

“Life” is playing at a Shakespeare playhouse near you

The experience that we call life can be thought of as like a 17th Century playhouse, where the audience is allowed, or even expected, to participate.

The play has already started when I arrive and I enter via the front ticket office. The ticket says it just started and will last for 70 years, but it looks like it has been in progress forever. I stand at the back of the theatre mesmerised by the amazing but strange events unfolding on and around the stage. I decide to take a seat at the back of the room and watch for a while. I was given a program with my ticket, but it's quite dark at the back of the theatre and it isn't easy to read, or indeed, understand.

There seems to be a list of rules about how to play the “game” but they don't make much sense, especially when I compare them to what appears to be happening in front of my very eyes.

I decided to ask someone else what they think the rules are. There was a person sitting a couple of rows further forward, so I went to join him. He seemed to be very clear about what was happening. He'd been here a long time and had it all worked out. I couldn't understand his explanation at all. It sounded a little bit like the description in the rule book, but it didn't make sense to me. I figured I would just watch for a little while longer and then take a nap.

It was hard to keep awake. I couldn't understand what the actors were doing or why. I thought I would move to a quiet row at the back and sit and think this through.

People kept arriving through the same entrance that I entered from. Some sat near the back and watched for a while, before moving forward, appearing keen to get involved. Others just went straight to the front, smiling and dancing as they went. Have these folks been here before or something. Do they know what it all means and how to play? I don't know how they can just get into the swing so quickly and easily.

As people get closer to the front rows, they are drawn into the events taking place on the stage and the actors on the stage “come-down” and encourage them to get involved. The activity isn't limited to the stage area, it is spread out into the standing and seating areas. Anywhere that people are willing to join-in. The actors appear to be telling the new comers what to do and how to do it and the new comers appear eager to oblige. Sometimes the events taking place on the stage appear to be fun and happy, but most of the time the interactions between the people are extremely negative and mean. It looks like the recipients of the “bad behaviour” actually like it. At least they don't make any effort to avoid it or improve the situation.

As I look around the audience trying to identify any glimmer of hope in this theatre, I notice that there are other individuals sitting back in the shadows, watching with interest but not willing to move forward to join in. Like me, I assume that they see this strange behaviour as “out-of-character” or not as the program intended. May be there should be someone orchestrating the proceedings. If there was a director with a vision for the play and a plan to make that happen, it could all be organised and happy, for everyone. Why isn't there someone in charge of all this?

After a while, I noticed that one of the quiet guys at the back made a very focused movement. He rose from his chair, took a very deep breath and marched to the front of the room. He went straight to one of the “victims” on the stage and put his arms around her and led her to a seat near the front, but away from the action. She looked distressed from the ordeal but relieved to be away from the strain of the play. Although she had been playing an active part in her own victim role, she was noticeably better once removed from the situation.

The man took some time to talk to her and comfort her before moving her to a seat further back where she could relax and sleep. When I saw that the man had also settled into his own relaxed state, I determined to go to talk to him. May be he really knows how the game should be played?

I was a bit apprehensive about approaching him but I couldn't stand being in the theatre any longer and not understanding what was going on here. I crept over to him, rather apologetically. “Excuse me sir! I noticed what you just did. Do you mind if I ask you what this play is all about and how it works?”

“Sure, sit down. What do you want to know?”

Well, everything really. I don't understand what's happening. I read the program and the rule book, but what I see doesn't match what I understand from my reading.

“What do you think you understand from your reading?”

Well, the title of the play is ‘We are All One’, but the actors don't act as if they are all one. Not even a little bit. They seem to be treating each other rather badly and taking advantage of the weaker ones. In fact, the weaker ones look like they actually enjoy the role they are playing, as victims of the aggression of the other actors. Don't they understand what damage they are doing to each other and to themselves?

“How would you prefer them to be acting?”

I thought I was asking you the questions. I don't really have any thoughts on how they “should” be acting, because I don't understand the purpose of the play. I was hoping that you could help me with that. After all, you did just intervene to save that girl.

“The play represents Life itself, in fact, the play IS Life itself. The Rule Book describes the logic for how the play works. These rules are acting upon all members of the cast, the audience and the theatre itself, all the time, without any arbitration. The trouble is, most people didn't read the rule book before they joined the play. Some read the book but quickly forgot it and others read the book but didn't understand it. None of this affects the fact that the rules are still being applied. Do you see?”

No, not really! Who applies and enforces the rules? I don't see any directors or producers, no referee or judge. What stops a person from acting badly (I mean, doing bad things)? And, you said “the play IS Life itself”, what is that supposed to mean?

“The play is ‘Life’ and this version is titled ‘We Are All One’. There are other versions being played out at other theatres, but let’s focus on this one. The Rules are always the same, but the players get to choose how they want to experience their time in the theatre. They can avoid spending any time on the stage and even keep from getting dragged to the front rows, if they choose. However, this tends to require mental strength and a feeling of detachment from the proceedings. Not an easy thing to do and given that you chose to come into the theatre in the first place, it does leave you wondering why you came here.”

“What tends to happen is that people are quickly attracted to the action at the front, and within a short time are interacting from the edge of the stage. Some people try to persuade those on the stage that they should behave more appropriately (‘better’), but any positive influence is usually short lived. After a while they will become more frustrated and climb on the stage and try to change the behaviour and actions of the others or at least go about their own time being as positive as they can and helping people where possible. When you have been here a while, you will notice just how crowded the stage is becoming, more people seem to be entering the theatre than are leaving. The stage can hardly cope with the weight of actors on it, but no one wants to give up the space they perform in. Each persons space is becoming smaller and there is almost no room left for people to express themselves without getting in someone else’s way. This causes conflict and aggression.”

Why don’t some people just step down and let others finish expressing themselves before they have their turn? I’m sure that there is plenty of stage available for everyone, if the time was organised and allocated fairly. Why doesn’t someone take control of the situation and make it work out the best for everyone, and not just for the few that got to the stage first?

“Many people ask this question. You have to understand that everyone IS expressing themselves ALL the Time. The people controlling the stage, the people being abused on and around the stage, the people sitting in the middle of the audience and the people sitting at the back of the room. They are all expressing who they are. They are playing in the same theatre to the same rules. Everyone has equal opportunity to choose how they want to experience the play of ‘Life’. If you would like to see order brought to the proceedings, then stand up and make it happen. Do what you would have someone else do. Be what you would have someone else be. As an individual, you can stand on the stage and experience the glory of life, be happy that you know and understand the rules and apply them in your own life. You will not be impacted by the chaos going on around you. It will not touch you. But in the play called ‘We Are All One’, how will you feel your connection to the others in the room? How will you experience their pain, their suffering, their joy. Do you even want to?

“The Rules are perfectly defined. They are applied perfectly in all situations. It is up to you to understand the rules and use them to experience the highest version of Who You Really Are.” Now, go and do it!