

Essence

A Play by Zoe Settle

Characters:

2017: A, B

1954: John, a man; Mary, his wife

1967: Avery, Casey

1999: Blake, Jesse

There are four couples arranged onstage. They all remain onstage the entire play as a reminder of timeline. There should be an even number of men and women onstage, although outside of 1954, the combinations and characters are open to be assigned as seen fit.

2017. Two people sit up center, they are elevated, perhaps sitting at a bar, engulfed in their screens. One has a tablet and the other a phone. The amount of eye contact made is minimal

A:

Did you see this?

B:

What is it?

A:

Apparently someone is trying to transplant a head.

B:

Huh

A:

Like putting someone's head on someone else's body. That's crazy

B:

Why?

A:

Because that's like mashing two people together!

B:

I mean people said that about every other major transplant and it worked out fine.

A:

But this is completely different!

B:

How?

1954. Two people sit stage right. It is a classic '50s breakfast scene, complete with a checkered tablecloth. The man has a large black and white

paper and sips his coffee. He will look up from the paper to make a point, then turn back. The wife nibbles some toast and sips on orange juice.

M:

Looks like there was a successful kidney transplant up in Boston.

W:

John, please don't talk about that at breakfast

M:

Mary, it's important. You should be better at keeping up with current events.

W:

Well I don't like thinking about that kind of thing. It's just wrong.

M:

They were twins. One donated to the other, they both survived. It's a great story.

W:

But carrying around part of someone else inside of you for the rest of your life? That feels so. I don't know, dirty.

M:

Apparently the twin's kidney acted like so much like the original, the body didn't know to reject it. Does that make you feel better?

W:

No.

M:

Well maybe if you understood the science more--

W:

It's not about the science, it's about the people. How do they feel whole? When they aren't all them anymore? It would just never sit right with me.

M:

I supposed it's different for everyone

W:

I'm not saying I wish the man ill, I just think this is a dangerous path to go down. I mean where does it end?

2017. Their conversation picks right back up. A is scrolling furiously trying to read as much information as possible. B is invested in the tablet-- maybe a game.

A:

You can't just play around with life like that. Look! He hasn't even had a successful attempt on an animal, none of them have regained consciousness. He doesn't even seem to want to save lives, he just wants attention.

B:

Well there's a reason he had to go to China to set up shop. No in their right mind would dip a toe into that on this side of the world.

A:

I just don't understand. Why focus on macabre, on hype? He could have something legitimate that could help thousands of people if he really can do this work on the spinal chord, but instead he's swapping heads.

B:

(This is the first time B is actually somewhat touched by this topic) I don't like the idea of giving people false hope. This kind of thing should be used to help, not to get buzz in the press.

A:

Exactly. Just because you think you can do something doesn't mean you should. This doctor is trying to redefine what it even means to be a human.

1967. Two young people sit stage left. Elevated, but in a different way to 2017. Maybe this is more like a malt shop than a bar. One reads the paper, the other reads something else, likely a magazine.

1:

Did you see this?

2:

What?

1:

They did a heart transplant, they actually did it.

2:

Did it work?

1:

I don't know, I haven't read far enough

2:

That's crazy. I didn't think that would ever be possible. Getting a new heart.

1:

It's kind of sad

2:

What do you mean?

1:

Well in order for it to happen, they had to have someone who didn't need their heart anymore. I mean before, with other things you could just take from someone and they'd still be okay, But this.

2:

(Looking at the paper) Avery, he died.

1:

What?

2:

Pneumonia

1:

Was it even worth it?

2:

Of course it was

1:

Was it?

2:

He got more time at least, and now they know what to fix next time

1:

Or they could have stayed out of it.

2:

But why would you stay out of it when you could save someone's life?

1:

At what cost?

2 doesn't have an answer.

1:

Where does it end? I mean Casey, the heart. That's where we feel, would we even be us if we had someone else's heart inside us?

2:

I think you might be placing too much meaning on biology

1:

How do you know? I know in my mind that I love you, but I feel it in here, in my heart.

2:

You love me?

1:

Yeah.

*B is still only minimally invested in this conversation. A is going **crazy**.*

B:

You know, I bet if it worked, that dude would be bonkers.

A:

You think?

B:

Yeah, there's no way you can just bounce back from inheriting a new body.

I think the brain would short circuit itself just from trying to process.

A:

This all just seems so irresponsible. They don't even know whether or not the body will accept the head. The technology for preventing organ rejections is still so medieval by comparison

B:

So it's basically a toss up.

A:

With a weighted coin.

B:

I'm more interested in the logistics aspect of it, assuming they succeed.

How do they classify this new person?

A:

...classify?

B:

Well say this new head woke up and actually could be a productive member of society. Where do they fall? Would they have to have a whole new identity? Or is it head rules all? Can they have kids? Then who is technically the parent? Is that even ethical?

A:

I think we're way beyond ethics at this point.

1999. This scene is the most casual, the two people are sitting on laptops. This has more humor to it than the other scenes.

B:

This is wild

J:

What is it?

B:

Hold on, I'll email it to you. *(There is a slight pause as the email is sent.)*

J:

Got it. *(Jesse clicks it open.)* You like baseball?

B:

What? No. It's a dude that got a new hand, the Phillies let him throw the first pitch last week.

J:

I'm sorry, I don't really follow sports.

B:

Okay, forget the sports, let's talk about the hand.

J:

Kinda freaky, don't you think? Like you have no idea where that hand has been.

B:

I think I would rather have someone's hand than someone's organs that have, like, been inside of them.

J:

Touché. It'd still be weird though. Like with organs, at least no one can see them, they're inside. But a hand? That's pretty obvious. I almost wouldn't want to bother.

B:

You would be okay not having hands?

J:

I mean no, but if the alternative was having weird stranger's hands that could revolt against me at any moment then yeah.

B:

That's not exactly how it works.

J:

Yeah but still, it would be so obvious that it's not yours. I wouldn't want to go through such a long process only to always stick out like that.

B:

But what would you do without a hand? I mean it may not seem like a big deal, but hands are how we work. They give us ability to act.

J:

I think you're taking this too seriously.

B:

I'm just asking you to think about it. See? Like right now, without hands, you couldn't be firing off all of these emails and ignoring me. You couldn't do any of your job.

J:

(Jesse sighs, surrendering. Jesse shuts the laptop and turns to face Blake.)

Blake, I apologize for not being more invested. What's so cool about this hand?

B:

Well for starters, the fact that he could throw a pitch from a hand that a few months ago wasn't his is incredible.

J:

What made this different?

B:

I mean, each time they try one they get better at balancing the amount of drugs needed, and it's become a little bit less of a guessing game with how to convince the body not to reject it. And I guess more practice at connecting the nerves back together. I'm sorry, I'm not a scientist, but it's cool to me that this is the longest one has ever lasted.

J:

Well you may not be a fancy doctor, but computer expert has to count for something. *(Jesse grabs the laptop, misc. papers on the table. Some starts to slip. Blake gets up to help.)*

B:

Here, need a hand?

J:

Ha ha, very funny.

2017. B is now pulled in to this conversation, has their own article open. B feels significantly less passionate about this than A and maybe even feels a little opposite.

A:

Does it really take so little to be human anymore?

B:

Why is this so difficult for you?

A:

Because before, transplants were just pieces that used to belong to someone which would now belong to you. But in this scenario, you're the piece! The recipient is the tiny piece that is being added to an entire body, and yet that piece is now who we base the person off of. It's like we aren't even talking about people anymore!

B:

What does that mean?

A:

They're just dragging and dropping a head onto someone else's entire body. It's like they're robots, not people. (*Mocking*) "Oh, this bot is malfunctioning, we'll just swap this control board over to a new operating system,"

B:

Some of them really are trying to save people's lives.

A:

But at what cost?! (*A significant silence*) Look, saving lives is a miracle. But what they're saving might not actually be much of a life. And they have no idea what the outcome will be if they actually do succeed. It's great that they might have figured out how to fuse a spinal chord back together, *but have they even considered how to stitch back together a soul?* (*An even longer silence as those words hang. B can't help feeling haunted.*) They're Frankenstein-ing someone together, and I don't think they're going to like what wakes up on that operating table.

B:

That might be a slight exaggeration. And really, the participants would die soon anyway, what do they have to lose?

A:

Everything. So they're breathing, at what cost? Would they really be *alive*?

The lights shift. It is dark save for pools of light coming down directly over each character. Everyone stands. The next lines almost overlap. Very quietly under this, there is repetition of lines from the earlier scenes.

A:

What do you need to be human?

M:

For too long nature has dictated her rules to us.

W:

We're meant to be the way we are, however that means we end our time here. We can't fight against natural order.

M:

We're born, we grow, we age, we die...110 billion humans have died in that process. That's genocide on a mass scale.

B:

Given the amount of mean criticism we've received, I don't think we should go international.

M:

We have entered an age where we will take our destiny back in our hands.

B:

For instance, if you stick to the Frankenstein schtick, which doesn't make any sense, then no.

M:

It will change everything. It will change you at every level.

B:

It isn't a joke.

J:

Unless they can provide real evidence that they can improve quality of life.....

2:

This endeavor appears to revolve around immortality, but in each case a body is needed for the transplant

J:

The entire project is morally wrong.

2:

And therefore a human needs to die.

BL:

I hope this is not just egotistical pseudoscience.

Everyone moves very slowly to eventually assume a pose by the end of the play of a team of doctors hovering over two sitting people as they prepare for something we can't even fathom.

1:

He'll slice the spinal chords simultaneously

A:

They have to remain seated for over 24 hours of surgery

1:

They'll cool the brain to a state of hypothermia

W:

What if it doesn't wake up?

B:

The nerves will be fused but won't regrow

J:

They're killing something and then forcing it back to life

2:

The team has rehearsed on cadavers

BL:

Most say it's a long shot

M:

The first heart transplant, hand transplant: all were met with serious reservations.

2:

It's not just about a head adjusting to a new body.

1:

We might be dealing with a whole new person.

B:

But even if the operation works, the biggest obstacle may not be the science itself

A:

But whether it should happen at all

All:

What defines humanity?

W:

Our body?

1:

Our feelings?

BL:

Our actions?

B:

Our thoughts?

A:

Our spirit?

2:

Or is it gone all together.

They create a tableau that suggests a transplant. Blackout.

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