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In Other Words

Matthew Seager

TBC Productions

Arcola Theatre, Studio 2

5–30 September 2023

So much of the dramatic and emotional impact of Matthew Seager's *In Other Words* derives from its stark juxtapositions—mood and movement, structure and sound, light and language, past and present—that comfort, then disturb, with disorientating effect.

First seen in 2017 and revived here at the Arcola (in partnership with The Utleigh Foundation's Music For Dementia campaign, which aims to make music an integral part of dementia care) to coincide with World Alzheimer's Month, the play charts the meeting and marriage of Arthur and Jane: a chance encounter, comforting domesticity, Arthur's dementia-ravaged decline, Jane's brave forbearance in a brutally cruel situation.

Andy Routledge's acute directorial decisions strike strong, emotive blows. The opening moments prepare us for the disjunctures and fragmentation: settling into our seats in Arcola's Studio 2, we watch Arthur and Jane nestle into two comfy armchairs and chat and cosy up, their living room warmly lit by the golden glow of a standard lamp (original design, Paul Brotherston; additional design, Bethany Wells). But, with the flick of a switch, Arthur is hunched, wide-eyed, quivering and whimpering, alienated from the world, as Jane, crouching by his side, dressed in a baggy cardigan, struggles to put on his shoes and calm him.

Just as quickly, we wind back to the 'beginning', an accidental encounter in every sense of the word, as Arthur bumps into Jane on the dance floor and red wine cascades over her dress. It was all part of the masterplan he tells us, later, in one of the play's narrative asides. The latter break the tension and draw the audience into the embrace of their relationship, which grows from unfortunate beginnings into genuine love. They dance, and Frank Sinatra's "Fly Me to the Moon" becomes their signature tune; in later years, Arthur finds it a particularly efficient way of smoothing and smooching over marital discord when he's done something 'wrong'!

At the start, Seager brings Arthur's slightly gauche cheekiness to the fore, and this cheery awkwardness and open-heartedness only makes his subsequent decline into interiority and lonely confusion more painful. When he tells us of that evening when, having walked to the local shop, five minutes away, his mind went blank, his question—haven't we all experienced such moments?—touches an audience nerve. Then, he can't remember where he's put his keys. Who wouldn't identify with that?

But, soon, it is language itself that starts to disappear. The pictures that are designed to hold back his loss of words—"apple, labrador, grass"—slide into "apple... maypole". And with speech goes self; with self goes love. Searching desperately for the words, when he's found them, he spits them out with bitter venom: "you're a nasty bitch!" he yells fiercely at Jane.

Without undue exaggeration, Lianne Harvey skilfully uses facial gesture and posture to communicate Jane's own aging and the toll that supporting Arthur exacts on her physical and mental health. Harvey conveys the joy—when, briefly, 'normality' is restored and Arthur recognises her, the name labels they sport momentarily unnecessary; the despair—when she considers drowning Arthur to spare them all; and the anger—life certainly isn't "fair", and the fact that language seems inadequate to communicate this truth only makes it more biting. The agony which lies beneath Jane's selfless stoicism is heart-breaking.

The jarring emotional shifts are expertly articulated by the sound (Iida Aino) and lighting (Will Alder). Soft pink and blue bathes the dance floor; a white glare catches the couple like rabbits in headlights when they are under the medics' spotlight; the jagged flickering of the standard lamp and the draining of the domestic glow embodies the piercing fragmentation and poignant waning of Arthur's inner life. The dulcet tones of Sinatra, Dean Martin and others judder against distorted echoes and discordant layering of words and sounds.

Seager wrote the play after witnessing the power of music to heal and connect when facilitating a drama workshop in a residential care home during his university years. He tells of how the process helped him when his own grandmother suffered from Alzheimer's.

The end of the play is painful. We're back where we started: Arthur is bewildered, frightened, isolated; Jane is similarly alone in her valiant but vain efforts to keep her husband with her. But, at the close, though the outlook is bleak, it is music that keeps Arthur connected to the world, to Jane, and to his true 'self'.

Reviewer: [Claire Seymour](#)