

A Twentieth Century Phenomenon

by Jon Lipsky

For the Science Museum and WGBH

(Note: this play was developed as a companion to a television series on the impact of technology on the 20th Century experience..)

Cast of Characters

Rosie -- A thirty year old woman.

Jorge -- Great grandfather of Rosie as a young man.

Joey -- A twenty year old man.

Doctor -- A man or woman playing multiple medical and counseling roles.

David -- a forty year old man.

Please note: Joey and David are played by the same actor. Jorge and Doctor are played by the same actor.

Style of the Play

This play is a dramatic narrative, often spoken out to the audience. It is also often a rhythmic collage of voices.

(Rosie is seen in silhouette)

Rosie

This all started in another time in a world far away. There was a young woman with a sick daughter in a small hut on a dirt floor. And a young man on a straw mat with a large map and a dream.

(Jorge, Rosa's great grandfather is on the floor with a map, speaking to the audience as if speaking to his wife.)

Jorge

Marta, my sweet, mi corazon, don't cry. I have a plan.

Next month the canal opens. The date has been set. I carried the telegraph message from Senor myself. Do you realize what that means! Every ship that used to go around Tierra Del Fuego will be passing through Panama. We can get to New York in only eight days. Think of it, Marta -- New York! -- with gas lights and street cars and skyscrapers ten stories high.

In New York we can find someone to help Rosalita. I'm sure we can. They have invented something called an X-ray that can look right through you. Maybe they can look right through Rosalita to see what's wrong with her heart.

No, no, I did not make enough money to pay for our passage. But I have something better than a third class ticket. Carlos, in the telegraph office, showed me how to work the wireless, how to fix the wireless, how to send messages through the air.

Every big ship passing through Panama will have a wireless and by the time they get to Panama half of them will be broken. And I'll repair them. And it will not stop there. The telegraph is a thing of the past. The wireless will reach to the far corners of the world. And on that wireless I will search the world for someone who can make the heart of Rosalita well again.

Rosie

(To the audience)

The X-ray, the wireless, the panama canal, without these this story would never have happened.

(Jorge folds up his map)

Jorge

What luck we have to be living in these times.

Rosa

"What luck, what luck," my great grandfather always said.

Jorge

And when our girl is well again, I swear my sweet, mi corazon, we will return when the world is new

(Lights up on Rosie, fast paced music)

Rosie

My mother had a bad heart, and my grandmother before her, and I had a bad heart and I was waiting to die. Actually, I was waiting for my beeper to ring. Cause those were my only two choices. Either my beeper would ring or I would die. My mother never had this choice, nor her mother before her. They didn't even have beepers.

(Pause. She looks at her beeper. Picks it up.)

Lucky me. Without the beeper, this story would never have happened.

(Joey appears)

Joey

You look out over the cliff. You check the wind once more. You check your rig once more. You ask yourself one more time: why are you throwing yourself off a fifty foot cliff? And the answer is obvious: Hey, Mom, get the Polaroid! (Pause) Geronimo!!!

(He freezes in an image of flying)

Rosie

The hang glider. Without the hang glider this story would not have happened.

Joey

(Flying)

Higher and higher... Higher and higher...

Rosie

without the heart/lung machine, a Japanese fungus, a fax machine, psychotherapy, the computer chip, the combustion engine --

Joey

Up! Up! Up!

Rosie

-- without these things none of this would have turned out the way it did.

Joey

Up! Up! Up! You're really soaring now. You can see all the way to the Golden Gate Bridge.

Rosie

This is a purely Twentieth Century story.

Joey

Ludwig Beethoven, Isaac Newton, Alexander the Great never did this!

Rosie

And I am purely 20th Century phenomenon.

Joey

This is the life! This is the life! This is the...

(Dizzying music interrupts. Sound of a crash.

Doctor enters in the midst of a tense operation)

Doctor

Where's that cat-scan. Where's that cat-scan! Goddammit we're losing him. We've gotta get more drainage. There's still too much pressure on his brain. I'm going in again. Come on, come on, come on...

Rosie

Without the cat scan...

Joey

(Describing and enacting his own death)

So you're lying there. Hooked up to monitors. Unfeeling. Unconscious. Unaware even of the awesome machine keeping you alive. If you call this living.

(Sound of labored breathing)

Rosie

Without the heart monitor...

Joey

And your folks stand over you -- they come every day -- waiting, waiting, for you to wake up. 'Cause you look okay. Your cheeks are pink. You breathe easily. But the flat line from your brain stem has signed your death warrant.

Doctor

(To the audience)

This is the the question you hate to ask. Some doctors won't even do it. The question didn't even exist when we went to Med School.

Joey

They ask for your heart, your lungs, your liver, your kidneys, your eyes. That was the hardest part for your mom. When they asked for your eyes.

Rosie

(To the audience)

But if they don't ask those question, this story never happens?

Joey

Your Dad shakes his head: out of the question. But your mother sighs: (As mother) Harold... dear... Maybe some good can come of this.

Doctor

(To the audience)

How do you decide that someone's dead?
When his breathing stops?
When his heart stops?
When his brain stops?
When you pour ice water in his ear and there's no reflex reaction?

Rosie

But if you don't answer this question, this story never happens?

Doctor

(As if to a committee)

Okay, folks, we need a decision. We expect the patient will be declared this morning and we've got a couple of candidates here:

(Throwing files down)

This guys real sick, he could die within the week, but he's over the age limit. This one is younger, she'll use the heart longer, but she's stable and probably could wait awhile. This kid is perfect, but he showed up in the emergency room last week with fresh track marks on his arm. We've got a popular T.V. star, here, who's offering to give us lots of dough if we break our rules and give him special treatment. And then there's this history teacher, who's mother we treated thirty years ago, who's grandmother died here thirty years before...

(The beeper rings. And rings. And rings.)

Rosie

Omigod! Omigod! I've just won the lottery!

Joe

And a helicopter lifting off with a heart and a liver packed in picnic coolers.

Rosie

Thank god for the combustion engine,

Joey

The rotary propeller.

Rosie

The carburetor.

Joey

The radar screen.

Rosie

The picnic cooler!

^ (She starts to leave, then remembers something)

I sign my will, and pack my tooth brush. (Pause) That's the 20th Century for you: one minute you're signing your will and the next minute you're packing your toothbrush.

(Sounds of an ambulance, and a helicopter.

Rosie closes her eyes, breathes deeply)

Joey

(Whispering, in Rosie's ear)

It will only take about four hours, less time than it took to harvest my body parts. That's what they called it: "harvesting" the body parts.

They put you in a deep sleep. The machine keeps your blood circulating, feeds you oxygen, lowers your body temperature twenty degrees.

The blood vessels are the hardest part. They have special micro-sutures to reconnect them.

With warm blood, the new heart starts throbbing... (Heartbeat) Ta-Tum! Ta-Tum! Ta-Tum! As if through some internal intelligence.

(Rosie wakes up)

Rosie

The next thing I know, I'm flying.

Joey

Flying...

Rosie

-- flying with a young man through the air. And we look down and see we're flying over Costa Rica, a place I've never been. And in the village square is my grandmother, my namesake, Rosalita.

Joey

Flying...

Rosie

-- And I wave to her but she is so sad, she is sick at heart that she can't fly with me.

Joey

Come up, come up... Up! Up! Up!

Rosie

And the young man shouts: come up, come up, come fly away.

Joey

Fly away home!

Rosie

But Nana's too sad and old to fly, too heartsick, so she shouts: come down, come down.

Joey

Down?

Rosie

And suddenly I feel these ropes around my wrists...

Joey

Down?

Rosie

-- pulling me down towards the village.

Joey

Down! Down!

Rosie

-- and I try to break away but I can't break away and I start to fall down,
down...

Joey

-- down... down...

Rosie

-- and -- oh!

Joey

Oh!

Rosie

-- suddenly I wake up in a hospital bed pulling I.V.s out of my arm.

Joey

Out! Out! Out!

(Pause)

Rosie

(Exhausted)

Oh, god! Whoever invented the I.V. and the catheter, must have been a sadist.

(Rosie puts on a surgical mask. The actor who played Joey turns into David and also puts on a surgical mask. They both listen to the Doctor.)

Doctor

(Lecturing)

Ladies and gentlemen: let me remind you your body has been infected by the very thing keeping you alive. Your new heart, your new kidney, your new liver is as dangerous to your bodies as any deadly microbe. So the natural thing for your bodies to do is to fight the foreign invader. That is why the drugs we have prescribed to suppress your bodies defenses must be taken without fail every day of your life, three hundred and sixty five days a year. The fact is you have simply traded one disease for another.

David

(Wearing a surgical mask)

I met her at a lecture on the transplant floor. She had beautiful green eyes. For the first weeks after I got my new liver, all I saw was people's eyes. Everyone had to wear masks. Our defenses were so down even a common cold could kill us.

Doctor

What makes this all possible is -- cyclosporin -- a wonder drug made from a fungus first discovered in Japan. This drug makes it possible to suppress just those cells in your body that would attack your transplant leaving the rest of your defenses more or less intact. Without cyclosporin, we might have given up on transplants altogether, because they were too risky. Without cyclosporin, you might not be here.

Rosie

He had the most intense eyes. I noticed him watching me at the cocktail hour. That's what we called our little ritual on the transplant floor. The cocktail hour. We'd mix up our drugs like cocktails, a splash of steroids, a pinch of antibiotics, and a couple of jiggers of cyclosporin -- the elixir of life. And raise our glasses in gratitude.

David

(Raising her glass)

As my father would say: "L'chaim! To life! "

Rosie

To life! I'll drink to that.

(The drink together)

But may I ask: why are you always staring at me.

David

Because I think we're related.

Rosie

Related? I-I don't think so.

David

In a manner of speaking. We had our transplants on the same day.

Rosie

-- the same day?

David

The same night. Almost the same hour.

Rosie

Oh.

David

So, you see, there's a chance we could have the same donor. And my liver...

Rosie

And my heart...

David

Are "soulmates." You are, literally, flesh of my flesh.

(Doctor enters.)

Doctor

Rosie, the heart is just a pump and the liver is just a filter. There is no biological evidence that a transplanted heart, or a transplanted liver, could have any residual memories or characteristics of its original owner.

David

But aren't you overwhelmed with feelings you can't explain. Impulses you can't control.

Doctor

Transplanted organs do not carry the characteristics of their donor. They do not change your personality. Identification with the person who gave you your new life is simply an illusion, or a delusion, if it persists.

Rosie

(To the Doctor)

But.. But I have these recurring dreams that I... I'm flying with a young man.

David

Flying? Our donor was a young man who spent the last day of his life flying.

Rosie

What? How do you know.

David

I wrote to his family through the hospital. He died in a hang gliding accident.

(Pause)

Rosie

So my flying dreams...

Doctor

Just dreams, that's all...

Rosie

(To the audience)

My counselor tried to bring me back to earth.

Doctor

(Simultaneously)
-- back to earth.

Rosie

She said: dreams of flying were an expression of euphoria..

Doctor

-- an expression of euphoria.

Rosie

-- born of my revived libido.

Doctor

-- revived libido.

Rosie

All of my new obsessions...

Doctor

-- new obsessions...

Rosie

-- were related to unconscious desires...

Doctor

-- unconscious desires.

Rosie

-- that had been repressed because of my illness.

Doctor

Repressed for a long time. Perhaps there's a simpler explanation to all this.

Rosie

What's that?

Doctor

Maybe you're falling in love.

(Pause)

Rosie

No.

(David enters)

David

(Intensely)

Your shrink's been reading the wrong books, Rosie. All those Freudians and neo-Freudians. You should be reading Carl Jung. The Jungians believe there is a collective unconscious. A kind of universal, symbolic memory that resides in all of us. The liver for instance is the reservoir of the emotions in ancient myths.

Rosie

Ancient myths...?

David

And the heart is the symbolic reservoir of nobility and courage in the

medieval world. Think of Richard the Lion Heart.

Rosie

Richard the Lion Heart...?

David

So even if there is no biological connection between our body parts and our donors, there is certainly a symbolic connection.

Rosie

(All flustered)

A symbolic connection? You are out of your mind.

David

Am I? I think you're just afraid of your own heart.

(He puts her hand on her own heart)

Rosie

(To the audience)

Well, we argued.

David

And argued.

Rosie

Every night we argued. Without the feud between Freud and Jung...

David

Jung and Freud...

Rosie

-- this story would not have happened. Because one night...

David

Late at night...

(Pause)

Rosie

And he asked me to marry him.

(Celebratory music. They join together for a wedding)

. Rabbi

For better or for worse,
For richer or poorer.

Rosie

Our wedding took place on our one year anniversary
(To the audience)

David

-- not our wedding anniversary: our transplant anniversary

Rosie

-- when our rules were relaxed and we had more freedom.

Rabbi

In sickness and in health..
Till death do us part.

(David crushes a glass in a napkin.)

Rabbi

Mazel Tov! You may kiss the bride.

(They embrace. David gives her an envelope)

Rosie

So after the big party at the transplant center, he hands me, for our honeymoon...

(She opens the envelope)

David

-- two airline tickets to anywhere.

Rosie

Airline tickets to anywhere.

David

So you can fly with your young man.

Rosie

So the next thing I know, we're flying over the Gulf of Mexico, heading for Costa Rica on a trip that goes a hundred times faster than my great grandfather ever dreamed.

(David starts laughing, looking in a duffle bag)

And David is laughing at me... (To David) Why are you laughing...?

David

(Pulling packages out of a duffle bag)

Freeze dried minute steaks, bottled water, packages of noodle soup, powdered milk, peanut butter.

Rosie

(Firmly to David)

Without my minute steaks and Lipton's noodle soup, this story doesn't

happen.

David

But it's a four-star hotel, Rosie. They have coca-cola, rice-a-roni...

Rosie

We said we would only eat our own food. If we got "The Runs..."

David

Okay, Rosie, okay, but I'm not gonna let fear of "The Runs" rule my life?

Rosie

(to the audience)

And something about the way he said it, should have warned me that he wasn't thinking clearly.

(Latin American music, as at the start of the play.)

Jorge

So towards the end of their honeymoon they left the windsurfers and the scuba divers, rented a landrover and drove into the jungle heading back in time. And they found the village I had left so long ago which hadn't changed all that much -- except for the electric generator, the satellite dish and the T.V. in the village square.

Rosie

And that day there was a wedding in the little stucco church and the bride turned out to be a distant, distant cousin.

Jorge

And she insisted they be guest of honor at the wedding feast. Tortillas and black beans, spitted goat meat, fermented sugar cane.

Rosie

All carrying common germs as deadly to us as anthrax or plague.

David

It was very embarrassing.

Rosie

We tried to excuse ourselves...

David

-- because of our medication.

Rosie

But how do you say...

David

-- in pidgen spanish...

Rosie

-- you have someone else's heart...

David

-- someone else's liver.

Rosie

The more we tried...

David

-- the more they looked at us like we were some kind of freaks.

Rosie

No, not freaks...

David

Something unholy.

Rosie

And the atmosphere was getting pretty tense.

David

Until I said:

(Pause)

-- to hell with it -- "L'chaim. To life!"

(He drinks the fermented sugar cane)

-- and downed their liquor and their grub.

(Celebratory music. Jorge drinks and embraces David.
Rosie just stares.)

Rosie

(To the audience)

And that's when I knew he had lost it.

(David eats a tortilla with gusto. And puts it down when
he notices that Rosie is staring at him)

David

On the plane ride back she wouldn't speak to me.

Listen. Rosie, I'm sorry...

Rosie

Isn't anything sacred. You have the gift of life. How can you abuse it.

David

I'm not abusing anything. I just don't want to live scared any more. The tortillas were fine. I'm as healthy as a horse.

Rosie

No you're not. You're lieing to me. You're lieing to yourself. I've counted your bottles of cyclosporin. You forgot to take your medicines a couple of times.

David

Yeah, a couple of times. It slipped my mind. I'm on vacation!

Rosie

No. You're on cloud nine. You think you're immortal. And now I know why your face looks so thin. You've cut down on your steroids. Out of vanity. Pure vanity!

David

So what? Why shouldn't I? They over medicate anyway. It's my life to live.

Rosie

No, it's your life to throw away.

(She walks off in a fury)

David

(To the audience)

Most newly weds in the back of their minds fear rejection. Only for me

and for Rosie rejection can be fatal.

Rosie

Two days after we landed, they rushed him to the Intensive Care Unit.

(Pause. The Doctor enters, shakes his head.)

As his liver began to fail, I could feel my heart breaking.

David

(Reciting the Jewish prayer for the dead)

V'yisgadal, v'yisgadesh, shmae rabo.

Rosie

(Trying to learn it)

V'yisgadal, v'yisgadesh... I-I won't be able to do this.

David

Sure you can. It's not a prayer of sorrow but in praise of God's glory. Or you can sing that song I love.

(She sings, at first hesitatingly, then beautifully)

Rosie

One bright morning when the world is over,
I'll fly away.
To that land on God's celestial shoulder.
I'll fly away.

Rabbi

(Reciting the mourner's prayer)

V'yisgadal, v'yisgadesh, shmae rabo.

Rosie

His last request was one of joy. . He wanted me to visit the mother of our hang glider, to thank her for the gift of life.

(She sings while the Rabbi prays over the body)

I'll fly away, I'll fly away.
When I die, by and by,
I'll fly away.

(David exits. He reappears as Joey's mother, looking through a photo album).

Rosie

(To Joey)

So: a few months later your mom is sitting by the fire with the old photo album.

Joey

(Opening a picture album)

And a strange woman comes to the door and says:

Rosie

I have the heart of your son.

Joey

(Simultaneously)

"--the heart of your son."

Rosie

And there on her lap is a Polaroid of a boy in flight.

Joey

Higher and higher.

Rosie

And your mother looks at me and says: "May I?"

Joey

And somehow you know exactly what she means...

Rosie

(Cradling Joey's head)

So I cradled her head in my hands and placed it on my chest, and let her listen to the heart...

Joey

To the heart of the boy...

Rosie

To the heart of the boy she called:

Joey

(sound of the heart)

Ta-Tum. Ta-Tum. Ta-Tum. Ta-Tum.

Rosie

Joey.

(She falls asleep with Joey in her arms.

Pause. Suddenly, the sound of an alarm!)

)

Joey

(They wake up from their reverie)

But at breakfast, all upset, you make your apologies...

Rosie

I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Joey

You've been throwing up all morning.

Rosie

(Simultaneously, to the audience)
-- throwing up all morning.

(Pause)

Oh, god.

(Sound of an ambulance. Rosie lays down as
on a stretcher. Doctor appears.)

Doctor

Into the car...

Rosie

Onto a plane.

Doctor

Into an ambulance...

Rosie

Back to the hospital.

(In the doctor's office)

Doctor

Rosie...

Rosie

Doctor... Am I going to die?

Doctor

Rosie, we're all going to die.

Rosie

Is it my heart?

Doctor

Only in a manner of speaking. You're pregnant.

Rosie

Oh.

(Pause)

Oh!

(Joyously)

The sonogram. Whoever invented the sonogram. I want to shake his hand. You can actually see the image of your baby moving... If not for the sonogram, you couldn't see...

(Looking at the sonogram)

Oh, she's beautiful. I named her Joey, of course, as soon as I saw her little heart, beating, beating, beating, beating...

Joey

(Heart beats)

Ta-tum. Ta-tum. Ta-tum. Ta-tum (Etc.)

Rosie

And looking at that sonogram, I suddenly thought about all those things that made her story possible:

Joey

(As a heart beat)

The hang glider. The beeper. The heart/lung machine.

Rosie

And I thought -- who knows? -- Maybe by the time she grows up, there may be some kind of gene therapy for this kind of heart disease.

Doctor

Gene therapy, or maybe...

Joey

(In the background as a heartbeat)

The fax machine, the computer chip...

Rosie

-- maybe some way to do transplants from animals.

Doctor

Animal transplants, or may be...

Joey

The helicopter, the sonogram...

Rosie

-- maybe some kind of artificial heart.

Doctor

A mechanical heart, or maybe...

Joey
(In the background as a heartbeat)
Antibiotics, anesthesia...

Rosie
-- maybe some way to grow our own spare body parts.

Doctor
-- using our own D.N.A..

Joey
-- the cat scan, the x-ray, the panama canal.

Rosie
Who knows?

Doctor
Who knows?

Rosie
After all, if we think about all the changes in the last hundred years,

Joey
(As if flying)
Come fly away...

Doctor
-- just think of what it's going to be like for her...

Joey

Come fly away...

Rosie

-- As she flies off...

Joey

Fly away home!

Rosie

-- into the twenty first...

Rosie & Doctor

-- into the twenty first...

Rosie & Doctor & Joey

-- into the twenty first Century.
(Lights slowly fade.)

End of Play

EDUCATIONAL GOALS

This play, "A 20th Century Phenomenon", is an attempt to inspire audiences to look more deeply at the discoveries, inventions and innovations that have transformed our society over the last 100 years. While it centers mainly on a medical "miracle" -- organ transplants -- the story exemplifies a much wider range of phenomena. Indeed, its characteristic litany of necessary causes -- "without the heart/lung machine, a Japanese fungus, a fax machine, psychotherapy, the computer chip, the combustion engine, this story would never have happened" -- could be applied, with different specifics, to any number of important changes in our lives. In the end, it is the range of innovations and not the details that, hopefully, will move audiences to a greater curiosity about our remarkable era.

With this goal in mind, the play was designed to whet audiences appetite for the more in depth exploration of the 20th Century that is found in the WGBH television series. Details of discoveries and inventions have been left out in an attempt to capture the audiences imaginations with a fast pace story, an emotional roller coaster ride through a technological and ethical terra nova. In the end, we hope that audiences will come away saying: "wow! -- look at all the amazing breakthroughs we take for granted in modern life! How did all those things come about?" Luckily, the answer to that question is a clicker away.

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