

Sydney Writers' Festival 2013

Ruby Wax: Losing It

The audience pulses with listening silence. On stage, Ruby Wax, comedian and writer, is sitting with Jude Kelly, artistic director of the Southbank Centre in Britain. Wax has just finished a monologue of invigorating honesty on the subject of depression. With the lights now on the audience, she guides us through a mental exercise. It started with Kelly's question, 'How exactly do you go about mindfulness?'

Wax has covered vast academic territory on the cognitive sciences and the black dog with a recent doctoral dissertation and an acclaimed novel, *Sane New World*. She's studied psychology and neurosciences, from Freud through to the insula; that's the small part of the brain that synchronizes sensory feedback from the environment, grounding body and mind in a sense of wholeness as a physical being. 'The insula is active when you do mindfulness, which can be anything from concentrating on the feel of your feet on the ground, to listening to the environment with intense focus. Studies suggest when you're doing those exercises intensely, your brain doesn't have the capacity to be anxious. It takes practice of course, it won't happen immediately. Let's give it a go now. Everybody, just be still for one minute, and listen. Listen hard.' We connect in the stillness, a full house of people stretching their senses. For one long minute the room surges with the same heat as our applause at the beginning of her talk.

Wax has given us plenty of food for thought with humorous, compassionate ruminations on experiences with depression. She's paced the floor, swung girlishly on her chair, gesticulated theatrically, laughed with the truth. She's taken us on a rough journey that continues to rise and fall in her day-to-day life. It was never realistic to consider eliminating dark thoughts completely, and Wax is well aware they can resurface from the deep recesses of the mind. However, it's entirely possible to dedicate yourself to a new, distanced awareness of the darkness and its triggers. Mental exercises can help to inoculate against the 'abusive voices' of a disease, and Wax's writing generously illuminates these in a book she believes would make an excellent toilet read. *Sane New World* publicises the tools she uses for this mental process, and renders the esoteric language of cognitive sciences accessible to a public where one in four are likely to experience depression. How is it, she asks, that we can know so much about the workings of the human brain, yet still be wary of that irksome subject, depression?

When she first moved to the UK, Wax herself tried to skirt around her haunting feelings. She threw cocktail parties, bantered on the trivial, advertised a performative happiness. She went to school sports carnivals, and listened to manicured mothers chatting about dresses and SUVs. As a comedian, she knew how to put on a show designed to garner positive attention. "And don't think I don't know what's happening now," she says, gesturing to the stage, "Narcissism, yes. Do you love me?" She knows how to laugh at herself, and keeps this in beautiful balance with a bold voice on mental turmoil.

Discussion on cognitive behaviour therapy and mindfulness is given without dogma; she doesn't deny the roles of medication, or appointments with psychologists. Instead, she wheels on a trolley carrying a large, boldly coloured plastic brain, and maps out basic functions of each fungal shape. The message is this illness is physical, not just a phantom of the mind.

She recalls the way certain well-meaning friends would try to help during the most empty, lifeless hours of her depression. "Perk up," they'd pipe down the phone line. "Get out of bed, go shopping" etc. If she'd told them she'd had a diagnosis associated with the body, would they have taken her more seriously? Words such as 'pneumonia,' 'cancer,' 'multiple sclerosis,' these are all received with necessary understanding and thoughtfulness because they come from a socially validated language. In *Sane New World*, Ruby's warm hearted and

frank language uncovers a debilitating illness still tainted with outdated concepts of a mind/body split.

How refreshing to see a performer stand before a crowd and garner strength through open vulnerability. The subject of the black dog becomes a lot less frightening when treated as part of our everyday human fabric. These days, Ruby Wax hosts parties where she doesn't force herself to stick to the light and breezy. 'How are you?' a guest asks. With that beguiling smile and twinkling eyes Ruby says, 'Oh, you know. Just doing what we all do. Dealing with death, self-loathing, loss, growing and up and grief. Hor d'oeuvre?'

Tara McLennan

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