

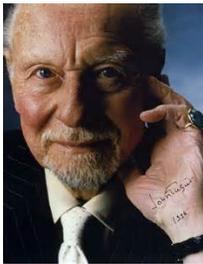
Keeping it simple . . .

It was October 1967 and my first trip to London. I spent an entire day rushing from one theatre to another buying tickets, then saw 16 plays in nine days.

Nothing astonished me more than a single moment at the Aldwych Theatre . . .

Twice that year, the Royal Shakespeare Company gave a benefit performance, once in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's birthplace, and once at the Aldwych. Seven actors in formal dress, seated in a semi-circle facing the audience, performed 35 scenes from 23 Shakespeare plays.

Among the players were Paul Scofield (who had just won an Oscar as Best Actor for his role as Sir Thomas More in the movie A Man for All Seasons); Peggy Ashcroft (who won an Oscar in 1984 for Best Supporting Actress in A Passage to India); Ian Richardson (later the Machiavellian politician Francis Urquhart in the BBC's immensely popular international trilogy House of Cards); Dorothy Tutin (four-time winner of Britain's most prestigious theatrical awards); and John Gielgud, one of the few who has won Oscar, Emmy, Grammy and Tony Awards -- and a man widely recognized as THE Hamlet of his generation for his performance in 1937.



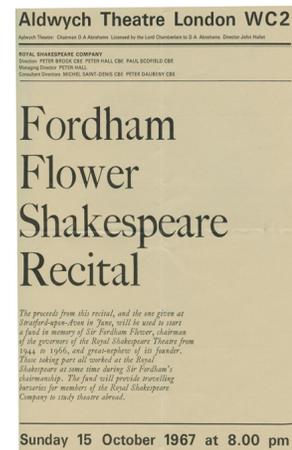
It fell to Gielgud to play King Lear waking on the heath, a ruined man, his daughter Cordelia kneeling at his feet.

Gielgud rose from his chair, carried it downstage center and placed it at a right angle to the audience. He seated himself in the chair, leaned his head on his shoulder, and stared at the audience. Ashcroft knelt before him, her face buried in his lap.

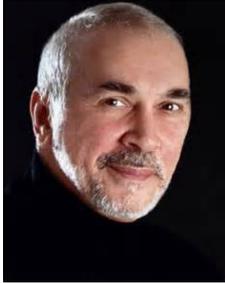
Gielgud paused, then closed his eyes. A moment passed -- and when he opened them again, Gielgud had disappeared . . .

It was breathtaking . . .

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NPR reporter Scott Simon discovered in 2011 that actor Frank Langella pasted three quotes on the walls of every dressing room he occupied, including this one: *“The cathartic possibility of the theater needs nothing more than the actor and the stage.”*



Langella rose to movie prominence in 1970 in *The Twelve Chairs* and *Diary of a Mad Housewife* and has appeared in more than 30 movies since then, but he’s spent most of his life in the theatre. He’s acted in more than 75 plays, won four Tony Awards, and saw two of them transfer to film: *Dracula* in 1979 and *Frost/Nixon* in 2008.

Simon saw the quote and agreed. “Who needs the smoke, bells and whistles of modern theatrical productions?” he asked. “They can get in the way of an audience’s experience.” But Langella went further: “You can *have* theater with all those things,” he said, “but you can’t have the cathartic possibility of theater -- that thing that lifts you beyond yourself as an audience member. You really just need the platform and the actor, another piece of humanity, sharing his humanity with the audience.”

You really just need John Gielgud and a chair . . .

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The concept of catharsis has been with us since Aristotle. Each of us who’s seen a great play or a great movie has felt its power.

But as I listened to Simon’s interview and recalled my evening with Gielgud, it seemed to me Langella was also talking about something vitally important to social enterprises.

We need to tell our stories more effectively. Far too many of us surround our core services and products with bells and whistles that either distract or exhaust our stakeholders. We ramble and embellish and tap-dance -- and by the time we finish, everyone’s drifted away.

We need to strip away unnecessary words and images and find a way to tell powerful, emotional stories that open hearts and wallets. But before we can even decide what story to tell, we must answer four questions:

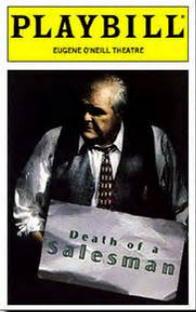
- *Who* are we trying to convince?
- What do we want them to *do*?
- What do they have to *believe* before they will do it?
- What do they believe *now*?

Our story must close the gap between what our stakeholders believe now and what we need them to believe before they will do what we want them to do. We are battling for a share of their minds -- and reality doesn’t matter. We need to be first in their minds, even if we’re not first in the marketplace -- and we don’t even have to be better. We just have to be first.

And to get there we need to keep it simple . . .

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I've seen hundreds of plays since that magical night in London nearly 50 years ago. Some were awful, most were enjoyable, and a few were memorable. The closest I've come to an experience similar to the one at the Aldwych occurred in New York in 1999 when my wife and I saw Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, perhaps the greatest American play of the 20th century.



Linda didn't want to go. She'd already seen Brian Dennehy in two previous plays and hadn't been impressed. But I cajoled her and we found seats in the balcony, quite a distance from the stage.

The play is about an aging traveling salesman who recognizes the emptiness of his life and tries to fix it. He's about to lose his job, he can't pay his bills, and his sons don't respect him. He desperately wants to retain his dignity and his sense of self -- and his desolation escalates until it's almost unbearable. When Dennehy finally moved to the side of the stage during the final moments and bellowed into the darkness "MY NAME IS WILLY LOMAN!!!" it was the most cathartic experience Linda and I have ever shared in a theatre. We were trembling in the silence that followed . . .

And all it took was an actor and a stage . . .