JOHN LITHGOW

In conversation with Bill Moyers

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Celeste Bartos Forum

JEAN STROUSE: Thank you very much, Tony. I'm really delighted that the Cullman Center's cohosting this evening's program with LIVE from the New York Public Library, as Tony just said. Can you hear me? Okay. Thank you. In addition to the conversation we're about to hear, both LIVE from the New York Public Library and the Cullman Center have full seasons of terrific programs coming up. You'll have probably found the cards on your seats. Next up from LIVE is Harry Belafonte tomorrow night, October

12th, and on Friday will be Def Jam with Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin, also from LIVE from the New York Public Library. The Cullman Center will have further public conversations between writers, including Deborah Baker, Elizabeth Rubin, Roy Blount Jr., James Shapiro, Wells Tower, John Jeremiah Sullivan, and Louis Menand. The Cullman Center's here, LIVE is here, and you've probably got those from your seat.

If you would like to receive e-mail notices about all these programs, there's a sign-up sheet by the door as you leave. And if you're not already a Friend of the Library, as Tony just said, think about becoming one tonight. You can join at any level, membership comes with all sorts of discounts and benefits. And since you're here tonight, you're already a friend of the library, why not make it official? As a special offer we will have five books for the first five people who sign up to become a Friend at the forty-dollar level tonight, five copies of John Lithgow's book, we will give you for free with your membership, and it's at the table over there where you can sign up to become a Friend. And both John Lithgow and Bill Moyers will be signing their books after the program, so you can buy them and then get the two authors to sign them.

I'm going to talk very briefly about the two people that you came to hear since you already know them quite well. Bill Moyers has been among other things an ordained Baptist minister, I assume he still is, chief of staff and White House press secretary for Lyndon Johnson, deputy director of public affairs at John F. Kennedy's Peace Corps, publisher of *New York Newsday* and a long-term immensely thoughtful engaging presence in all of our lives as a writer and television journalist. The liberal political

commentator Molly Ivins had another idea for him in 2006 when she published an article called, “Run Bill Moyers for President, Seriously.” **(applause)**

A couple of years ago Bill tried to retire from his stellar award-winning television career, but will be returning with a new weekly series in January, partly, he told me by e-mail last night, “Because I have no retirement skills, **(laughter)** but also because there are so many voices like John Lithgow’s that I want to be heard.” Retirement may be the first thing Moyers ever tried for which he didn’t have the requisite skills.

The other outrageously multitalented person he will be talking with tonight is of course John Lithgow, actor, artist, Fulbright scholar, musician, voice of Lord Farquaad, writer of children’s books and songs, and most recently the author of a memoir called *Drama: An Actor’s Education*. I should have a copy here in my hand to be holding up to you, but I don’t. It’s terrific and John has won a great many awards—acting awards—maybe he’ll win some writing awards, too. Including five Emmys, two Tonys, two Golden Globes, and two Screen Actors’ Guild awards. He and I went to college together and it was clear to everyone who saw his undergraduate performance as Gloucester in *King Lear* that he was made of different stuff than everyone else on that stage.

One quick story: John was the first actor ever to give the commencement address at Harvard in 2005. He nodded to the solemnity of the occasion, saying, “I’m well aware that this is an occasion of dignity and gravity, and that a certain amount of graduation day wisdom is called for. But wisdom from an actor? Are you kidding?” **(laughter)** He did of

course go on to deliver gentle wisdom and also gave a gift to the class in the form of a new children's book in verse. As you may recall, 2005 was the year in which Larry Summers, then president of Harvard, got into a lot of trouble by saying that the low representation of women in science and engineering could be due to a different level of aptitude at the high end. With Summers sitting on the stage behind him, John recited his tale of a mouse, named Mahalia, who accidentally gets herself zipped into a student's backpack, lands in an advanced physics course, falls in love with the subject, aces it, majors in science, and graduates with her class on a beautiful day in June. The story ends, "And so we take leave of Mahalia's tale, a story of stout self-reliance, an epic account on a miniature scale of a mouse who set forth on life's bumpy trail, and succeeded by simply refusing to fail, Mahalia, Bachelor of Science." **(laughter)** The speech got a standing ovation, a very very long standing ovation. John said he did not dare look behind him at the people on the stage, **(laughter)** but friends told him Summers was roaring with laughter, as I predict you are going to be for much of this evening.

(applause)

BILL MOYERS: Thank you very much for that welcome, we've just been told to switch seats.

JOHN LITHGOW: What a bad, bad start.

BILL MOYERS: I'm usually to the left of the guest, but not tonight. **(laughter)** For

John, all the stage is a world and to us he's given the gift of letting us share that world and that stage. Of the thousand or more hours of television I've done over the last thirty to forty years, none touched me or the audience more than the hour that we did with John about eighteen, twenty-four months ago on *Bill Moyers Journal*. It came about because I'd had on my reading table for several months his little book *Poets' Corner* and every night as has been my custom ever since Inez Hughes at Marshall High School stood up and read poetry aloud to her students on the basis that we weren't smart enough or wise enough or experienced enough to read it ourselves, so she would play all the parts for us, I've read poetry as the evening came and the night descended and sleep arrived, and for those months I had this book, *The Poets' Corner*, on my reading table.

Lo and behold, John moved into our building at 151 Central Park West, putting to test the imperative "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," but I have come to love this man, and Mary, his wife, love him because he feels as all neighbors might do a space in my own life and work that was vacant because I didn't have the talent to be the performer that he was and to bring alive the poetry that—John grew up with poetry, and in this book there's a range of poets that touched him over the years and me, so I asked him on the program, we read some poetry, he read some poetry, I listened, the audience thrived, and it was a resounding success, so I'm going to take the liberty of the chair tonight and before I get to his new and enthralling biography of the first half of his career I'm going to ask him unexpectedly to read three of my favorite poems in here. One of them is "The Owl and the Pussycat," by Edward Lear, and I want to ask you to share with our friends here why this poem is one of your favorites.

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, it's a poem for young people, and I first experienced it as a little boy, and I just included it because I think very often poetry has that effect, it sort of evokes childhood responses, childlike responses. If I read it, I'm sure it will affect everybody the same way.

BILL MOYERS: You say it's one of the most fun poems to read of all, right?

JOHN LITHGOW: Yeah, and it's very dreamlike. I mean, such a thing could only happen in a dream, of course, an owl and a pussycat setting off to sea, so it's like a dream poem, it's almost like a Maurice Sendak—All right, I'll read it. **(laughter)**

The Owl and the Pussycat went to sea
In a beautiful pea-green boat,
They took some honey, and plenty of money,
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.

The Owl looked up to the stars above,
And sang to a small guitar,
"O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,
What a beautiful Pussy you are, you are, you are,
What a beautiful Pussy you are."
Pussy said to the Owl, "You elegant fowl,

How charmingly sweet you sing.

O let us be married, too long we have tarried;

But what shall we do for a ring?”

They sailed away, for a year and a day,

To the land where the Bong-tree grows,

And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood

With a ring at the end of his nose, his nose, his nose,

With a ring at the end of his nose.

“Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling your ring?”

Said the Piggy, “I will.”

So they took it away, and were married next day

By the Turkey who lives on the hill.

They dined on mince, and slices of quince,

Which they ate with a runcible spoon;

And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,

They danced by the light of the moon, the moon, the moon,

They danced by the light of the moon.

(applause)

Thank you and good night!

(laughter)

BILL MOYERS: How do you explain it? Merry, silly, and yet absolutely beautiful, that sound.

JOHN LITHGOW: Who can explain it? I mean, using phrases like "the moon" to repeat, baying at the moon. I don't know, that's the first I've looked at that poem for years, but it all comes rushing back.

BILL MOYERS: I've never heard language dance as vividly as it did on my show when you read from your patron saint, Ogden Nash. Remember that? I'm going to ask you to do that now, and I want you to listen to the sound of the sound.

JOHN LITHGOW: Yes, I've only dared—

BILL MOYERS: He didn't know he was going to read this.

JOHN LITHGOW: I've only ever dared to write doggerel poetry, but I think there's a certain kind of nobility to doggerel poetry, conferred by Ogden Nash. The title of this is "No Doctors Today, Thank You." Anybody know it? Good.

They tell me that euphoria is the feeling of feeling wonderful,

Well, today I feel euphorian.

Today I have the agility of a Greek god and the appetite of a

Victorian.

Yes, today I may go forth without my galoshes,

Today I am a swashbuckler, would anybody like me to buckle

Any swashes?

This is my euphorian day.

I will ring welkins and before anybody answers I will run away.

I will tame me a caribou

And bedeck it with marabou.

I will pen me my memoirs.

Ah, youth, youth! What euphorian days them was! **(laughter)**

I wasn't much of a hand for the boudoirs,

I was generally to be found where the food was. **(laughter)**

Does anybody want any flotsam?

I've gotsam. **(laughter)**

Does anybody want any jetsam?

I can getsam. **(laughter)**

I can play "Chopsticks" on the Wurlitzer,

I can speak Portuguese like a Berlitzer.

I can doff or don my shoes without tying or untying the laces because

I'm wearing moccasins.

And I practically know the difference between serums and antitoccasins.

Kind people, don't think me purse-proud, don't set me down as

Vainglorious,

I'm just a little euphorius.

(laughter/applause)

BILL MOYERS: Euphorius. It's not a word, but you know what it means when you hear it, right?

JOHN LITHGOW: Yes. And Euphorian.

BILL MOYERS: On the other end of the spectrum, and then we'll get to the conversation about drama, on the other end of the spectrum that night you read for us that great eulogy, Shakespeare's great eulogy from *Cymbeline*, which I know was one of your favorites. You read it, did you not, at your father's memorial service?

JOHN LITHGOW: I did. I did.

BILL MOYERS: All right, so I wanted you to read it tonight. Tell us about it.

JOHN LITHGOW: It takes place in I think Act 4 of *Cymbeline*. If any of you have not seen Cymbeline down at the Barrow Street Theater, I urge you to rush, rush, run don't walk, it's a fabulous production performed by only six people.

BILL MOYERS: So if you leave right now, you could make it.

(laughter)

JOHN LITHGOW: You could literally make it. Lose my audience. It's to me the most beautiful thing Shakespeare about death, and death and life, and valuing life while it lasts. The superb thing about this and it speaks just volumes about Shakespeare, is that the entire poem is a joke. This is a poem spoken or sung, it's called a song, over the body of a young dead man. The two people who are speaking this poem are two brothers who don't know that the man, number one, is not dead; number two, is not a man, it's a woman dressed as a man; number three, is their own sister. They don't know any of this. It's a big joke on them. And yet they speak the most beautiful, deeply melancholy meditation on death and mourning because they have grown to love this fake man so deeply. That's all you need to know. That and you must see this production. It's a great illumination of the play.

Feare no more the heate o' th' sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages,
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gon, and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads, and girles all must,
As chimney-sweepers come to dust.

Feare no more the frowne o' th' great,

Thou art past the tirants stroake,

Care no more to cloath and eate,

To thee the reede is as the oake:

The scepter, learning, physicke must,

All follow this and come to dust.

Feare no more the lightning flash.

Nor th' all-dreaded thunderstone.

Feare not slander, censure rash.

Thou hast finish'd joy and mone.

All lovers young all lovers must,

Consigne to thee and come to dust.

No exorcisor harme thee,

Nor no witch-craft charme thee.

Ghost unlaid forbeare thee.

Nothing ill come neere thee.

Quiet consummation have,

And renowned be thy grave.

(applause)

BILL MOYERS: I wanted you to read that because as you said it is a joke, and yet and the emotion evoked by it in the small audience in the play were unwarranted by the reality. The reality is, he wasn't dead, he was a she, and they were her brothers. But the emotion, true, powerful, and the emotion you evoked and emoted and evoked was true. What does that say about acting, that you can bring powerful and sincere emotions out of what is not real?

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, it's not just acting but writing. I mean, I think the richest drama, the richest performance, the richest interaction between a performance and an audience is very complex. It's suffused with all kinds of feeling. That's why I love the irony and the joke of a beautiful, kind of plangent poem spoken in an absurd moment. There's another great moment of Shakespeare where everybody descries and keens and moans about the death of Juliet when she's not dead. Again, it's a total travesty of Greek tragedy, because she's not dead and the audience knows that, the audience knows something that the performers don't know. And it's a little insight into kind of the absurdity of life, this sort of deep emotional absurdity, the emotional and comical absurdity of life.

BILL MOYERS: But it's not merely the words, is it? There's something else going on that the actor plays upon.

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, that's the actor's job, to sort of channel it, to channel the

writing or channel the situation.

BILL MOYERS: When did you know it was going to be your job?

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, I grew up in a theater family, as I describe in the book. I didn't want to go into the family business even though I loved the theater, I loved the magic of theater and the sort of beautiful world that my father had created in creating Shakespeare festivals, but it was not my intention to be an actor. But I went off to college, and I'd become a very good actor just through pure osmosis. And so I was a campus star, I fell in with the acting gang almost immediately. And I went to Harvard, if there's some area in which you're the star, you go with that.

(laughter)

BILL MOYERS: Then you had two roommates who were actors, Tommy Lee Jones and Al Gore.

(laughter)

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, actually, that's an urban myth. They were not my roommates. They were a year younger. I acted a lot with Tommy Lee but I never even knew Al Gore until later. My roommate was David Ansen, who is still my best friend and who was the *Newsweek* movie critic for about thirty-five years and reviewed me about ten times. We

never knew that while we were—I didn't think I'd be an actor, he never dreamed of being a critic, but that's the nature of college.

BILL MOYERS: Do you still hear Shakespeare in your father's voice?

JOHN LITHGOW: What a lovely question. I do. In fact I have heard, there are a couple of little scraps of recording tape that capture him from like the early 1950s when he was a much younger man than I performing Brutus in high tragedy and Dr. Caius in low farce in *Merry Wives of Windsor*, and it's unbelievably stirring for me to hear that, because I—he, it's a distant memory, but yes I do. He had a kind of stentorian, kind of grand and old-fashioned way of performing Shakespeare. A lot of it came from the fact that he and his companies acted Shakespeare out of doors with no amplification so it was, "Once more into the breach, dear friends . . ." It was literally yelled. They had to yell everything the way the Greeks had to yell and yet give it some substance of humanity. So he was big and stentorian and I became a little kind of snotty about it when I became an actor myself. I began to feel my father was a very old-fashioned actor and I was more of the sort of new age and I was such a young asshole.

(laughter)

BILL MOYERS: Fortunately you grew out of it.

JOHN LITHGOW: Listen to me now!

(laughter)

BILL MOYERS: But he read to you. This is a beautifully written book, *Drama*, and the first chapter is so moving about your father that I have to dwell on him for a moment. Give us a quick bio of him and then take us to that moment when he's failing, he's frail, he's given up, he's ready to die, and then something happens that brings the mystic cord of memory snap alive again, right?

JOHN LITHGOW: That's just what happened. Well, my father—as I've told you, he was a great Shakespearean, he was a great man of the theater, and he had a huge, genial nature, he was very generous-hearted and had a great sense of humor, and when he was eighty-six years old, he'd had an operation, he was very ill, and he was very depressed. He became a different person, and to all appearances he'd lost the will to live, and I found myself in a situation where I was taking care of him and my mom for a whole month trying to work out some sort of care for him in the moment of this crisis and I knew my big job was to simply cheer him up, get him going again, and nothing worked.

And I had the bright idea about halfway through my time with him to read them bedtime stories. And it was this big fat book, called *Tellers of Tales*, that he had used to read us stories when we were all little children, and I looked through their bookcases and I found that book and that evening when they were all tucked into bed, I showed them the book just like little children, told them to pick a story, the way we did. And the story he picked

was “Uncle Fred Flits By,” by P. G. Wodehouse, which I recognized immediately and remembered it was one of our favorite stories, but I’d totally forgotten it.

BILL MOYERS: Read these two paragraphs.

JOHN LITHGOW: You’re so smart, Bill.

(laughter)

BILL MOYERS: I don’t think preparation is smart, I think it’s necessary.

JOHN LITHGOW: So I read it to them. I launched into the first paragraph, this is “Uncle Fred Flits By,” with only the dimmest memory of what I was reading. As the story unfolded, more and more of it came back to me. I was astonished. It was hysterical. I’d never read anything like it. It practically caught fire in my hands. The characters revealed themselves and the complications kicked in, and one by one I recognized all those moments that we had thought were so damn funny all those years ago. And then it happened. My father started to laugh. It was a helpless, gurgly laugh almost in spite of himself. It was like the engine of an old car starting up after years of disuse. I kept reading and he kept laughing, harder and harder until he was almost out of breath. It was the most wonderful sound I’d ever heard, and I’m convinced that it was sometime during the telling of that story that my father came back to life.

(applause)

BILL MOYERS: Well, this book is one story like that after another, I tell you, and it still touches you as it touches us. When did you recognize your own voice? When did you know that your voice could serve up a feast of emotions?

JOHN LITHGOW: Oh, I don't know, Bill. I mean, it's sort of cumulative, and you've just put a very beautiful question to me, but it's a very large and grand idea. Everything is incremental. I mean, there was an explosive moment early on in the book when I had my first show-stopping, kind of explosive triumph onstage and made an audience cheer and roar and applaud so long that they literally wouldn't let me continue on to the next scene. Of all things it was playing King Paramount in *Utopia Limited* by Gilbert and Sullivan **(laughter)** when I was a sophomore at Harvard and I always said that it was during that ovation that I decided to become an actor. **(laughter)** I mean, literally, waiting and waiting and waiting, and I don't know how many of you have had that experience. Probably not many, **(laughter)** but it's just—you think your heart's going to explode, it's like a drug, and it's such an explosive and joyous experience, it's like there's no way I could do anything else. And, you know, that was at the very beginning of my career. It's happened a few times since then.

BILL MOYERS: But that was after—if I remember correctly, that was after your first spoken line onstage in *Henry V*, do you remember that? Do you remember that line? How old were you?

JOHN LITHGOW: Yes, I do. Well, I was about fifteen. I had spoken a few lines but only one, two, or three syllables long. This was my first extended Shakespearean line spoken in a professional production. I was the French messenger announcing the arrival of Exeter, the ambassador from England, to the court of the Dauphin. I came out onstage and in my tinny little fifteen-year-old voice, I said, "Ambassadors from Harry, King of England, do crave admittance to Your Majesty." That was it, **(laughter)** and that was a pretty good imitation.

BILL MOYERS: But that moment later on the stage when you felt ebullient and empowered by your own discovery, that attitude, that sense didn't prevail always. I mean, you write beautifully in here about your own neediness, your own sense of cowardice, your own fears, I mean, all those qualities that I would have thought would have suggested you might choose a career in politics, but you didn't.

(laughter)

JOHN LITHGOW: It's a lot of similarities.

BILL MOYERS: But it wasn't all uphill, easy uphill after that, was it?

JOHN LITHGOW: It's never easy. I mean, it's one of the great—I mean, my profession is fraught with occupational hazards, and one of them is fully believing in yourself. You

know, it takes tremendous self-confidence, but I think all actors share a curious duality, this crazy pendulum swing between a kind of arrogance and self-doubt, if not self-contempt. I mean, there are moments when you think what you do is so pointless, and so useless, especially when you're acting badly in a bad piece of theater or a bad movie, I mean, you're so down on yourself, because it seems so undignified somehow. But that's one end of the pendulum swing. The other is when you have a success and you feel that you've reached people and moved people and what you've done is important to them. You have enlarged their life. That makes you feel fantastic. But it's this crazy pendulum swing. Moments like that come along once every few years if you're very, very lucky and yet that's what you're constantly looking for, opportunities to do that.

BILL MOYERS: I was very touched by several reviews of *Drama* on Amazon. I like to go to Amazon and other sites to see what ordinary, if there's such a term, readers, or how they're responding to books. There was one this afternoon, I'll read you just a paragraph from it. She wrote, "What comes across more indelibly, though, is the weird cocktail of emotions that propel a good actor forward: ego and neediness, bravado and melancholy, and how they both marry an actor to the world and separate him."

JOHN LITHGOW: You know, I wrote that.

(laughter)

BILL MOYERS: That's what we journalists are looking into about Amazon and others.

By the way, I found out and I'll tell the audience this, because your book can be bought now on Amazon as of 4:30 this afternoon for sixteen dollars and ninety-one cents, discount, I also found out there that it weighs 1.2 pounds, **(laughter)** so did you expect to get paid by the word or the ounce?

(laughter)

JOHN LITHGOW: That was wonderful. I mean, that was putting far better what I was just trying to say.

BILL MOYERS: And she goes on to say, "John is unstinting on that score, and also in his relationship with his family, and there's some magnificent, marvelous writing in here about family relationships. He makes you understand what a psychically rough business it is and how scarred the survivors become." Why is it a rough business?

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, it's, you know, actors, if they are given the chance to act, if they are lucky enough to get really good roles, roles that put them to work at what they truly want to do, they go to work using their own emotions, they deal in volatile chemicals, and they use their own emotions to try to illuminate false emotions, to give audiences a point of identification, to tell a story that means something to an audience. Well, you're just—when you put your own emotions to work that way, it's—you're very vulnerable to all kinds of disruptions in your life. Ill-advised romances, it played havoc with the end of my first marriage, which is all written about in there. I was an unformed

person in many ways and I was a much more successful actor early on than I was a human being, I sort of hadn't put it all together yet. And that's, you know, that's the scars they, that that woman writes about.

BILL MOYERS: How much—how would you weigh the extent to which you would hurt your first wife, I presumed that that happened, by telling of these affairs you had at that period of your life?

JOHN LITHGOW: I couldn't not tell her. It was exploding from me. My life was in crisis. We were very close, I couldn't be false to her. I was being false to her, but I had to be honest with her about it.

BILL MOYERS: What was the crisis in your life?

JOHN LITHGOW: I think I describe it—the simplest way I could describe is I title the entire chapter "Adolescence." It was a kind of postponed adolescence. Part of my growing up, I was—because it was in a theater family, we were relocating so many times, it was this kind of desperate need to be a good boy, an impeccably, unimpeachably good boy, God forbid I do anything wrong, and I sort of reached for adulthood at the age of twenty, got married at the age of twenty, this unformed young man, and I describe it as a postponed adolescence. I reached my thirties and just—things flew apart, the marriage flew apart.

BILL MOYERS: There's a great line, it's not verbatim, but it's close to it. Where you say that everyone experiences adolescence, but some people are lucky to experience it when they're adolescents. **(laughter)** Yours was postponed.

JOHN LITHGOW: Mine was substantially postponed.

BILL MOYERS: You know, it's interesting that when some people have a crisis they resolve it with affairs and some people have a crisis and go to seminary. I think you had more fun.

(laughter)

JOHN LITHGOW: I describe it as "ecstatic chaos."

BILL MOYERS: I don't see any evidence that you're carrying any scars.

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, no, but I mean, you know, scarred skin is a lot tougher than unscarred skin.

BILL MOYERS: In fact, Charles McGrath, writing in the *New York Times*, describes you as "distressingly normal."

JOHN LITHGOW: No, I think his phrase was "disappointingly normal."

(laughter)

BILL MOYERS: Disappointingly normal. Was that an insult?

JOHN LITHGOW: I took it as a compliment. I'll settle for that any day.

BILL MOYERS: But this is what puzzles laymen, who stand in awe of acting but I don't understand it. How can somebody be so normal when you have played such loopy roles? I'm serious, you're a football player turned transsexual, a psychopath in *Blow Out*, a killer in *Cliffhanger*, the evil prince in *Shrek*, a lunatic alien in *3rd Rock from the Sun*. I mean, how do you hold on to your normality if you become authentically as an actor dramatically authentic as an actor in those roles?

JOHN LITHGOW: It's just, to me there's a very, very clear line between performing and not performing. And I try—I think I'm a fairly secure ego, I'm a fairly together person and that almost allows me to sort of fly out there into the ozone when I'm acting. I don't always do that, but people know I'm ready, willing, and able to, so they hire me for it. I could do the Trinity Killer for you right now. But I would know I was acting, you know. You may not.

BILL MOYERS: I don't think I can ever think of you as a killer. A psychopath, maybe. **(laughter)** McGrath goes on and says you are happier and more well adjusted than most.

What makes you happy now? Mary, married thirty years?

JOHN LITHGOW: Yeah, my marriage and my life with my wife makes me very happy. That's my default activity as soon as I finish acting and get home. To me the very, very simple things in life, mainly centered around cooking and feeding ourselves, going to theater, just experiencing life in a very simple, almost calm and low-keyed way, just because the rest of my life is so extravagant and very, very public, it's made me private to the point of exclusivity. My wife and I spend ten times more time alone with each other than we do with other people and it's just become a wonderful thing in my life.

BILL MOYERS: She's the daughter of a Montana farmer—

JOHN LITHGOW: That's right.

BILL MOYERS: Rancher?

JOHN LITHGOW: No, a farmer.

BILL MOYERS: A farmer, and you spend—I know you disappear from the Kenilworth about two months a year.

JOHN LITHGOW: That's right.

BILL MOYERS: And you're out there. What do you do out there?

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, we have a beautiful little lake house on Flathead Lake, this incredibly beautiful spot in Northwestern Montana, and we have the laziest, idlest days, we go horseback riding at about six p.m. every night together and swim.

BILL MOYERS: You realize you're surrounded by armed militia in Montana? I'm not exaggerating.

JOHN LITHGOW: I'm very sensitive to that. It's a crazy state, there's no doubt about it. But for us, it's our little island of sanity.

BILL MOYERS: McGrath also writes that, "with his big, almost hulking frame," by the way, this is a marvelous review, "and his long, quizzical-looking face, Lithgow on screen or stage effortlessly manages to seem like a panic-stricken creature imprisoned in the wrong body." **(laughter)** What would be the right body to you? Jane Fonda?

(laughter)

JOHN LITHGOW: I've chosen Ryan Gosling. **(laughter)** But, you know, it's interesting. As you say that, it occurs to me, almost for the first time, how many times I've played one person inhabiting another person's body. Dick Solomon taking on the form of a human. Dr. Lizardo in *Buckaroo Banzai*. I've done it frequently. And in *The*

World According to Garp, a woman who literally changed from one body to another. I have no answer for why I have done this so often.

BILL MOYERS: I always thought it might be because you had won the Tony, if I remember correctly, for the longest, one of the longest nude scenes in the theater. Right? What was the name of that? *The Changing Room*.

JOHN LITHGOW: *The Changing Room*, a magnificent play by David Storey, in 1973.

BILL MOYERS: Was this your first time to appear naked in public?

JOHN LITHGOW: Yes, it was. And it was my first time on Broadway. My opening night was on March 7 of 1973 and I won a Tony Award on March 25th for it.

BILL MOYERS: That's like Barack Obama winning the Nobel Prize before he takes the oath of office.

JOHN LITHGOW: Right, but he never takes his clothes off. **(laughter)** It turned me into an exhibitionist for the rest of my career.

BILL MOYERS: What part of you won the award?

(laughter)

JOHN LITHGOW: I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer. **(laughter)** I'm surprised at you, Bill. Surprised.

BILL MOYERS: Was it hard? Was it hard to act—

(laughter)

JOHN LITHGOW: And this is BILL MOYERS!

(laughter)

BILL MOYERS: Was it difficult **(laughter)** to perform—how many minutes onstage?

JOHN LITHGOW: It was a long, long scene. **(laughter)** It was about a ten-minute scene. I mean, we all laugh about it, but in fact I write very, very seriously about the whole phenomenon of performing naked, just because it's the extreme version of what an actor does, he exposes himself. And in its way, it's the most potent, emotionally potent thing you can do on the stage is completely expose yourself.

BILL MOYERS: Describe the scene.

JOHN LITHGOW: *The Changing Room* is a superrealistic look at an afternoon in the

changing room of a semipro rugby team in the north of England. These working-class men with not very happy lives, on a gloomy, rainy day, and they've all assembled to play rugby, which is a murderously brutal sport. The first act is before the match. The second act is the halfway point in the match and immediately after that. And the third act is after the match, when they've won. In Act 2, after the teams rushes back out on the pitch, about five minutes later, one of the players is brought back into the changing room, very, very seriously injured. His face has been smashed, and that's the part I played, Kendal.

He's covered with mud, in his uniform and he can't even see, and they have to take care of him like a baby, they take him offstage and strip him down and plunge him in a bathtub, which is how rugby players bathed back in those days, these huge communal tubs, bring him back onstage, stark naked and glistening, and he has to be toweled off and dressed, socks, underwear, and T-shirt, and bundled up and sent on his way. That's the entire scene. There's no plot to it, very, very few lines. The only sound is the roar of the crowd in the distance over the little speaker and the occasional sound of the announcer announcing plays and Kendal just sits there, and occasionally mutters something.

It was, I think, arguably the most powerful scene I've ever been involved in onstage. It was extraordinarily moving, because you'd gotten to know this character quite well in the first act. He was not a very bright guy, you know, his whole thing was this electric tool kit that he'd bought, and he went showing his teammates and they all tease him because he's been cuckolded by a couple of the men on the team and he doesn't even know it. So you know all about this and just as he's going off into the cold, being bundled off to be

taken home while the game is still on, he says, “Where’s my electric tool kit, Luke?” He’s forgotten his electric tool kit. You know, it was so moving and also visceral—extremely visceral because of the blood and the mud and the wetness and the nudity.

I don’t know. I just think the audience was so taken aback. There was a good deal of titillation about this production because there was fifteen rugby players in the course of the day in the changing room. That was fifteen men who were nude twice in the course of this day. That was not titillating in the least, it was nothing but reality and this scene was the most real of all.

BILL MOYERS: I’ve not seen it, but I’ve read about it.

JOHN LITHGOW: Let me do it for you.

(laughter)

BILL MOYERS: All right, do it. **(laughter)** But what intrigues me is that an American audience is not familiar with rugby, certainly wasn’t then, you can now see rugby on cable channels. You were twenty-seven by your own admission, not yet out of your adolescence. And yet you won the Tony for getting inside this remarkably taciturn and almost reclusive, emotionally reclusive man. And I’m honestly curious. How do you do that?

JOHN LITHGOW: It's simpler than you think. I mean, it's extraordinary how much the play writing does for you. I remember reading the play and thinking, "Oh my God. I know exactly what this scene is going to be like, and I know how it's going to affect people." It was right there, even though if you read *The Changing Room* there's not a line in it which is anything more than small talk. It's like the small talk among men, dirty jokes and teasing and taunting and a few lines about the game. There's no well-made play dialogue at all. It's nothing but reality but you get this sense of this extraordinary social organism and getting to know these twenty-two people and getting to know little sliver of their lives. I just knew it when I saw it and I knew exactly how to play it, and that's what happens with good writing. You know, I could—everything good that I've been in, I've had that reaction to the writing.

BILL MOYERS: Have you ever been asked to play Orson Welles?

JOHN LITHGOW: No, I haven't.

BILL MOYERS: I wondered, because when you were young, as you may remember, you were often compared to the young Orson Welles. And you had your Tony at twenty-seven. He was a bright star on the firmament when he was just a young man, and I watched *Citizen Kane* the other night, perhaps I was influenced by the knowledge that I was coming here and seeing you again, but I thought, "Wow, he would make a great, great Orson Welles." Have you ever thought about that?

JOHN LITHGOW: Not about playing him. You know, I'm not crazy about playing people that are very, very familiar to you. I played Abe Lincoln and FDR in my day and I —to me it was far more important to me, or a greater experience to me playing Kendal or Gallimard in *M. Butterfly*, roles that came to life in front of the audience with nobody to compare them to. Because basically you're doing an imitation, and Frank Langella did this miraculous job of making you forget Richard Nixon. You know, he was more Nixon than Nixon was, **(laughter)** it was like, "wow!" but to me that's not something that excites me, pulling off that particular trick. I'm about to play Joseph Alsop in my next play in the spring, and it's wonderful because you're probably one of the very few people who knows anything about what he looks or sounds like. Nobody knows.

BILL MOYERS: Joseph Alsop was one of the most prominent columnists for a number of years. He and his brother Stewart wrote a joint byline and then they went their separate ways, and when I arrived in Washington as a very young man in 1960 he could make or break you and so obviously those of us who didn't want to be broken were in his orbit and influenced by him and tried to influence him. Why are you playing—who's writing the play, David—

JOHN LITHGOW: David Auburn. It's David Auburn's second play.

BILL MOYERS: Why do you want to play Joseph Alsop?

JOHN LITHGOW: Because he's written a brilliant play. I mean, it's all I can do to keep

myself from overselling this play because—but I just think it's marvelous.

BILL MOYERS: What about it appeals to you? You didn't know Alsop, did you?

JOHN LITHGOW: No, I knew vaguely about the Alsops but I didn't know the important events or the evolution in his politics or anything. I am not going to tell you why I love this play so much, but you will see it because you are my friend and my neighbor **(laughter)** and you have to see it and I will buy you your tickets to make sure you see it.

BILL MOYERS: It's not a one-man play is it? Does Susan Mary show up? Very eccentric wife. They were quite a formidable pair.

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, he had an extraordinary story. It will be David Auburn's take on that story, so it may take some liberties with the precise history of Joseph Alsop, but nobody knows the precise version of Joseph Alsop.

BILL MOYERS: But we will.

JOHN LITHGOW: You'll know our version, and you'll see that he's a great hulking man, like me.

BILL MOYERS: Occupying the wrong body.

JOHN LITHGOW: Exactly. He was only about this tall.

BILL MOYERS: Listening to you, John, I struggle with something I—you may have written it in here, I don't remember. You've said or written that you actors don't think—you actors know this is a serious world, but you don't think you're in a serious business. And yet when I hear you talk, whether it's about poetry or that performance in *The Changing Room* or about Shakespeare, this is the most serious business of all, is making us feel.

JOHN LITHGOW: No, no. Yes, I consider it a very, very serious business and a very high calling but I also relish and value its frivolity, you know, its silliness. Half of what I've done is completely ridiculous. **(laughter)** And I love going back and forth between high seriousness and total nonsense and mingling them. You know, it's one of the things that I love about my favorite roles are villains who have an inexplicable good streak, good people who do inexplicably vile things.

BILL MOYERS: So when are you doing Nixon?

(laughter)

JOHN LITHGOW: I was on Leonard Lopate today and he asked me to imitate Richard Nixon. This seems to be my destiny today.

BILL MOYERS: Did you?

JOHN LITHGOW: No, I didn't. I said I'd forgotten how.

BILL MOYERS: You go back and forth in these roles. You also go back from the stage, to television, the movies. How seriously does acting differ for the stage from television from the movies?

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, it's like the mechanics are completely different. You go through the same process, but the most basic difference is that onstage you're going through the story at the same time the audience is going through the story and you're in the same room with them, so there's a kind of a chemical energy that is not the same acting for a camera and for a camera crew. I mean, I make a sort of conscious choice to turn the crew into my audience, get their attention and make them watch, make it that compelling, but you have to keep it—you have to stay within the frame, I mean. You have to keep it—use your judgment, not overact. It's also out of sequence. It takes place over the course of sometimes of three, four, five months, and you've more or less forgotten all about it by the time everybody else is experiencing it. Not only that, but they take your performance and they dice it up into little pieces and put it back together and you don't even recognize it. **(laughter)** It's like, "What? That's not how we played that scene. What happened to that great moment?" Whereas onstage, you own it. It's your taking the audience on your own ride, or you and your company of actors.

BILL MOYERS: I saw you do that to a whole audience, the night we saw, the first time we came to see *All Our Sons*, what was it two and a half years ago?

JOHN LITHGOW: Just about.

BILL MOYERS: You played Joe Keller in *All Our Sons* and we went home and set up until about one or two o'clock debating whether that could be translated to the cinema, to the screen. I don't think it could. Do you?

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, it would just be different. It's a very, very different experience and you always. I've always—I've always—I think it's almost a truism that if something is truly great onstage, it's not going to make it on film. *M. Butterfly* was not the film that it was onstage. Same with novels, I think the great movies are made of not-so-great novels, because I don't know, they aren't treated with such sacredness. It's very hard to make a great movie about *The Great Gatsby*.

BILL MOYERS: I was looking to see if the poem about the turret gunner is in here. I don't remember. Is it?

JOHN LITHGOW: Yeah.

BILL MOYERS: Because we thought of that, you and I, after *All Our Sons* because it's

a story of a father who during the war had sold defective, knowingly sold defective aircraft material to the British, to the air force, and several young men were killed as a result of that malfeasance on his part, and his son doesn't discover this for a long time and in the conversation that John and I had about it we were reminded by that story of the young men who died in the war of the poem—tell us, you take it over.

JOHN LITHGOW: It's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," and you surprised me on that occasion, too by asking me to read it. Let me just read it. I should only tell you that the ball turret of the B-17 is the little ball at the back of the plane, and the ball turret gunner is sort of crouched kind of womblike inside this ball turret, extraordinarily vulnerable, easy target, and very, very dangerous.

From my mother's sleep I fell into the state,
And I hunched in its belly until my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

BILL MOYERS: Hearing that is like experiencing what happened on the stage that night with Joe Keller. Your memoir, which each of you really must read, it's beautifully written, it's wonderful stories and it gives you far more insight into the art of acting than I can do as a journalist, but it stops in 1979. Are you going to do anything after that?

JOHN LITHGOW: You mean am I going to write another book?

BILL MOYERS: Yeah.

JOHN LITHGOW: I don't know. I finished the book and I thought, "Oh, thank God. I don't have to do this again." I wrote it. You know, I set out to write the memoir not quite knowing where I was going, how far I would take it, but I realized very early on, "I can't keep up at this rate and tell the whole story of my life. It would be a book that fat," and I began to see 1980, '81 as the very logical endpoint because it's the years when my life completely changed. If my life were a play that would be intermission, so I began to see early on, write toward that ending. After that, along came *World According to Garp*, *Terms of Endearment*, *Footloose*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Buckaroo Banzai*. I became a movie actor who does theater, rather than a theater actor who does movies. And I thought, "Good, let's just confine it to my young years. Let's make this a story about basically discovering who I am as an actor and who I am as a human being," because after that I became what I am today, I mean, I sort of became an adult. Besides which, I would feel writing about all those notable moments that I've already done a hundred press interviews for every one of them, that's—to me that's not as interesting as those early years, besides which the strongest subplot of my book is it's also a biography of my father, and a kind of tribute to him, and a portrait of our father/son relationship, and that was a very logical time to bring that full circle.

BILL MOYERS: Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gently into That Good Night"—did you

read that at your father's—

JOHN LITHGOW: No, I didn't, but I read it on your show.

BILL MOYERS: That's right. I was thinking about that. Let me ask for some questions from the floor, but before I do, let me read you from another citizen's review in Amazon today, "What comes across more indelibly"—I read this—"is the weird cocktail of emotions that propel a good actor forward. This book is as close as most of us will ever come to having a complex, nuanced actor take you into his confidence and show you around behind his eyes. It is as if you're sitting down for a long, languid, long-haul overseas flight and discover that your seatmate is John Lithgow. You have hours to kill, the bar cart is open, and he doesn't mind talking. What an unforgettable flight that would be, and what a book this is." **(applause)**

We have a microphone and you're welcome to come up and address a brief question to John. Who will be first? I can't see because of the boldness of the lights, but I can hear you when you get close to the—now I can see. Who has a question? Yes, sir.

Q: Evening. I'm wondering when you're on the stage in the theater and you're doing hundreds of performances, day after day, night after night, how do you keep it fresh, how do you—I imagine each performance is a little bit different. How do you keep interested all those days all those evenings, doing that?

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, it's I get asked that question a lot and I frequently answer with this wonderful story. I think it was attributed to Sir Thomas Beecham when he was guest-conducting the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and they were rehearsing for Brahams' Second Symphony to be performed later that evening and he just couldn't get any energy and interest out of the musicians, or not nearly enough because they'd played it so many times, and he stopped and he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I know you've played Brahams' Second Symphony a thousand times and you have no special interest in playing it again tonight, but there are two people in the audience tonight that I want you to play for. The people who are hearing Brahams' Second for the first time and the person who's hearing it for the last time."

When you're acting, you're trying to give them an experience. Yes, you want a great experience, too, but it's all about them, and it's making it vivid for them. For some reason that particular challenge keeps me constantly rejuvenated. Yes, there are shows that have gone on too long, and I have wanted them to end. But whenever I get to that point, I just try to remind myself of that, "Yes, it's old hat to me, but it's not old hat to them, my job is to make this happen for the very first time," and I think good actors, that's what they do. And you can see it up onstage. They're experts at making it happen for the first time. It's a kind of magic act they do. You know, and I love the craft of it. I love circus performers, circus clowns, who perfected a five-minute-long routine and it's all they've performed for the last thirty years, because it's just dazzling. You know, you're just, you're after creating that magic.

BILL MOYERS: Another question. Yes, sir.

Q: I'm not an actor, but I did play around in college a little bit. And there was one moment, I had a minor role in a Molière play, and you know how Molière, craziness happens and then some messenger from the king comes in an dreads a long monologue and resolves all the conflicts in the play and everything's fine. Well, my role was that messenger, and I came on one night and I completely blanked my lines and I was standing there and everybody in the audience was waiting for the play to go on, and I just knew that I could totally screw it up if I did not remember the line and after a few, it was probably just a couple seconds, seemed like hours, the lines came back to me, but I'm wondering if you've not just forgotten your lines while you were onstage but in some sort of awkwardly, embarrassing, but in some kind of dramatically significant way.

BILL MOYERS: It's a good question.

(laughter)

JOHN LITHGOW: Yeah, it sounds like a nightmare what you went through, but it's a nightmare that has happened to me plenty. I mean, I actually forgot my words in the middle of *All My Sons* quite recently, and I was onstage with about five people and it was a scene that I was—I had to run that scene, and I had no idea where I was. And it's completely terrifying. You don't know—it seems absurd. All you're doing is acting for people, and for very forgiving people, but you just feel like you're going to have a heart

attack and die on the spot. I mean, you remember it well, somehow or other you muddle through, but your body is just trembling.

BILL MOYERS: What happened that night? Did the music come back, I mean, did the words?

JOHN LITHGOW: Yes. We got back on track. God knows how, because there was no way they could help me. They were all looking at me like . . . **(laughter)** and it went on and on and on and the audience didn't notice it at all, they thought it was an extremely powerful moment, **(laughter)** and it was, believe me.

(laughter)

BILL MOYERS: It's like Charles Kuralt once said to a group of us at CBS News when I was there: "Once you learn to fake it everything else is easy." **(laughter)** Another question. Come right on up. Yes, ma'am, back there, and there's one, and you come down and wait and we'll save a little travel time.

Q: First of all, thank you for a wonderful evening. This is lovely. I know you spent a year studying in England and I'm wondering why you did that and what you got out of that experience?

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, you'll just have to read the book. **(laughter)** No, it's—I

mean, there's a good. There's two or three chapters about those two years in England. It was a very logical thing to do to go for a Fulbright, I didn't know whether I'd get it or not but I did get it. And the Fulbright went to one man and one woman to spend a year in the D Group at LAMDA, London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, a program tailored for overseas students, most of them American. It was like a British Academy acting training horse pill. It was like three or four years' worth of training all in one year and a lot of the people in it were actors who had already spent some time in the profession, although we were all young, under thirty certainly.

I'd never been to England. I had the feeling that there was a lot I still had to learn and my experience of LAMDA, which was a fantastic year, it was a great, great program in those days, it still is, was to really strip you down and build you back up, sort of peel away habits. My version of Shakespeare came very much from my father's sort of company style, which was as I've described, it was kind of loud and direct and with a huge emphasis put on speed and energy and loud and fast, it was this sort of loud, fast version of Shakespeare, and it had tremendous—and I don't mean to diminish it, it was really great, it was terrific Shakespeare, but I felt there was a lot more I could learn by actually going there.

I had a kind of reverential regard for the knights and dames of British theater. And I wanted—it was an amazing year, couple of years in British theater, it was when Peter Hall, Trevor Nunn, Peter Brook, all these people were working at a very, very high level, great, great actors were constantly working at the National, at the RSC, and the West End

and I sort of wanted to experience all that and I was eager for the adventure of it all, I just wanted to see England, and I got the Fulbright. Those were the reasons I did it. I describe two things that happened to me. The downside of it was number one, the very simple business of coming back with this fruity English accent that I hadn't intended to acquire, this sort of weird hybrid middle Atlantic accent that I had to purge my first year back.

The other thing was it made me into a kind of Shakespeare snob. The extraordinary thing about my career is I was in twenty Shakespeare plays by the time I was twenty years old. I've only done Shakespeare three times since then, twice in American theater. The last of those two was in 1975, and the third was going back in England and performing to the Royal Shakespeare Company, and that was four years ago. It's just made me too much of a snob, and I look at all the roles that I've turned down over the years and it makes me wistful and a little embarrassed. I really should have been doing more Shakespeare.

BILL MOYERS: Yes.

Q: Hi. You mentioned earlier that part of the ability to create characters comes from the playwright and I was just wondering what playwrights have inspired you in your life and playwrights who you think create good characters.

JOHN LITHGOW: Well, I've had these few wonderful experiences. *The Changing Room* was one of them. M. Butterfly was another, working with David Henry Hwang. I love working with playwrights themselves. I love the process of doing new plays. I love

working on *Sweet Smell of Success* with John Guare, for example, a musical that he wrote the book for. You know, the playwrights—I've just listed some of the really, really good pieces of theater I've done. And there are those great revivals, those great classic plays, too, that you sort of discover how great they are when you do them.

I remember dusting off an old George Bernard Shaw one-act that I'd done in a high school workshop a few years ago to memorialize an actor, a dear actor friend, David Dukes, who had died way too young. I gathered together actors who had worked with David, and I thought, well, let's do *Overruled*, a four-character Shaw one-act, I remembered that that was pretty good and I got Alex Kingston, Annette Bening, Rene Auberjonois, and myself. We performed *Overruled*. We just read it through in my living room and then we performed it and it was fantastic. It was like, you forget how great George Bernard Shaw is, and what an amazing manipulator of an audience he is. There were these astonishing moments in this trifling little one-act play about wife-swapping that completely stopped the show with laughter. It was like, "Whoah!" You just forget. And it only comes to life, you know, it's like granular instant coffee, you can't just put it in your mouth, but when you add water, it's like **(laughter)** you add the actors and it just becomes amazing.

BILL MOYERS: A good question. A story is told, whether it's apocryphal or not I don't know, but a lady came up to George Bernard Shaw at a cocktail party in London during World War I and said, "Mr. Shaw, why are you not at the front fighting to save civilization?" He said, "Madam, I am the civilization they're fighting to save."

(laughter)

JOHN LITHGOW: That's good.

BILL MOYERS: All right, if we may follow the arc back to the beginning. John told you the story of how he came to serve his father when he was in a slough of despondency and perhaps even beginning his descent into death and how reading from that wonderful book *Tellers of Tales* revived him and we stopped there and now I want to close the evening if you will, before John signs his books, with your concluding three paragraphs about that experience, and it's the opening of the book. Starts there.

JOHN LITHGOW: This is what I started to read before. I thought long and hard about that moment, the moment of reading to my dad. Starting the next day, Dad rallied. His health and his good spirits began to return. He lived another year and a half, eighteen precious months. That may not sound like a long time, but it was much longer than any of us had dared to hope for. Better still, it was a happy time. The cloud of doom that had darkened his thoughts for so long finally dispersed. Those eighteen months provided a graceful coda to his life. They were months filled with visits from family, visits from friends, reminiscences, taking stock, fond farewells, more stories, more laughter, and I can't help thinking that it was Uncle Fred that got him going again. It was as if my father had fed off the irascible spirit of a long-dead author's fictional creation, that fabulous flim-flam artist, Uncle Fred himself.

Acting is nothing more than storytelling. An actor usually performs for a crowd, whether for a hundred people in an off-Broadway theater or for millions of moviegoers all over the globe. Reading to my parents on that autumn evening in Amherst was something else again. It was acting in its simplest, purest, most rarefied form. My father was listening to "Uncle Fred Flits By" as if his life depended on it. And indeed it did. The story was not just diverting him. It was easing his pain, dissolving his fear, and leading him back from the brink of death. It was rejuvenating his atrophied soul. Lying next to him, my mother could sense that by some mysterious force, her husband was returning to her.

Before he went to sleep Dad thanked me for the story as if I'd given him a treasured gift. But he'd given me a gift, too. It was the gift of a father's love. I was fifty-six years old and had known him all my life. In all those years our relationship had changed kaleidoscopically. We had been up and down, happy and sad, close and distant. Our fortunes had risen and fallen, ebbed and flowed, rarely at the same time. But in all those years I'd never felt as close to him nor ever felt as much love for him as I did that night.

He had given me another gift, too, although he never lived to see it bear fruit. The period I spent with my parents was one of the most significant in my life. In that memorable month, that Wodehouse story was the most memorable hour. I had spent my entire adult life acting in plays, movies, and television shows. I had told stories. I had had a gratifying, fun, and prosperous career. Only infrequently had I paused to plumb the mysteries of my peculiar occupation. That night, however, everything came into focus.

Sitting at my parents' bedside and reading them a story, trying to help two old people feel better, came to seem like a distillation of everything my profession is about. In the years to come my thoughts kept returning to that evening, even after my father was long gone. Finally, spurred on by the events of that night, I decided to write this book.

(applause)