

## THEATRE REVIEWS

## REVUES DE THÉÂTRE

### “Whose Life is it Anyway?”/“Quelle vie?”

British author Brian Clark's play, “Whose Life is it Anyway?”, was first staged at the Mermaid Theatre in London in 1978. Since then, audiences in Paris, Brussels, Zurich, New York, and Montreal have viewed this thought-provoking and sensitive piece, which adopts as its focus an individual's right to choose death with dignity as an alternative to an impaired life. The reviews that follow discuss the issues in this timely play from ethical, juridical and psychiatric viewpoints.

La pièce de l'auteur britannique Brian Clark, traduite par Eric Kahane sous le titre “Quelle vie?”, fut d'abord présentée au *Mermaid Theatre* de Londres, en 1978. Depuis lors, les représentations se sont succédées à Paris, Bruxelles, Zurich, New York et Montréal. L'intrigue se noue autour du droit qu'a l'individu d'opter pour une mort digne plutôt que pour une vie diminuée. Les commentaires qui suivent veulent discuter diverses questions soulevées par la pièce, tour à tour dans une perspective éthique, juridique et psychiatrique.



## Ethical Perspective

Brian Clark's play is a story about a former sculptor now confined to bed as an incurable quadriplegic after a road accident and successful life-saving medical treatment. But the life that has been saved now needs to be maintained. Joncas need not die. He has alternatives, but not many. He can live only with uninterrupted medical care. He cannot feed himself or attend to any of his basic bodily functions. He will never be able to do so. He will never walk or be able to use his arms. He will have to be fed for the rest of his life. If he is not fed, he will die. He will have to be fed and catheterized, or he will die. He can only live in a hospital or institution for constant care. The hospital is his new placenta, the catheter his umbilical line to life. Joncas grows into his realization that this kind of life is, for him, not worth the effort. About this realization, at least, he can do something: he demands to be released from hospital, or at least from life-prolonging treatment, fully conscious that he will die. He is opposed. He is told that he cannot take this kind of decision and, at any rate, that he is too depressed to really know what he is doing, too depressed to take such a decision rationally. Joncas is in the hospital's power. He cannot move and those who saved his life now refuse to release him from their care. Who rightfully has power over this life that has been saved? Whose life is it now? The story is just the arena for the contest.

### I. The power play

Brian Clark's play pursues its question and its advantage with vengeance, relentlessly pressing its audience to score an assent. It scores. How could it fail to?

Joncas's hospital room is a closed arena. It is set for a contest of wits. The contest of wills is secondary. This is the play's advantage. It sets the rules. It selects the players. A mother, father, brother, sister, a friend or deeply loved woman, are not permitted on the ice. The decisive moves allowed in this contest are those of intellectual argument. Joncas and the other players are locked into the relationship of disputants. The other players really only meet Joncas on this level. They move against one another throughout the play. Dr Côté, the attractive, sympathetic and understanding woman, is something of an exception. She speaks *to* Joncas, not just in argument