

Drama: An Actor's Education

John Lithgow

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Through the vivid stories in "Drama", John Lithgow shares a backstage history of his struggle, crisis, and discovery, and the scenes of his early life and career that took place before he became a nationally-known star. Above all, "Drama" is a tribute to the most important influence in John Lithgow's life: his father, Arthur Lithgow. An actor, director, producer, and great lover of Shakespeare, Arthur brought theatre to John's boyhood, where performance and storytelling were a constant and cherished part of family life. Lithgow brings the theatre worlds of New York and London to life as he relives his collaborations with renowned performers and directors including Mike Nichols, Bob Fosse, Liv Ullmann, Meryl Streep, and Brian De Palma. Lithgow's ruminations on the nature of theatre, performance, and storytelling cut to the heart of why actors are driven to perform, and why people are driven to watch them do it. At once hilarious and reflective, "Drama" pulls back the curtain on the making of one of our most beloved actors.

"John Lithgow's memoir is both unflinching and irresistible. It captures the long, hard road to the stage for any actor, or for virtually anyone trying to make it in New York, and shows how putting all of your hopes into the one thing you love isn't so crazy after all." —Gay Talese

"A memoir as finely crafted as one of Lithgow's performances." —Steve Martin

"John Lithgow's memoir of his training as an actor is more than an insider's view of his craft. Lithgow likens acting to storytelling, and he's a wonderful writer. The portrait of his father is as finely articulated as it is heartfelt, and the account of the young actor's struggles with his too-young, too-early first marriage is both moving and candid. I loved this book."

— John Irving

"This book has all the drama we've come to expect from John Lithgow, the alternately dark, tender, romantic, dangerous, deranged actor we find in Drama, which is also a family tale of the richest variety. A great read."

— Mary Karr

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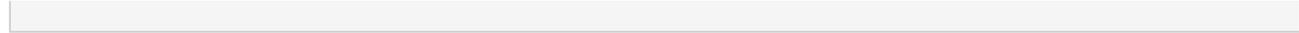
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From Reader Review Drama: An Actor's Education for online ebook

Patty says

John Lithgow's telling of his life as he grew to be the actor we recognize was, at times poignant, very funny, and a surprise, but entertaining and interesting throughout. I'm not a big movie buff and have only seen a few of his movies, as well as the very funny TV series, but what I have seen was enough to know what a good actor he is—enough that seeing the audiobook at the library piqued my interest. He has led a long and venerable career that began on stage long before most of the world had the opportunity to see him.

The story of his life revolves around his family, the people he met at Harvard, and the actors he worked with on stage and in movies and tell of how those events and dealings helped shaped him as a person and an actor. He name drops, but almost offhandedly, and he is circumspect enough to protect those for whom he did not have the most flattering story (though, if pressed, it's not too hard to figure them out.)

The book is well-written and, in the case of the audiobook, well-read. He is self-deprecating at times, proud in others, but the love of his profession is clear and the love of his family is paramount.

I learned a lot about the actor and the man and my respect for him is greater for the knowledge.

Joseph McBee says

I don't typically read celebrity autobiographies. Frankly, I don't care to know that much about their private lives. I was drawn to this one though for two reasons:

First, I admire John Lithgow as an actor, not a celebrity (although he is one of those) but as an ACTOR. Secondly, this book claimed to be about how his life prepared him for his life in the performing arts. That idea fascinated me, and made me want to know more.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. The context is the author's relationship with his father, who was also an actor and director, and who had an enormous impact on the theater arts in this country, though few today really realize it.

The book was well-written and honest. There were times that it was brutally honest, particularly when Lithgow was revealing his own shortcomings. He was gracious, even kind, when referencing people that he was at odds with at some point in his life, but he pulled no punches when speaking of his own faults and foibles.

This impressed me.

There were times I wanted to judge him for some of his actions but how could I, when he owned them so completely? Besides, his honesty did nothing but reveal my own hypocrisy as I desperately try to cover up my own sins.

In fact, there were times I felt as if I was listening in on the author's confessional with his priest. I felt as if I

were invading his privacy and that I should apologize and excuse myself before I heard too much.

Thankfully these moments were few, but the honesty was consistent. He was just as honest about his joys and delights, and especially about his passion for the profession and craft of acting.

I have always loved films and theater. Five or six years ago I actively auditioned for and performed in local plays, I wrote sketches and one very bad play, I directed, and was even thinking of starting a theater myself. Then, I decided to finish my business degree (a decision I in no way regret), but theater had to take a back seat in my life. I thought for a long while that I wouldn't be going back to it anytime soon. If at all.

DRAMA reminded me why I love the performing arts so much and why I MUST get back to it again.

Lithgow writes with the passion for the theater that any "theater person" can understand. His book awakened that in me again, and for that, I am grateful.

I suppose there are many things in this book that will connect with many different kinds of people, but for me, it was the theater. I am thankful for Mr. Lithgow's honesty and the passion with which he wrote. God has used it in my life to turn me back to something I thought I was no longer a part of my life. I am glad that I was wrong about that.

Donald says

I had the good luck of seeing John Lithgow give a reading from his memoir, *Drama: An Actor's Education*, at Book Expo 2011. Lithgow is a likable, popular performer, and the event was packed. He gave a great reading that I really enjoyed. I didn't stick around afterward to get a signed copy of the book (and regretted it later). When it showed up on my Amazon Vine list (Amazon's invitation-only review program) I grabbed it right away. I'm glad I did.

Lithgow's writing is clean, revealing, honest, and engaging. The bulk of this book covers his early years as a student of theater (his father was a theater director). It's a wonder Lithgow decided to become an actor after witnessing firsthand the hardships his father had to endure--the constant uprooting, insecurity, money concerns--but really, he had no other choice; this was the life he was born into. Lithgow spends a lot of time chronicling these early days of his childhood, the plays that he helped out on (mostly as a stagehand, then slowly but surely easing in as an actor), and his relationship with his father, Arthur. Lithgow's father was an eccentric character, and the (literal) cast of characters that made up Arthur's repertory theater gave me a peek into a world I'd never known. At times Litgow's early life reads like a John Irving novel, which is fitting since Irving actually wrote a blurb for the book.

The second half of the book deals with Lithgow striking out on his own, away from the warm embrace of his father's theater group (and the sure work John would've gotten there). Instead he and his first wife head to New York, and the competitive Broadway and commercial scene that awaits them. Here, despite his experience, it is hard to find work, and the young couple struggle to make ends meet. Of course the reader knows it all works out in the end, but it is fascinating to see all the steps along the way, as told to us by Lithgow's funny, friendly voice.

Drama: An Actor's Education covers up to 1980, when Lithgow successfully made the transition from Broadway stage actor to Hollywood TV and film star. There is just a quick summation of what came after,

which opens the door to (hopefully) a second memoir. I look forward to reading it!

Glee says

I have always been intrigued by John Lithgow, but I truly was amazed at his versatility when I heard some of his performances of children's songs that he wrote. I grew up in a small town with one big celebrity - Pete Seeger, who is a master musical storyteller. John Lithgow can match him stride for stride with the songs he has performed/written for children. Anyway, I was curious when I saw this at the library, and I had been sort of casting about for something on CD to play in the car and I saw this.

Well, I cried during the introduction. One of the most touching "bits" I've ever heard. I'm not a real theater person, but I have seen my share of plays and musicals (and wallowed in Rogers and Hammerstein stuff as a kid with my four sisters - prancing and dancing around in the living room to my dad's occasional bellow "this ain't a goddamn gymnasium"). And I've been impressed with Lithgow since I saw him as Roberta Muldoon in "The World According to Garp" in the early 80's.

This is just a marvelous telling of a remarkable life and how that life was shaped by many things, but most importantly, his father, Arthur Lithgow.

I really recommend listening to this (it is probably a good read, also, but I can't imagine it being any better than as read by the author). You won't be sorry.

JG (The Introverted Reader) says

In this memoir, Lithgow writes of how his early years shaped him as an actor, from his childhood, to his time at Harvard, to his studies in the UK as a Fulbright scholar, and on to his breakthrough on Broadway and film.

I truly enjoyed listening to Lithgow narrate his own personal history. I don't know how much of his work I've actually seen, but I do like his voice. He took my thoughts and feelings exactly where he wanted them to go. I was quiet and pensive as he spoke about the power of story in his father's last days, I was howling with laughter alone in my car as he wrote about his father telling off a decidedly unpassionate Romeo, and I was interested enough not to notice as I listened and worked my way through yet another week of the Couch to 5K training program.

You could probably accuse Lithgow of name-dropping, but when he's speaking of his work, it's impossible not to name-drop. I was very interested to learn that he was at Harvard with Tommy Lee Jones and that he saw some of Meryl Streep's earliest Broadway auditions.

He doesn't hold much, if anything, back. His first marriage was rocky and he acknowledges his role in that. He writes honestly about his great love and respect for his father, how confused he felt to sort of surpass his work, and how determined he became to disassociate himself from his father's influence.

If you like memoirs at all, I do recommend this as audio. It's wonderfully narrated by a fascinating man.

Thanks to the publisher for sending me a copy in a contest I won during Audiobook Week at Devourer of

Books.

Book Him Danno says

Every time I see John Lithgow in a real situation, like an interview or game show, I never fail to come away impressed about how genuinely nice he seems. That is why I was very excited to get this autobiography as soon as possible. So I went into this a little biased too really like this and I can say it met all my expectations.

This book should be handed out to every aspiring teenager who sees all the glittering lights and wants to be an actor. It will completely dispel the myth of overnight success and show you the hard work and time required to have a chance at your dream. More than that, it clearly demonstrates the amount of love you must have to every aspect of your profession.

John Lithgow was a stage rat since he was a little boy working on his father's productions. He grew up working backstage, building sets, making costumes, and being an all around dog's body. Then as he grew up he began with nonspeaking parts and eventually having a few lines. Lithgow delights with a series of stories from his life that lead you through his progression as an actor.

He covers both the proud and the shameful with equal honesty. From his Tony award to his infidelity, in the end you come away liking him all the more. What sticks with me is the new respect I have for any successful actor and who manages to stay a nice person. Acting is a profession and it is hard work. It sort of justifies my dislike for reality stars who try to skip all the education (as Lithgow puts it) and just be famous for nothing; or failing that, a sex tape.

What you won't find in this book is gossip and lurid tales of all the people Lithgow has met or worked with. This is definitely not a glorified tabloid.

Doug says

I suppose one might compare this memoir to a fine cigar. You fire it up and you're not sure immediately where it's going flavor-wise. Eventually it settles down and hopefully gets mellow, not bitter.

I enjoyed this (Lithgow's *Drama: An Actor's Education*) though I might have enjoyed it more if I were a psychiatrist and could have real insight into Lithgow's pathologies. Being of his generation (we might have even passed each other by on the Princeton campus, where I use to go to party with my betters in 1969), I've been aware of him and his work for a long time. But the thing is, I sort of avoided most of his stuff, because, in his early days (including early movies) he frankly gave me the creeps. Dressing in drag (*Garp*) or brutally murdering women (*Blow Out*) or just being stone cold brutal in a few flicks, his strangeness and coldbloodedness was just too...creepy.

So, after I see he has a sense of humor (*3rd Rock*) and can play something other than strange or brutal it was with renewed interest that I rechecked his work and dove into *Drama*. The book (I got the audio version, because with an actor or comedian it adds a lot to hear the author read their own work) goes a long way toward giving a picture of a guy from a fairly elite background, privileged by dint of his father's somewhat

exalted place in the theater world as he grew up, later acting in decidedly sophisticated works (Royal Shakespeare Company, et al), who starts scraping bottom (unemployed for a good stretch -- though still living in NYC's Upper West Side; yeah -- problems of the well-off), gets a bit anti-establishment (WBAL), and finally finds his niche in Hollywood.

So good for him, and judging by his work, good for us -- Lithgow is a dependable and eminently watchable actor. Sure, he comes off a bit snobby, which he honestly admits to; he may be over-analytical here and there; and he could have easily infused his story with more humor. But he also comes off as very genuine, thoughtful and kind, though reading between the lines -- or listening between the words -- he seems to dole the kindness out rather conservatively. He is also unafraid to look back at his mistakes and face the realities of temporary failures (the draft dodging...occasionally treating others a bit shabbily...his fecklessness during his first marriage...cluelessness re finances), while also examining the nature of his relationship with his father, which for writers and actors has always been and will always be one of the great themes.

Needless to say, Olivier never did a sitcom on the order of *Third Rock*, nor offered a soliloquy from Harry and the Hendersons. And his *Twilight Zone* appearance? Pure pulp. So how did this snobby Shakespearean wind up doing such lowbrow stuff? Sure, it was a paycheck. But otherwise there's no real answer here. For this reason, Lithgow, who puts so much on the line and reveals himself unabashedly in Drama comes off as an enigma. And the thing about enigmas -- they're always interesting; at least to me. But I wonder what Lithgow's father would have thought of some of the "entertainments" his boy found himself in.

Jim says

John Lithgow is one of the best human beings I have ever met. Turns out he is also a superb writer. This autobiography covers his career primarily up to about 1980, which leaves me in hopes that there will be a follow-up volume. He writes passionately about his love of theater and his upbringing in it. There is much for the novice actor to learn in these pages and I recommend it highly. Lithgow does not spare himself when describing his failings and he admits justifiable pride in his successes. For anyone who loves the theater, this is a wonderful read by a wonderful man.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

John Lithgow had no intention of becoming an actor. What he wanted most was to be an artist. He pursued that path with rigor, while participating in theater productions just for the fun of it. One night after a particularly fine performance, he was seduced by the roar of the crowd. That adulation from the audience was more than he could resist, and it changed his life plans. Art became an avocation, and acting became a full-time pursuit.

Lithgow writes well and generally keeps things moving quickly. He tells some great stories from on and off the stage, and a few times he had me laughing so hard I had to put the book down. Sometimes things even move a little *too* quickly, perhaps, as he hews closely to the book's subtitle---*An Actor's Education*. He focuses primarily on his development as an actor, making only cursory mention of many life events that made him the person he is outside the theater. He does own his mistakes, though, and goes into some detail about how his infidelity destroyed his first marriage.

The most moving thing about the book is the way John pays tribute to his father. Arthur Lithgow's consuming passion for live theater was what paved the way for John's success. Arthur devoted his whole life to acting, directing, and producing, but never received much acclaim. He always thought of himself as a failure, but very late in life he was allowed to see himself through the lens of his son's admiration.

Lithgow ends the book rather abruptly, leaving off the second half of his life. Having read some unwieldy celebrity memoirs, I do appreciate Lithgow's efforts at keeping this one short and readable, but a little more about the time between 1980 and the present would have tied things up nicely. Maybe he's saving that material for another book.[3.5 stars]

Helen says

Upon picking up Lithgow's memoir, I was surprised to find him, not only charming, but kind-hearted and caring. In the forward, Lithgow describes the difficulties of moving in with his parents after his father undergoes a difficult surgery, yet refuses to move to a retirement community. Finding the task of caring for his parents far more difficult than anticipated and with his father in a deep depression, Lithgow brings out the stories that his father had read to him as a child. And thus opens the door to long-forgotten, but fond memories.

If you've read Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* (or about the 10,000 hours of practice it takes to successfully master a skill) Drama will certainly drive the point home. The child of a Shakespearean actor, Lithgow was immersed in theatre, although he didn't claim it as a profession until adulthood.

The strength of the book lies in Lithgow's memories of his nomadic childhood and loses steam during his early career while he recounts the plays and projects he worked on and the directors and actors he with whom he worked. Because most of these names are unknown to me, the narrative lost its impact here, but I suspect those well-versed in theatre will appreciate the relationships.

As Lithgow brings his memoir to a close, he describes his tribute to his father: *Stories by Heart*, a one-man act of PG Wodehouse' Uncle Fred Flits By, the fondly remembered story Lithgow read to his father as his father had done for him.

Randa says

I truly enjoyed this audio book. John Lithgow is a wonderful orator, and a poetic writer. His stories and recollections of his family are particularly poignant and visual. I really looked forward to my long commute to work so that I could be lulled by this evocative storyteller. I knew nothing about him beyond enjoying his roles in *3rd Rock from the Sun* and various movies, so it was fascinating to learn of his theatrical background and his family history of the same. It was also curiously interesting to learn of his self doubt, oblivious nature, and fretfulness. He is exceedingly honest and frank about his weaknesses. It was actually soothing to listen to him so honestly share where he felt he fell down in life and why; it reminded me that we are all human, and all have personal struggles and things to learn.

The only reason I didn't give it five stars is I tire of the long lists of shows performed and actors I don't know, which is seemingly typical of these comedic and actor memoirs to which I am drawn. While I love learning of these worlds, I get bored when they go on at length about who was involved and what the technical details are about a production. For readers who know and care about this sort of thing, I'm sure it's a delight.

A captivating novel and one which I would highly recommend. His love and respect for his family - and his father in particular - is so touching and powerful. At the very least this book makes you think about what contributions others have made in your life - especially during your formative years - and how those contributions shape where you end up in life.

Joy H. says

Drama: An Actor's Education (2011) by John Lithgow

Added 9/30/11

I first heard about this book from the New York Times Books Update, 9/30/11.

The NY Times review is at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/02/boo...>

It says: "*_Drama_ is a buoyant, heartwarming account of coming into one's own.*"

It also says: "*Lithgow ... is relentlessly likable.*"

I agree. I'm looking forward to reading this book.

Edit 1/22/13 :

I am currently listening to an audio version of this book, read by the author himself! WONDERFUL!

Lithgow is gifted with words!

I had tried to read the book back in November, 2011, when it was new, but it was due back at the library. So I couldn't finish it. That was a good thing because now, as a solution, I'm enjoying the audio-version so much more than I would have the book, because I'm listening to Lithgow himself. "*Sweet are the uses of adversity.*" (Lithgow refers to this Shakespeare quote in his book. So true!)

Edit 2/19/13 :

I finished listening to this audio-book a few weeks ago. It was great! Lithgow's writing is wonderful. He's a great wordsmith. He writes with great style and has a lot of interesting things to say about his life and about the performance-world. His charismatic personality shines through the entire book. He's sort of self-deprecating, being honest about his downs as well as his ups.

Jim says

If I knew anything about acting or plays, I might give this 5 stars. Maybe I should anyway since I have no interest in either & yet really enjoyed this autobiography that is full of both.

How did he do that?!!!

Part of it was his voice. It's great for an audio book, but mostly Lithgow was amazingly honest - not brutally, though. There wasn't anything shocking or particularly horrible, just a pretty typical man who didn't always measure up to his own standards, but still managed to make a good, successful life for himself. I wondered if

he'd had therapy since there were some great self-insights. He did mention some, but he didn't use this to excuse anything, just told it like he thought it was & why.

How it was was pretty interesting. With a father who was in the theater, he went into it too, but went on to become quite a success. It wasn't easy. In fact, it was horrifyingly difficult to make a living as an actor. I had no idea there were so many theater groups tossed together the way he describes. His several meetings with Meryl Streep, a short segment toward the end, was very well done. I played it for my wife, too. Anyway, it was fantastic.

Thanks for turning me on to it, Joy!

Donna says

This is a partial autobiography of John Lithgow. The first thing I remember him in was "Twilight Zone: the Movie." And I've been a fan ever since. He is funny and kind. His humor is clean. What's not to like?

I liked the latter half of this more than the first half. He talked a lot about Shakespeare's plays, his childhood and his father. I found it interesting how he just kind of fell into acting as a career, even with growing up in the arts. The best part of this was that John Lithgow narrated his own audio.

This felt honest, well written, and informative. But with all that, the beginning was slow and a lot of this was a little on the superficial side. So 3 stars.

Sara says

Audio version is the way to experience this book. His wonderful voice and clever writing expresses more than I ever understood about acting, family, storytelling and the fragile experience of being human. I never was a fan of John Lithgow, in fact I hated Third Rock from the Sun enough that I still can't shake that annoyance. But after having read his experiences with theater and acting I admire him greatly. Anyone who appreciates Shakespeare will love John for his father's legacy and who he embodied in his many forms as an actor.
