his family owned and gradually acting out each role and action.

"Haircut" imperceptibly evolves from a folksy portrait of 1920s small-town America to a grim indictment of sexism and small-mindedness. The narrator is a gossiping barber unspooling the local scandals to a newcomer. Lithgow endows him with a giggly maliciousness as well as

heartbreaking, unexpected empathy. “Uncle Fred” is a riotous romp satirizing British middle-class snobbery in which the author creates a roomful of varying citizenry representing a cross-section of physicalities, attitudes and classes.

Daniel Sullivan’s subtle direction, John Lee Beatty’s handsome drawing-room set, and Kenneth Posner’s cozy lighting compliment Lithgow’s tour-de-force turn perfectly. This one-man show has artistry as well as *Heart*.

Jan. 11—March 4. Roundabout Theatre Company at American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 8pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$39—\$139. www.roundabouttheatre.org.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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