

# **Reunion**

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*By John Caine Directed by Anthony Biggs Presented by Polpo Productions in association with Jermyn Street Theatre on 16 April 2012*

Raymond and Antonia are like any couple in their 60s. They have their flaws, their ups and downs, but after 30 years they still love each other. Now they face a choice – the hardest choice of their lives. Diagnosed with an incurable and relentlessly progressive degenerative disease, Raymond has decided that he wants out before the illness takes over. However if he is to end it, he needs the help of Antonia.

Raymond, an atheist, has no ethical concerns about killing himself, nor does he believe that anyone else has the right to interfere in his decision but, as a lawyer, he does realise the potential legal implications for Antonia if she assists in his suicide. For Antonia, a practising Catholic, the criminal consequences that might result from helping Raymond to die are of less concern than the religious and moral issues. As the couple struggle towards a resolution of what both of them, from their different viewpoints, consider to be the crucial questions, they gradually reveal more of the thoughts and emotions that they have kept hidden, during the twenty-five years of their marriage.

It's the sort of situation we hope never to find ourselves in, in the sort of setting we find ourselves in every day of the week, the blandly familiar modern kitchen and living room, with the boiling kettle, the one-piece worksurface and fitted units, the well-stocked cupboards, and purple Ocado bags in the hallway. This is the home of the well-to-do couple, Raymond and Antonia Dean, their long marriage having survived its

ups and downs, facing the final drawn-out down of irreversible degenerative disease. This is a downward slide, on a tedious helter-skelter lined with rough-grit sandpaper, with only one outcome.

The entrances of both Roberta Taylor and Peter Guinness are disturbing in different ways, and made more so against this domestic backdrop. She enters pulling off surgical gloves and putting them in the kitchen bin, and you feel from her movements that this is a routine she has long got used to, and yet she cannot get used to the exhaustion. You can't help thinking, what does she need those for? You can't help imagining exactly what she needs those for, especially when her husband enters, in a motorized wheelchair, Hawking-like, clearly suffering from some terrible and physically disabling disease (which turns out to be motor neuron disease).

Raymond Dean has more movement than Stephen Hawking, but he's still severely limited in his ability to move one arm and his head. And he can still speak. This is a challenging role for any actor, and Guinness is magnificent. His voice is rich and expressive and conveys many of this character's strengths in its timbre and texture, not just in what he says. Most powerful, perhaps, is the way Guinness uses the two kinds of movement available to him to express weakness, futility, struggle, anger. He operates the wheelchair either to travel in a straight line, tiny distances across the kitchen, jerking to a halt almost as soon as he's started, or in a circle, around the table, getting nowhere. The second kind of movement is what's left in his wrecked body, a permanently, slightly heaving chest, as if he's out of breath from running, itself a mockery of his condition, or breathless with passion, again a mockery of his virile self, or anger, which is closer to the truth of his permanently angry state. Acting is as much

about plausible movement on the stage as it is about getting the right words out at the right time, and if the possibility of movement disappears, so do many opportunities to create character. Here, the possibilities have been narrowed enormously, but this production found amazing ways of magnifying meaning. (I overheard someone in the audience recognize the John Coltrane soundtrack — again, the physical dexterity of the musicians either a poignant contrast or a cosmic mockery of his condition.)

Early on, it's clear that Raymond's condition can only get worse, that there is no chance of recovery. He mimics Mrs Jamieson, a volunteer helper who tells him, "You'll have your good days and you'll have your bad days" — which he corrects to bad days and worse days. He objects to the way she treats him like a child, calling him by his first name while she is always "Mrs Jamieson". He objects because there is still scope for respect. Contrast this with the way his wife is compelled to infantilize him (she places a tiny, plastic bib round his neck and feeds him breakfast slow spoonful by spoonful) — he doesn't object, he loves her for it. They can still have grownup conversations, with all the bells and whistles that come with a long, intimate relationship that has endured many painful events. The script captures very well the mercurial switches from playfulness to anger: one minute Raymond is joking about Mrs Jamieson's advice that they should sleep in satin sheets and he should wear satin boxer shorts (it's easier to slide around, "So why not oil me to make me slippery?"), the next she's saying, "It's all about you!" and "I'm not playing scissors and stones" when it comes to questions of suffering.

She's the kind of Catholic who's not interested in converting others (personality seems to come first, the duty to evangelize second), and who's not too exercised by

philosophical difficulties such as the problem of evil (why him? why this disease? why don't her prayers work?). He's more of an instinctive atheist, who is comfortable with Darwinian thinking, and tolerant of her beliefs. In fact, while he appeals to well-known sex differences to account for his own sexual appetite, she is also struck by another well-known asymmetry that affects mammalian behaviour: paternity uncertainty.

Head-on clashes over belief are kept to a minimum, with their theological differences being explored more obliquely. For example, she believes in an afterlife, and that only non-believers can use the emergency exit (only God can take life away). He wants to know why she won't help him die, if it's to get a better life? (An echo of Feste's argument to Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, but surely he would need to believe to get the reward of eternal life?)

Antonia sorts through a shoe box containing old love letters, describing them as a young man's letters, written in the future tense (in mood as much as grammar). This also implies that, a lifetime later, there is no future. Is this what she really thinks? Is she reconciled to an afterlife without him? Or has she for the moment forgotten her metaphysical beliefs? This reminds me of a point that Julian Baggini (2011:229) makes in rebutting the idea that there are no atheists in foxholes:

...it seems that the charge can be turned around: there are no theists at funerals. Most people say that they believe that death is not the end, but the way people behave at graveyards and crematoria suggests that they don't really believe it.

Roberta Taylor pulls off the possibly even more difficult challenge of portraying a woman having to cope with the humdrum routine of caring and the keeping the household ticking while at the same time mulling over an extraordinary decision, whether to help her husband die. (Spoiler alert: if you don't know which way she goes, stop now!) He's the one who admits that religion is a comfort, but I've never been convinced by this line, even setting aside the easy retort that heroin can be comforting if it distracts you from the harsh realities of life. The character of Antonia is not distracted, which is why she is suffering, why she is facing up to the harsh reality of death.

So far, the emotional tone has been understated, and judged pretty much perfectly by both performers (I think he describes her's as a "Woman's Hour voice"). This gives more emphasis to those moments when there's a rise in genuine anguish, this carries real weight, as when he cries out "Please help me!" and later when she says, looking back over their life together, "I've always agreed with you... you have to be right!"

Unsurprisingly, his argument that Jesus committed suicide, with the help of his father, and so she shouldn't have a problem helping him commit suicide, doesn't wash, although maybe it does, in a strange way? Given what happens, and the decision she makes, something must have persuaded her, and it's not clear whether it's a single overriding reason or some cocktail, whose contents she might even be unaware of.

Talking of cocktails, and preparations, I'd noticed a little red file lying around, which seemed significant, and now it came into play, as a source of information for a special kind of recipe. Antonia retreats to one corner of the kitchen, with a

pestle and mortar and a bottle of pills. She could be crushing cumin seeds, but they're not. She pours in some liquid, pauses, and then pours another slug for good measure, as if she was adding red wine to a stew. (A good argument for doctor-assisted over DIY suicide: when we heard Michael Irwin speak on this, he had plenty of horror stories of what can go wrong.)

As a special treat, she pours him some of the good brandy, in a child's blue plastic beaker, which he drinks through a straw, making small hunching movements in the armchair. She places the white mug on the table, where it sits centre stage for a few moments, an existential black hole sucking in our attention, while she prepares a second mug, just in case. No decision has been made, and yet it's happening, they're going to go through with it. The lawyer in him advises her to get rid of all the evidence, and she hands the mug to him, pulling away abruptly, and moving to the door. She clears her throat as he sips the fatal draught (nothing like Romeo), and then she moves back to behind the chair. She's not going to leave him now.

He finishes his struggle with the straw, and is nearly done with his struggle with life. He begins to reminisce — “Do you remember the restaurant?” (This reminded me of the last hour of my mum's life, when my dad told a funny story about their wedding day.) He loses consciousness. The phone rings, the answerphone clicks in with his disembodied voice. It's Eric, their son-in-law, saying Laura is on her way, and don't let Raymond do anything silly. Banging on the door. Antonia sits down at the table, and pours a glass of wine.