

## ?Morrie? shines light on learning about one?s self



**By Brock Weir**

Mounting a two-man play can be a daunting prospect for any actor, particularly if you don't have that certain 'click' with your sparring partner; thankfully Tom Mercer and Robert Ball heard that click loud and clear as they got to know each other over the last few months at Theatre Aurora.

Both men have an impressive pedigree in community theatre, but this is the first time they have ever had the chance to work together - and what better way to get to know each other than taking on the two lead roles in Mitch Albom's 'Tuesday's With Morrie', Theatre Aurora's latest production which opens this week at the Factory Theatre on Henderson Drive.

The play centres on Mitch (Mercer), a writer who re-connects with Morrie (Ball), his college professor, who is dealing with the rapid decline of ALS.

For Ball, a King resident, the role was a challenge. Joking that when he first became involved with Theatre Aurora he was initially on tap for roles aged between 30 and 50, and now ranging from 60 to 80, he has always been a very demonstrative actor no matter the demographic.

'I have never had to do anything that was quite so [constricting],' says Ball. 'As an actor, I am very physical, using my hands, arms and legs, and this was fascinating in that I have to shut that down and just rely on voice and mostly my head.'

A year ago, however, he was faced with a similar challenge, finding himself in a wheelchair for several months, unsure if he would ever be able to walk properly again. While he recovered, it gave him a unique perspective which allowed him to identify more with Morrie.

'It was fascinating for me to get inside the character and find out what it is really like to lose yourself.'

As Ball's Morrie is discovering what it is like to lose one's self, Mercer's Mitch is struggling to find himself. It is a particular challenge to Mercer as this is the rare opportunity to tackle a play rather than a musical.

'It is an opportunity to stretch myself as an actor and step out of my comfort zone,' says the Innisfil Actor, a long-time member of the South Simcoe Theatre Company. 'It has been more than I thought it would be - fantastic. Robert has been great to work with.'

Living in Innisfil and working in Markham, this is his first foray into Theatre Aurora. When he heard about their upcoming production of Tuesday's With Morrie, he thought it was high time he found an opportunity at the midpoint between work and home.

?My interest in musical theatre came from my dad,? says Mercer. ?He used to do shows when he was a young man, so when we were kids, whenever any of the old musicals came on TV we would all get called into see some of the Fred Astaire and Shirley Temple movies. When he was in charge of the Sunday school, he would always put on shows and I would always get drafted into some part.

Robert, on the other hand, has been with Theatre Aurora for over 15 years. He particularly enjoys getting to rehearse on the stage where the magic will ultimately unfold versus a sterile, off-site rehearsal space.

?It is one of the best small community theatre situations in York Region,? he Mr. Ball.

Ball got his start as a boarder at St. Andrew's College, gender bending just a little bit in the role of Mrs. Sowerberry in Oliver Twist. It put him in good stead for his career because as a car salesman he likes to entertain this new audience and do things with a certain flair.

In this complex portrait of the human condition, Mr. Mercer hopes people walk out of Theatre Aurora after the play with a new value on life.

?Life is short,? he says. ?You don't know what is going to happen, so make the most of every day.?

Mr. Ball says he hope the play helps not just break down people's fear of death, but also provide them with a means to cope when death occurs.

?There are people who might not want to come to this show because it is about dying and they want to laugh, well, hopefully you'll cry but you will also laugh,? he says. ?If we can just reduce the level of terror one degree and show people that even though you come into the world alone and you leave alone, it doesn't have to be horrific and there?can be some completion of your life.?