

# Fate and a Sprained Ankle – An Interview with GRT’s Larry Eisenberg



Larry Eisenberg - Photo by Peter Konerko

Eighteen years old and a freshman in college, Larry Eisenberg was forced to miss his track practice after he sprained his ankle. Just a little bummed, he decided to drown his sorrows with a beer and burger in an off-campus diner – and just happened to meet an older student who was on the way to a rehearsal for a play called “The Chinese Wall.” Planning to meet his new friend at the theater, Larry wandered into a room where the chair of the theater department was checking the costumes. She took one look at him, handed him a bright red jacket, and told him that rehearsal was at seven o’clock. His career in the theater had begun.



Larry Eisenberg in "Tuesdays with Morrie" – Photo by Doug Engalla

Larry has come a long way since that fateful day when he was hooked on life on the stage. After an eventful acting career in films and television, he joined The Group Rep in 1990, where he had the good fortune to be mentored by theater icon Lonny Chapman. The two were to have a warm and creative relationship for almost five years. Larry left the theater company in 1995, but he ended up rejoining in 2003 and served as President of the Board for a few years – eventually becoming co-artistic director after Chapman's death; he has served in that capacity for over a decade. Since 2003, Larry has acted in and directed numerous Group Rep shows. Most recently, Larry reprised the role of Morrie – which he had essayed previously at the Sierra Madre Playhouse in 2019 – in Mitch Albom's best-selling novel adapted into a play "Tuesdays with Morrie." The COVID-19 crisis led to his current streamed performance. On August 12, 2020, Larry agreed to interview.



**Jackson Kendall and Larry Eisenberg in Sierra Madre Playhouse production of "Tuesdays with Morrie"- Photo by Gina Long**

**I NOTICE THAT YOU'VE BEEN IN "MURDER, SHE WROTE," "THE SEVENTH SIGN," AND "ER." HOW DIFFERENT IS IT FOR YOU AS AN ACTOR TO PLAY IN FILMS AND ON TELEVISION? IN YOUR PERSPECTIVE AS AN INDIVIDUAL FAMILIAR WITH BOTH FORMS OF ENTERTAINMENT, WHAT ARE THE MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ACTING IN FILMS AND TV? COMPARING FILMS AND TELEVISION, WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES YOU SEE WITH LIVE THEATER?**

**LARRY EISENBERG:** First of all, the size for film and television is much smaller than for the stage. I know that the first couple of times I did TV and film I felt fine after the shoot – but when I watched it on the screen, I became tremendously self-conscious about how over-the-top my performance seemed. I gradually had to learn to keep things simple and small. Basically, it's like the difference between using your inside voice for film and television and using your outside voice for theater.

Onstage, you are always aware of the audience. With film, not at all. Onstage, they are in the room with you, breathing the same air you are breathing, and are a big part of the event that is taking place in your story. Onstage, you can almost feel their heart beating; and that helps fuel your energy and emotional content.



**Jackson Kendall and Larry Eisenberg – Photo by Gina Long**

**NOW LET'S COMPARE LIVE THEATER AND A STREAMING PERFORMANCE. WHAT ARE THE MAIN DIFFERENCES FOR THE ACTOR IN THESE TWO FORMS OF ENTERTAINMENT? WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHANGES YOU'VE HAD TO MAKE TO ADAPT TO LIVE STREAMING?**

**LE:** I think for streaming the performance remains absolutely the same. We want to give the audience the feeling of a live stage performance. During this pandemic, the main issue was the fact that it was not safe to rehearse on the stage together – so we were forced to rehearse via Zoom through our computers or smart devices. The "effort" to connect was a big part of the exploration, and I believe colors the content of the streaming product.

When we were going to stream "Tuesdays with Morrie," we had a big discussion about whether or not to allow audience members. We were concerned that, if we had just a few people, the sounds they made might disrupt the flow. Eventually, we decided to bring in about eight people and spread them around the room with masks – and we played to them. It turned out to be the right choice because those bodies in the room helped make the emotional journey deeper and more rewarding than if we had been alone playing to vacant cameras.



Larry Eisenberg and TJ McNeill in The Group Rep production of "Tuesdays with Morrie" - Photo by Doug Engalla

**YOU RECENTLY PERFORMED THE ROLE OF MORRIE AT THE SIERRA MADRE PLAYHOUSE FROM 2/23/19 TO 3/31/19. HOW DID THE SHOW ORIGINALLY GET ON THE SCHEDULE FOR THE GROUP REP AS PART OF THEIR 2019-2020 SEASON?**

**LE:** Chris Winfield and I had been planning to step down as co-artistic directors of the Group Rep at the end of 2019. We spent most of the last year working in concert with Doug Haverty to make the transition as seamless as possible. During one of my conversations, I mentioned to Doug that I was planning to work up another production of "Tuesdays with Morrie" and was thinking of renting a space for the production. Doug suggested we mount it in the Upstairs Theater. This seemed like a very nice and appropriate way for me to finish out my tenure at the GRT, and we agreed to put it into the schedule for Upstairs.



TJ McNeill and Larry Eisenberg – Photo by Doug Engalla

**WHAT IS THERE ABOUT YOUR ROLE IN “TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE” THAT EXCITED YOU ENOUGH TO WANT TO DO THE SAME ROLE AGAIN?**

**LE:** I loved the role. I loved the play. It is a life-affirming, powerful piece of literature that has become an important source of courage, comfort, and healing to millions of people around the world. It also fell into my lap at a time when I was dealing with personal medical issues that were very challenging. Playing this role helped me face my challenges and helped me grow as an artist and as a human being. I honestly wasn't ready to let the character of the play get away from me. When I ran into TJ McNeill and had conversations with director Flint Esquerra and Lloyd Pedersen, who would go on to produce the play, we agreed to give it another shot. We almost got it up when the coronavirus hit; and, thankfully, we did not have to abandon it.

**IF YOU HAD YOUR CHOICE OF ANY ROLE (ONE YOU'VE HAD IN THE PAST OR ONE YOU'VE NEVER HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO), WHICH IS YOUR DREAM ROLE AND WHY?**

**LE:** King Lear. It is my favorite play of all time, and I was fortunate enough to play Edgar in a very nice production opposite the great Academy Award winning actor George Coulouris. That was one of my peak acting experiences when I was a young man, so it would be lovely now that I'm "of an age" to be able to play the title role in another production. I remember also that at my mother's death bed, my father – who was not a literate man – kept acting out Lear's final moments with the dead Cordelia. "She breathes," he kept saying. "She's not dead...she's not gone...look, she breathes." There's so much truth and humanity in the play, and Lear mirrors the decline and loss we all eventually face. And he allows its dignity.

**HOW HAS COVID-19 AFFECTED THEATER GENERALLY AND YOU SPECIFICALLY OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS?**

**LE:** It's put a real crimp in things, hasn't it? It's forced everyone to go to Zoom. That's been interesting. It's changed the way we do things, and I guess it has also changed the content. It's made the private moments more important. Perhaps, it's forced us to become a little better at listening.

When I did "Tuesdays with Morrie" in the Sierra Madre Playhouse, the play was about a man facing his mortality and sharing his life's lessons with a young man whom he cared about deeply. TJ and I were forced to rehearse via Zoom; and, because we were no longer in the same room, there was a heightened forcefulness to the way we penetrated the computer screen trying to reach in and communicate with each other. I think it impacted the relationship of our characters and also the details of the play itself. This new production has become more about the human need to connect with each other during difficult times. So, in some ways, "Tuesdays with Morrie" is even more relevant during this pandemic.

It will probably be quite some time before audiences become comfortable coming back to live theater. I hope the skills we performers are developing with these streaming media can blossom into an acceptable alternative.

"Tuesdays with Morrie" made its live streaming debut on Friday, August 14, 2020, with a limited run through Sunday, August 30, 2020. There will be a talk back with Mitch Albom on Tuesday, August 18, 2020 at 1:30 p.m. (PST). For information and tickets, call **The Group Rep** at 818-763-5990 or go **online**.