

on ego



Mick Gordon and Paul Broks have written a play, an experiment and a meditation. Alex (Elliot Levey) is a neurology lecturer; his wife, Alice (Kate Miles), develops a brain tumour. Eventually, she doesn't recognise him - which means she's not "her" any more. So, what is identity? What is the self? Is there an ego within? Neurology is exciting because it explores the core of your being, and frightening because it tells you that there is no core. The play is an experiment: can we turn all this into drama? It's a meditation: If the brain is not a central computer, you can meditate only on where your personality resides and how your will functions. Gordon and Broks are steeped in the work of Oliver Sacks, Daniel Dennett, Gerald Edelman and Antonio Damasio; what is impressive is the way they turn it into gripping theatre. The three actors (Robin Soans plays Alex's boss) combine the intensity of being personalities with the tragic sense of being objects. Don't miss it.

The Sunday Times

Hamlet, traumatised by his family's misdemeanours, described men as a "quintessence of dust". Some 350 years on, Francis Crick decided this was much too poetic: we are, concluded the scientist who co-discovered the structure of DNA, a bundle of neurons. Both figures cast their shadow over *On Ego*, an engrossing play by Mick Gordon and the neuropsychologist Paul Broks that peers into human minds and suggests that, no matter how rationally science is now able to explain existence, the construction of feelings such as love and pain remains as unfathomable as ever.

On Ego is the kind of show that makes much other theatre look shallow. Technically it's canny: in one scene, the face of the main character, Alex, fragments and re-forms as voiceovers replicate the fractured procession of thoughts in his brain. More impressive, though, is the way the narrative doesn't just grapple with complex questions about the nature of self, ego and consciousness, but is driven by them.

Alex, a neurologist, is convinced that there is no self; faced with his imminent mortality, however, he proves to be as seduced as the next man by the idea of his own uniqueness. Alice, his wife, discovers she has a brain tumour; her mental disintegration is distressing to witness, not least as it exposes feelings she was once able to hide. Underlying everything is a celebration of theatre itself; in Alex's assessment, "the human being is a story-telling machine", and where better to tell those stories than on stage?

Gordon crams so much material into his 90 minutes, it's almost impossible to process it all. But the clarity of his staging, and the ease of the performances, particularly from Elliot Levey as Alex, prevent even the toughest scientific ideas from alienating the audience. Science and emotion meld so successfully that you leave the theatre feeling less like a bundle of neurons than a king of infinite space.

The Guardian

Alex, a thirty-something neurologist, brandishes the brain of the late Richard. How did this lump of meat become mind. How did it construct the idea of a self? There are, Alex tells us, two schools of thought. “Ego theory” takes the view that behind the face, there lurks an essence, a core, an “I”. “Bundle Theory” argues that the processes behind our sense of self are distributed in different regions of the brain. The self is an illusion relayed to us by our grey matter. Alex (beautifully played by Elliot Levey) then asks us to imagine there were a Star Trek-like teleportation device that could whisk people from one place to another by digitally encoding them so when they were decoded at the other end, everything about them was replicated. The twist is that, for legal reasons, the original people are vapourised.

To a committed bundle theorist, this form of travel should pose no psychological threat. But at this point *On Ego* - the provocative first venture of Mick Gordon’s “On Theatre” company co-written with the neuropsychologist Paul Broks - makes a lurch from the hypothetical to the actual. Alex becomes embroiled in a real waking nightmare: the device transmits his digital duplicate but fails to get rid of him. Jailed and pressed to commit suicide, he is left to imagine his surrogate arriving for a wedding-anniversary meal with his wife. The “original” Alex’s ordeal is compounded by the fact that his dying wife (the excellent Kate Miles) has succumbed to Capgras syndrome, a neurological delusion that loved ones have been replaced by imposters. Is this an irony too far? You will not think so as you witness Elliot Levey’s piercing distress or watch him witnessing his alter ego tossing and turning in drink-numbed sleep on film. Is it, even for a fully paid up bundle theorist, any consolation to know that this is a creature who could live precisely the life that you would have lived - especially if the woman from whom you drew your identity can no longer authenticate you? Ending in a brilliant blizzard of filmed brain activity, this is a philosophically stretching and heart-twistingly ambivalent piece.

The Independent

Nothing but neurons. That’s you, that is; according to the ‘astonishing hypothesis’ of Francis Crick there is no inner self, no ego, no ‘I’. Your brain has made ‘you’ up. The thought that you’re merely the sum of a sequence of electrical impulses is for Alex, the cord-jacketed neurology professor giving this lecture, ‘a kind of liberation’. He goes on to prove so-called ‘bundle theory’ with a demonstration of transportation - yes, the beam-me-up kind - assisted by his grumpy father-in-law Donald, who Robin Soans makes a cult turn. The drama stems from two developments: an unfortunate malfunction of the transporter - Elliot Levey’s excellent Alex can be a pretty cocky bugger, so it’s enjoyable to see him stumped by his own scientific conundrum - and the growing illness of Alex’s wife Alice, who has been forgetting words lately. Neuropsychologist Paul Broks, who wrote the book this ‘theatre essay’ is based on, has collaborated with Gordon to create a script that is witty, engaging and precise and a production that presents its ideas with the slick certainty of science-for-all. Actually, Alex explains bundle theory so well the first time - with the help of designer Es Devlin’s ingenious multi-purpose projection screen - that the later repetitions are superfluous. It’s as the tumour in Alice’s brain takes hold that things get uncomfortable; not just because her decline is acted with increasing power by Kate Miles, but because the trauma we witness feels emotionally disconnected from all this theory. Should we be convinced that our selves are ‘a work of fiction’? The ending suggests we should. But it’s no coincidence that that’s also the production’s least potent moment.

Time Out