

● Theatre

Insight and inspiration

Reviewing a play in which the human relationship in the face of death and disability is explored with tenderness, and some humour, **Prof Eoin O'Brien** believes *Tuesdays With Morrie* will enrich understanding for all who care for ill people

Tuesdays With Morrie is a true autobiographical story of Michael (Mitch) Albom and his relationship with his mentor Morrie Schwartz, his former college professor. Albom was born in New Jersey in 1958. In 1979, he earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, where one of his teachers was Morrie Schwartz, the title character.

After university, Mitch tried unsuccessfully to become a professional boxer and a nightclub musician. He eventually took up professional sports journalism, a career in which he became very successful and which led to his having his own nationally-syndicated radio show on sport.

During this time, he thought little if at all about his university days, but 16 years after graduation, he chanced to see his former professor discussing his battle with Lou Gehrig's disease. Mitch contacted and visited Morrie, and what began as a simple gesture of kindness soon became a weekly pilgrim-

age that developed into a philosophical examination of the human condition.

The pain of Morrie's rapidly approaching demise and Mitch's necessary obsession with the requirements of his frenetic existence are made tolerable, and even enjoyable, by the tender humour and deep understanding of life that is so evident in the older man's repartee with his former student. The exchange forces the audience to re-evaluate the worldly influences that drive and motivate our lives.

Novel and film

When Morrie died, Albom began gathering notes for his book, *Tuesdays With Morrie*, in which he traced the philosophical threads of his and Morrie's discussions on the meaning of life, held each Tuesday in Morrie's home. The novel became a best-seller and the profits were divided between the author and the Schwartz family, which had incurred considerable medical expenses in caring for Morrie.

The play, which was writ-



Terry Byrne as Morrie (left) and Andrew Murray as Mitch

ten by Mitch Albom and Jeffrey Hatcher, was adapted from this popular first novel and was received with acclaim.

Perhaps the *New York Post* best captured its essential pathos: "I was unprepared for how moving *Tuesdays With Morrie* turned out to be... On this ground, the flowers of humanity grow." The play was followed later by a film in 1999, in which Jack Lemmon played his last role.

I saw the present production of *Tuesdays With Morrie* in

the Pavilion in Dun Laoghaire, where it played to a packed house and a very appreciative audience. I have known Terry Byrne for many years and have seen him in many productions, but this must rate as among his most successful achievements.

Terry is a theatre professional who works principally as a director, but he has recently returned to theatre and film acting, playing roles in the Abbey, Gate, Andrew's Lane and most of the provincial theatres.

His co-actor, Andrew Murray, who supports him with what at first might be described best as gentle tolerance, soon becomes indebted to the older man's deep understanding of life and his brave acceptance of death.

Andrew is also a director and co-founder of the Viking Theatre@The Sheds.

Lou Gehrig's disease

Henry Louis, 'Lou' or 'Buster' Gehrig (1903-1941), was an American baseball first baseman who played 17 seasons in Major League Baseball for the New York Yankees. Gehrig set several major league records, including the most career grand slams (23) and most consecutive games played (2,130). Gehrig is chiefly remembered for his prowess as a hitter and his durability, a trait which earned him his nickname 'The Iron Horse', as well as the pathos of his farewell from baseball at age 36, when he was stricken with motor neurone disease, which is known in the US and Canada as 'Lou Gehrig's disease'.

Gehrig was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1939. In 1969, he was voted the greatest first baseman of all time by the Baseball Writers' Association.

Following the diagnosis, he served as New York City Parole Commissioner, always shunning publicity in his quest for better conditions in correctional institutions. He was often helped by his wife Eleanor, who would guide his hand when he

had to sign official documents.

On June 2, 1941, two years after his retirement from baseball, Lou Gehrig died at his home in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. Mayor LaGuardia ordered flags in New York to be flown at half-mast. The Yankees dedicated a monument to Gehrig in centre field at Yankee Stadium on July 6, 1942, lauding him as: "A man, a gentleman and a great ball-player whose amazing record of 2,130 consecutive games should stand for all time."

Lou Gehrig starred in the 1938 20th Century Fox movie *Rawhide*, playing himself in his only feature film appearance.

In 2006, researchers presented a paper to the American Academy of Neurology, reporting on an analysis of *Rawhide* and photographs of Lou Gehrig from the 1937-1939 period, to ascertain when Gehrig began to show visible symptoms of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. They concluded that while atrophy of hand muscles could be detected in 1939 photographs of Gehrig, no such abnormality was visible at the time *Rawhide* was made in January 1938.

Future fixtures

Tuesdays With Morrie will be next staged at the following venues: Droichead Arts Centre, Drogheda (October 6); Riverbank Arts Centre, Kildare (October 10); Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray (October 11-12); the Solstice Arts Centre, Meath (October 16); and The Gaiety (October 22 to 27).