

present



## **The Year of Magical Thinking**

**By Joan Didion**

**Directed by Cate Blanchett**

### **Teacher's Resource Kit**

**Written and compiled by Jeffrey Dawson**

#### **Acknowledgements**

Sydney Theatre Company would like to thank the following for their invaluable material for these Teachers' Notes:

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## Sydney Theatre Company

Sydney Theatre Company (STC) produces theatre of the highest standard that consistently illuminates, entertains and challenges. It is committed to the engagement between the imagination of its artists and its audiences, to the development of the art form of theatre, and to excellence in all its endeavours.

STC has been a major force in Australian drama since its establishment in 1978. It was created by the New South Wales Government, following the demise of the Old Tote Theatre Company. The original intention was to better utilise the Drama Theatre of the Sydney Opera House and the new Company comprised a small central administration staff, technical staff, workshop and rehearsal facilities.

The Wharf opened on 13 December, 1984 by Premier Neville Wran, which allowed all departments of the Company to be housed under one roof for the first time. The venue was to become the envy of the theatre world. From 1985, the Company could perform in two locations throughout the year, the Drama Theatre and The Wharf. From 1990 to 1999, Wayne Harrison served as Artistic Director. A third regular venue, Sydney Theatre, administered and operated by STC, opened in 2004.

The predominant financial commitment to STC is made by its audience. Of this audience, the Company's subscribers make a crucial commitment. The Company is also assisted annually by grants from the Federal Government through the Australia Council and the New South Wales Government through the Ministry for the Arts. STC also actively seeks sponsorship and donations from the corporate sector and from private individuals.

**To access detailed information on Sydney Theatre Company, its history and productions please contact our Archivist Judith Seeff at [jseeff@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:jseeff@sydneytheatre.com.au)**

## Sydney Theatre Company Education

Sydney Theatre Company is committed to education by programming original **productions** and **workshops** that enthuse and engage the next generation of theatre-goers. Within the education programme Sydney Theatre Company produces its own season of plays as well as collaborates with leading theatre-for-young-people companies across Australia.

Often a young person's first experience of theatre is facilitated by teachers. STC ensures access to all of its mainstage productions through the **schoolsdays** programme as well as produces and tours theatre specifically crafted to resonate with young people.

**For further information on STC Education programme, please contact the Education Manager Helen Hristofski at [hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au)**

## Production Credits

### Creative Team

Director Cate Blanchett  
Associate Director Jennifer Flowers  
Set Designer Alice Babidge  
Costume Designer Giorgio Armani  
Lighting Designer Nick Schlieper

With Robyn Nevin

Originally Produced by Scott Rudin, Roger Berlind, Debra Black, Daryl Roth and The Schubert Organization. Executive Producers: Stuart Thompson, John Barlow

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### The Writer – Joan Didion

**Joan Didion** is an American writer, known as a journalist, essayist, and novelist. Didion contributes regularly to *The New York Review of Books*. According to a 1979 *New York Times* review of Didion's book *The White Album*, reviewer Michiko Kakutani quoted, Novelist and poet James Dickey calling Didion 'the finest woman prose stylist writing in English today.'

With her late husband, writer John Gregory Dunne, she collaborated on several screenplays. She lives in New York City.

### Biography

Didion was born in Sacramento, California and graduated from the University of California, Berkeley in 1956 with a BA in English. Much of Didion's writing draws from her life in California, particularly during the 1960s as the world in which she grew up "began to seem remote." Her portrayals of conspiracy theorists, paranoiacs, and sociopaths are now considered part of the canon of American literature.

She adopted a culturally conservative stance; her early career being spent as a Goldwater conservative and writing incisive articles in William Buckley's *National Review*. Perhaps as a reaction to Reagan whom she termed a faux conservative, or as a result of being closely aligned with progressive writers in the New York literary world in which she moved in the seventies, she abandoned her earlier leanings and moved toward the liberal tenets of the Democrats. Didion retains a conservative bent, though, sharply chronicling America after World War II with its endless search for privacy and fulfillment of individual dreams.

Didion is the author of five novels and eight books of nonfiction. Her early collections of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979) -- a book described in one review as helping to define California as "the paranoia capital of the world" -- made her famous as an observer of American politics and culture with a distinctive style of reporting that mixed personal reflection and social analysis. This led her to be associated with members of the New Journalism such as Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, though Didion's ties to that movement have never been considered particularly strong.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As Ben Brantley said in The New York Times, “as a writer Ms. Didion has a peerless ear for the music of words in motion. And this theatrical version of her account of losing her husband and her daughter within two years includes classic *Didionesque* sentences, as hard and translucent as hailstones. But it is in the quiet between the words, as she tastes and digests what she has said.

Reference: Joan Didion, “The Year of Hoping for Stage Magic” in The New York Times (March 4, 2007)

“I was seized by the idea that the fact that I had never written and did not know how to write a play could be the point, the imperative, the very reason to write one. My husband had died, our only child had died, I was no longer exactly the person I had been.

It was necessary to try something new.

Something the person I had been would not have tried.

Something high-risk.

Something so high-risk that it would entirely absorb my attention, the more constructive version of the narrow track.

On Oct. 16, back from Boston that morning, leaving for Dallas and Minneapolis the next, I again met with (one of the producers) Scott. “SR sees the form as six or eight ‘sections,’ or ‘chunks’ — call them movements,” my notes read that day. “The movements should build sequentially, repeated refrains taking on new meaning as they build. The speaker is urgent, driven to tell us something we don’t want to know. She is reporting, bringing us a dispatch from a far country.”

More notes: “At some point we notice a slippage in this. We begin to suspect that the delivery of this report is all that holds the speaker together. We begin to sense a tension between what we are being told and what we are not being told — What’s going on here? Is she crazy? Or is she aware that we think she’s crazy and doesn’t care?”

“Is that the risk she is taking? Why is she taking it?”

“Think of the Greeks, how ragged they are, how apparently careless of logical transition. Is there a deeper logic?”

I put these notes and the e-mail messages I got from Scott in a box. On the box I wrote “theater piece” in Magic Marker. I kept going to the airport, kept checking in and checking out, but I was beginning to think about how to make a play, how to use the specific tool that is spoken language. I could see right away that writing a play could not be a simple matter of adapting the book: I had written the book, I had no interest in rewriting it, a play would need to go deeper, come from a new perspective, tell me what I did not know when I wrote the book. I could also see that writing a play would be nothing like writing a novel: the shape of a novel is where you begin. The shape of a play could finally reveal itself only in the collaborative process of doing the

play. I had not yet tried to guess what the shape of *Magical Thinking* would be, but I was beginning to sense it as music, a sonata.

Through November the e-mail from Scott focused on when we could talk again. On Nov. 21, in Toronto, about to fly again to California, I got a message suggesting a new development: "David Hare will be in town and I'd love to get some time for the three of us, which I think will be exciting and provocative and very, very helpful to us."

That first meeting with David took place in January 2006.

By then I had roughly identified the movements and made notes on what would eventually seem the dramatic line. I knew that the play would be about language — that if it was to exist at all it would need to exist in its subtext, in the collision between different kinds of language, the tension between what is said and not said. The speaker would be someone who uses language not to communicate but to distance, to obscure what she thinks from even herself.

Scott suggested that it might be somewhere in this distance that we would find the narrative.

In fact it was, although I had at that time written nothing.

At our first meeting, I heard myself ask David how "long" a play was.

He did a word count on his own "Via Dolorosa": 15,000, give or take.

So armed, I began. One afternoon three months later the three of us first heard the play, alone in the Lion Theater on West 42nd Street, an actress sitting in a chair onstage and reading.

As she spoke the first words, I could not breathe.

I have been asked if I do not find it strange that Vanessa Redgrave is playing me. I explain: Vanessa Redgrave is not playing me, Vanessa Redgrave is playing a character who, for the sake of clarity, is called Joan Didion. At points before this character appears onstage, she loses first her husband and then her daughter. Such experiences of loss may not be universal, but neither are they uncommon. If you take the long view, which this character tries to do, they could even be called general.

This does not close the subject. "But Vanessa Redgrave is nothing like you."

This is not entirely true. As it happens I knew her before I ever thought of writing a play. Tony Richardson, to whom she was married, was until his death in 1991 one of our closest friends. I had known their daughters since they were children. She and I understand certain kinds of experience in the same way. We share the impulse to make things, the fear of not getting them right. I would even guess, although I have not asked the question, that she has had the nightmare in which you get pushed onstage without a script.

I say some of this. "But she's taller than you are." This is true. She is taller than I am. I try to suggest that her task in this play, for better or for worse, offers more elusive challenges than height impersonation. Then I give up. In fact I never thought of the character who would appear onstage in this play as me. I thought of her as "the speaker," or "she." I thought of myself as the witness, the watcher, the auditor, the audience, "we." "The speaker will be telling us something we need to know," the

notes read. “We notice on the part of the speaker a certain carelessness about time sequence. It occurs to us that she may be losing chronology.”

It would be logical to assume that I adopted this distance to protect myself. It would also be wrong. The idea that whoever appeared onstage would play not me but a character was central to imagining how to make the narrative: I would need to see myself from outside. I would need to locate the dissonance between the person I thought I was and the person other people saw.

One example, a note: “This is about the speaker discovering that she is completely powerless, that the control she so prizes is nonexistent.” This was for me, even as I wrote it, novel information. I had never before thought of myself as a person prizing control. Only when I saw the play performed did I see that character clear, and I also saw her in the mirror.

Plays find their own shape. A few words cut or added can radically change that shape. This thing we have been making in the studio on West 42nd Street is still finding itself. Every day now we see a colour we did not see before. We now have only a few more days of rehearsal and three weeks of previews. Yes. It scares me. Yes. Some days I think it’s working and other days I think it’s not. But I remember a February evening when Vanessa went to see the dressing rooms at the Booth. Like a mermaid sensing water, she moved to the stage. She began saying the play. There it was: Vanessa Redgrave was standing on a stage in an empty theatre and she was telling me a story I was hearing for the first time.”

For excellent contextual information on Didion’s play, see the articles in the STC program for this production, edited by Laura Scrivano, Publications Manager:
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## Plot Summary

JOAN: *To keep her alive I need to focus. For example: I need to avoid noticing anything that might lead me back into the past. Going back has trick currents, unrevealed eddies, you can be skimming along on what looks like clear water and suddenly go under. Get sucked down. Get caught in the vortex and let go of her hand. Lose control.*

Over the course of one brutal year a woman loses her soul-mate suddenly and their only child (a young mother herself) slowly.

The woman at the centre of this terrible series of events is Joan Didion. One of the great American essayists and novelists of the past fifty years, her writing is marked by a unique combination of the personal and the universal. Able to pare away the clutter of our culture she is never afraid to draw blood. Even her own...

This material, drawn undiluted from her personal life, is delivered by the actor portraying her alone on stage. She lays her heart and soul bare with the surgical precision for which she is renowned as a writer. In the process of doing this, she realises she has in fact retreated into her characteristic precision, confusing it with scientific objectivity.

When her inevitable subjectivity is grasped Didion sees she has collapsed into Magical Thinking. The type of thinking that believes sheer force of will can somehow make reality behave sensibly, kindly.

She is fallible and if she is fallible... what might happen?

*"The theatrical event of the season - and rightly so."* The Observer

Several days before Christmas 2003, John Gregory Dunne and his wife Joan Didion saw their only daughter Quintana (affectionately known as Q or Q Roo), fall seriously ill and placed on life support. Days later the Dunnes were sitting down to dinner after visiting the hospital when John suffered a massive and fatal coronary. In a second, this close, symbiotic partnership of 40 years was over. She says, "I have no memory of what I meant to have for dinner."

"Life changes fast.

Life changes in the instant.

You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.

The question of self-pity."

These are the first words she wrote after John collapsed and died. I'm a writer – but after that I didn't write anything for a long while,"

She knew he was dead but she "refused to know."

Four weeks later, their daughter pulled through, only to collapse again two months after at L.A. airport, and undergo six hours of brain surgery to relieve a massive hematoma.

*The Year Of Magical Thinking*, based on Didion's powerful book, attempts to make sense of the weeks and months that cut loose any fixed idea (she) ever had about

death, about illness... about marriage and children and memory... about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself.”

“There’s only one key scene: John dies,” says Didion.

Reference: Frances Simmons “Only an Actor,” in <i>Currents</i> , STC’s Subscriber Magazine, Vol.6, No.2, March 2008
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Robyn Nevin as Joan Didion, retells her memoir in *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

Robyn Nevin sits on the wharf at Sydney Theatre Company, a small, upright figure, dressed entirely in white. In her right hand she is holding slim paperback copy of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, the one-woman play by the renowned American writer, Joan Didion. It is the first time Robyn has been back to the Wharf since she stepped down as Artistic Director of STC in December 2007. Today, she is speaking as an actor and, for the first time in a long time, just an actor.

Her new role is as the star of STC’s production of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. The play, which is adapted from the Pulitzer Prize winning book and was previously performed on Broadway by Vanessa Redgrave, sweeps away the clichés and the platitudes the obscure bereavement and chronicles the experience of losing those you love most with heart wrenching candour.

“Grief turns out to be a place that none of us know until we reach it,” Didion wrote in the aftermath of the unexpected death of her husband. The play, which was written after the death of Didion’s daughter, records the acute shock of a double loss. The phrase ‘magical thinking’ captures a surreal emotional landscape where Joan can not give away her husband shoes because he will need them if he returns; where she thinks “as small children think, as if my thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome”.

Unlike Joan Didion, Robyn Nevin has not lost either a husband or a daughter but, nonetheless when she reads the play she feels “a strong sense of identification”. “[Joan] creates an experience for the listener that it is at once personal and simultaneously universal”. The hold of the dead on the hearts and minds of the living is a story that reflects a “deeply human experience which is inevitably going to be common to us all because death is”.

Robyn’s decision to program *The Year of Magical Thinking* as part of STC’s 2008 season was one of her final acts as the Artistic Director of STC before she handed over the reins to Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton. Her emotional connection with the text started when she began reading the book on a long-haul flight. By the time the plane touched down she had finished it and, like the thousands of others who turned the book into an international bestseller, was “totally gripped”. When she heard it was going to be produced as a play she applied for the rights. In 2008, the timing was right.

The timing was also right for Robyn to have her pick of directors. In an intriguing role reversal this will be the first time Cate Blanchett has directed Robyn Nevin. Robyn has no doubt that she is the woman for job. “She knows how to do it and she knows what I need better than any other director I can name... she has all the right kind of intuitive understanding that the piece needs”.



So far, their discussions about the play have consisted of “conversations on the run”; moments on the phone; hurried exchanges on the white couch. “I’m at that very vulnerable stage of entering the [rehearsal] room in two weeks and not knowing anything”. This, she adds, is a typical response.

“You can only analyse a thing like this so far: there are so many elements that go to make up a production: the way it’s lit and supported by sound; the way it’s staged; the relationship that evolves in the rehearsal room. Ultimately it’s me, but what comes out of that rehearsal room is a result of the rehearsal room as much as my personal contribution and years of experience. It’s a mysterious thing – so many elements – all important. It’s going to be very lonely though.”

Performing in a one-woman play will be a new experience for Robyn. “I’ve never done one so it’s a fearsome prospect”. She wonders “what it will be like to be the only face and the only voice. The only thing there is to look at”. Previously she has been “much more inclined to enjoy an ensemble setting in which I can merge and meld and disappear and come forth and listen and contribute as much by listening as speaking...”. The one woman play is “a mystery” to her although, as a theatre goer, she is acutely aware of the pressure on the actor to hold the audience’s attention. “I tend to sit there and after five minutes I think is this it? Because it’s never really enough.”

None of these reservations dented her determination to program *The Year of Magical Thinking*. “I didn’t consider the aspects that might cause me to quake in my small boots”. “I just thought it was a compelling piece of theatre”. In a way, she muses, it’s not a play but something more intimate. “Cate refers to it as “an evening with” that doesn’t do it for me. It’s the retelling or recounting or telling. She’s there to give people her experience, to tell people what it is, what it’s like”.

Robyn sees her role – as the person charged with the “huge responsibility of telling this very private, very personal story” - as very simple: “get it right”. It is challenge which is consuming her. “I carry around the script in the same way I used to carry around the NIDA Prospectus in the last year of school”, she says.

The fact that Robyn now has the time to focus exclusively on preparation for her new role reflects her transition into a new stage of her career. The woman who, in 2006, observed that “[t]he more time you spend applying your mind to the practicalities and demands of running such a big company, the less you feel you can go in [to rehearsal]”, now has, for the first time in a long time, “the great luxury” of thinking about acting and only acting.

The weight of running a company off her shoulders, Robyn embarked on what she describes as “a Didion odyssey”, traveling to New York to stand at the pulpit of the St John the Divine; to walk through the wards at Beth Israel North hospital where Quintana was treated for septic shock; and see the table where Joan’s husband sat down to dinner and died. And, most importantly, she met Joan.

At the first meeting there was an immediate sense of recognition. “She guided me to a chair in her living room with was large and white (which has always been my favourite colour) and I sat in the chair that encompassed my frame perfectly and I immediately recognised a woman of my own scale ...I looked across at her and she was seated in a chair of a different style but equally suited to her frame and I had an inner smile”.

At the second meeting Robyn mentioned the pleasure – the very simple pleasure – of sitting in a chair that suited her frame and they had what Robyn calls “a moment of sharing”. These moments were vital for Robyn who says ‘it was wonderful spending time with her and in ways that I can’t describe and analyse. It will help, ultimately, [in the performance]’.

Pushed, she suggests that as an actor she has to understand her purpose for being on stage. “Because I’m representing her and telling her story I wanted that closer understanding”. She was also keen to form her own view about a woman who, despite the tragedies that life has dealt her, sometimes attracts little sympathy. “[I had heard] that she was cold, aloof and lived a very unconnected life but I don’t agree with any of those views”.

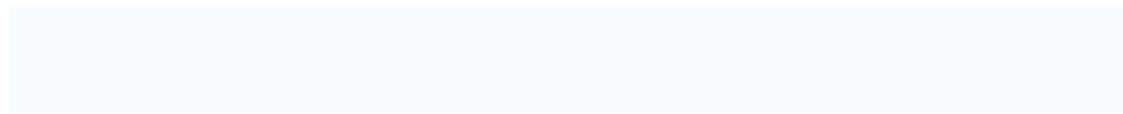
“I’ve been labelled with the same kind of words so she I had a moment of sharing, a moment of understanding about that”. She looks out across Sydney Harbour. “I think aloof was the word that remained with her as the most frequent adjective used against her” she says in a way that suggests that she too is baffled by being so consistently misrepresented.

Robyn suggests these misconceptions arise from misplaced expectations. “[Joan] has a wonderful sense of humour but she has quite a severe appearance and a penetrating gaze. She says very little, [but] she says as much as she needs to. She doesn’t decorate or embellish. She’s an observer; that’s her job and I am too and I recognise that in her and don’t expect what other people expect”.

“I think there’s always an expectation on the part of journalists ...that the subject will be forthcoming and warm and fabulous and chatty. She raises her eyebrows. “And why?”

“She’s a writer and the works speak for her”. This is the subtext that lies behind everything Robyn says and does not say in this interview. She says one of the challenges of the play is discovering “the emotional peaks” but she does not want to say where she thinks these peaks may be. “I won’t know until I get on the floor,” she says. Or to paraphrase her own words, she’s an actor now and the play will speak for her.

Frances Simmons



**Before seeing the production, explore these questions:**

### **5 Questions for students who haven't read the play**

1 Joan Didion reads from one of her books about grief on page 29:

“Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it. We know that someone close to us could die. We might expect to feel shock. We do not expect this shock to be obliterative, dislocating to both body and mind. We might expect to be prostrate, inconsolable, crazy with loss. We do not expect to be literally crazy – cool customers who believe that their husband is about to return and need his shoes. Nor can we know ahead of the fact – and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is – the unending absence that follows, the void, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.”

**How does this quote link to your understanding of grief?**

2. **Monologues** - Select a monologue or long speech from a play and present it to your Drama class. Work in pairs and direct each other.

Reference: Stefan Rudnicki, *The Actor's Book of Monologues for Women*, Penguin Books London 1991

When **selecting a monologue** for Drama class work or audition purposes, it is important to look at a range of material of characters of different ages, backgrounds and sensibilities.

p.5 “The only way to know whether a piece is suitable for you is to experience it, so I recommend read out loud as many selections as seem interesting. When the words of someone's story are spoken, an entire world is set in motion, with the actor at the centre of it, assuming the author's place. Even a first rough reading will provide a good indication of whether it is a world you wish to inhabit for any length of time.

It is by actually speaking the words of others, by sharing, however momentarily, another person's perspective, that real understanding, true collaboration and genuine freedom are achieved. Freedom of speech itself has two sides: the license to express oneself and the opportunity to hear another side.”

Rehearsing a monologue: Reference: Stefan Rudnicki, op cit., pp.6-9

Guidelines in preparing a monologue for presentation:

\* First, commit to a little basic research... Look up unfamiliar words or names or places. It is extremely poor form to try to get by without knowing what you are talking about; you have only to mispronounce a crucial word and the game is up.... If the selection is autobiographical (like *The Year of Magical Thinking*) or in some other way expressive of a real person's thoughts and actions, the actor has a responsibility to the man or woman he/she is portraying to discover as much as possible about him/her.

- Next, determine the **structure** of your chosen piece. Even when the selection is not strictly narrative, there is a story being told, and a story is best told with **a beginning, a middle and an end**. So, wherever possible, begin organizing

your piece in terms of a three-part structure. To determine an appropriate three-part structural division, look for changes in subject matter, significant shifts in focus from one audience to another, and whatever clues (the composer) may have provided by the use, or absence, of verse stanzas, prose paragraphs or punctuation.

Once the three larger divisions are set, divide each of these into its own beginning, middle and end, until you have settled on the smallest comfortable dramatic unit, or 'beat' – **assign beats (changes of intention in the character's motivation**, as described in the Stanislavsky System in the great Russian acting teacher's text, *An Actor Prepares*). Beats are usually expressed as verbs in the infinitive form with adjustments as adverbs. Annotate your monologue script with these.

Try also to discover what fundamental change occurs over the course of the monologue as a whole; time has passed in the reading and something *must* be different. Too many actors seem to treat monologues as if they were single, complete statements, placing a premium on consistency at the expense of the sort of variety that can really make a speech interesting.

- Another issue is **length**. The structuring process suggested above will facilitate intelligent and intelligible editing.

When the initial structuring is completed, a more detailed study of the **language** is called for, and these guidelines for working on classical texts are just as effective when working with modern material. Look for the patterns and for the exceptions to those patterns. Also look for repetitions of sounds, words and phrases (alliteration, or assonance.) Does the punctuation suggest easy flow or a stop-and-go rhythm? Is the language common or refined? Is it grounded in the senses, in things you can touch, see and hear, or is it adrift in a sea of images?

- \* **Power, focus and scale** are next... You must make some decisions about what surrounds you and about the size of the world you inhabit. In order to create a complete environment, you must **determine a past and a future as well as a present**. Simply put, the past, which is always implied if not actually spoken of, is behind you. It is the place you have come from, your history, your reason for coming to *this* place, your motivation, if you will. Consequently it serves as your source of power.

The future is, of course, ahead of you. It is the world you hope to affect with your actions. Your goal is out there, your objective, your audience. Between the two is *this moment*, the plane of the present, clearly defined. On either side of you, in this present plane, are your helpers – other actors perhaps, and the props, real or imaginary – that you require to fill this moment. Borrowing a term common to architecture, computer science and other contemporary disciplines, is this entire field made up of past, present and future, a 'matrix' or grid, the present plane of which can now be populated with people and objects which are necessary to the world of the particular monologue you are working on. These people and objects placed in the matrix, become your **focus points** and give that world its unique character and tone.

**Scale** derives from the size of the world you must create given the future – your goal, your audience – and the past, your power source.

**To whom are you speaking? How large is your audience? Are there separate factions?** This audience need not be physically present; it may be created instead by the importance or ultimate impact of the material spoken. A declaration of war made in front of a microphone in a studio may be a matter of life and death to millions, and this importance is never lost on the speaker, no matter how quietly he speaks, so the words gain weight and are delivered more slowly, very much as if he were addressing a present crowd.

**For whom are you speaking?** .... In theatre there is no such thing as a privately motivated action. Somewhere outside the physical being of the actor lies the source of each action. Is that power source a single incident or person in the past? Rarely. For instance, the scale of a great deal of women's (monologue) material derives precisely from the accumulated weight, and so the power, of both natural and historical cycles, of generations past, of all men and women.

In presenting your monologue, take the advice of lawyer Atticus Finch to his young daughter, Jean Louise (nicknamed Scout), after her involvement in a school yard fracas, in Harper Lee's 60's masterpiece, ***To Kill a Mockingbird***: "*If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view - ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.*" (p.33, Chapter 3 of the Mandarin paperback edition.)

Present your character in journal and monologue modes."

3. What would you include in the program for a play about grief? (From Robyn Nevin's diary "From Page to Stage: Journey to Joan" in *The Australian Magazine* in ***The Weekend Australian***, 23 February 2008: "We talk about the 'craziness' which grief pushed her (Joan Didion) into, and her need to 'tell the truth' of her experience,.... A story of life and love and death and letting go.")

4. A portrait of a young Robyn Nevin features on the poster and print advertisement for ***The Year of Magical Thinking***. Clip this ad from the Amusement Section of ***The Sydney Morning Herald***. What can you tell about the play from this STC poster image of the play? What does this ad tell you about the marketing strategy for this production? What alternative images would you choose to represent the play?

5. The book of ***The Year of Magical Thinking*** has been described thus: "American author and essayist Joan Didion's memoir was a harrowing but compelling record of a devastating time. As her daughter lay unconscious in hospital, Didion's husband died of a massive heart attack just days before their 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. The writer takes refuge in the belief that force of will can shape an unruly universe." Have you read other texts dealing with death and grief?

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. **Playbuild** around the themes of: (Improvise around these themes):

- **grief – process and rituals** (Joan gives away John's clothes but not his shoes)/**bereavement – men's and women's grief – the differences; the child's grief** – e.g. Quintana is in hospital when her father dies and Joan wants her hospital television disconnected so she doesn't find out through the media.
- **death and dying and loss**
- **family** – “Many people have pointed out that John and Quintana and I were “unusually dependent” on one another.”
- **marriage** – There is nothing I do not discuss with John. I do not always think he is right nor does he always think I am right but we are each the person the other trusts. There is no separation between our interests and investments in any given situation. Many people assume that we must be competitive, that our private life must be a minefield of professional envies and resentments. This is so far from the case that the general insistence on it has come to suggest certain lacunae (hiatus, gaps or blanks) in the popular understanding of marriage.”
- **Vortex of time** – p.18: I need to avoid noticing anything that might lead me back into the past. Going back has trick currents, unrevealed eddies, you can be skimming along on what looks like clear water and suddenly go under. Get sucked down. Get caught in the vortex...Lose control.”
- **Memory**
- **Truth** – p.28 “Is a lie only a story that the hearer disbelieves?”
- **Denial** – “There's a certain kind of personality – my own, maybe yours – that sets great store on seeing it straight. For certain of us this is a big ego point. You might think you'll see it straight but you won't. You'll be standing in some ER and at one level you'll have a pretty clear idea of whatever it was that just happened but you'll see it as a kind of first draft.”
- **Identity** – “On most surface levels I seem rational.” “To myself I am invisible, incorporeal. (immaterial)”

2. What does the title ***The Year of Magical Thinking*** tell you about the play? What is its effect as a metaphor? (p.8: “Of course I knew he was dead..... Yet I was in no way prepared to accept this news as final: there was a level on which I believed that whatever had happened remained open to revision. That was why I needed to be alone. I needed to be alone so that he could come back. That was the beginning of my **year of magical thinking.**”

3. What expectations do you have for Joan Didion's play in production now you have read scenes from the play? What do you think of the play's opening speech: “This happened on December 30, 2003. That may seem a while ago but it won't when it happens to you.” Do you agree with the perception of Didion as “a cool customer” in the play?

4. Comment on Didion's use of direct address to the audience in *The Year of Magical Thinking* – e.g. Then there was Xigris, a drug for septic shock. Said to improve the survival rate from 56 to 69 percent. You might want to file that. For when you're

standing by your child's ICU bed and the vanc (medication) isn't working." P.23 "If I'm sane, what happened to me could happen to you. You don't want to hear what I have to tell you. You want me to give you a good prognosis. I can't. So it's safer to think I'm crazy. Fine. It doesn't matter to me. I was crazy for a while but I'm not now." She tells us in a prophetic way that we must all someday face death, dying and grief.

5. Outline in detail what you perceive the essential preparation for Robyn Nevin in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* in her pre-rehearsal and rehearsal period.

Stanislavsky "life off-stage" exercise. The great Russian acting theoretician, Constantin Stanislavsky, says in his manual *An Actor Prepares*, the actor needs to find the nucleus of the role based on the character's reality both on and off-stage. Hence the actor needs to explore the "life off-stage" of the character. Explore the times of writer Joan Didion yourself.

Reference: Robyn Nevin, "From Page to Stage: Journey to Joan" in *The Australian Magazine* in *The Weekend Australian*, 23 February 2008: Robyn was fortunate to have been able to spend time with her partner Nicholas Hammond in all of the locales in Malibu etc that Didion mentions in her memoirs.

"We drive up the Pacific Coast Highway to Malibu, the place of such happy memories where she and John (Gregory Dunne) lived with Quintana. I sit on the beach and gaze at the hills, the sea, the trees which must have been overlooking their lives. Now when I say to the audience: 'In Malibu we built fires even in summer because the fog came in,' I will have images on call. I visit the UCLA bookshop where Joan bought a reference book to read up on Quintana's illnesses. I visit the school Quintana attended. I visit the Rite Aid drugstore on Canon Drive Didion avoided so as to avoid the memories it brought forth. I drive the boulevards and suburbs she knew."

Nevin also visited Didion's apartment in New York: "Her apartment is filled with photos of her family. It is a comfortable and welcoming world she has created."

**After seeing the production, explore these questions:**

1. One critic has said, “The substance is in the silences in *“The Year of Magical Thinking.”*”

How does the director use silence or pauses in *The Year of Magical Thinking*?

2. What expectations did you have before seeing this production? What changed for you after seeing it? Some responders find the play “arresting yet ultimately frustrating.” How did the following tools of theatre impact on your response to Joan Didion?

- \* dialogue
- \* vocal tone
- \* costume
- \* stage directions
- \* movement/gesture
- \* pauses
- \* placement on stage

3. Joan Didion says at the start of her play adaptation, “This happened on Dec. 30, 2003. That may seem a while ago but it won’t when it happens to you. And it will happen to you.” However, these words are not said as direct address to the reader of her printed memoirs. What effect do you think these words will have on an audience?

4. Joan Didion says near the end of her book and play, “We all know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a time when we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead. For once in your life just let it go. Let them become the photograph on the table. Let them become the name on the trust accounts. Let go of them in the water. Knowing this does not make it any easier to let go of them in the water.” How does the playwright make such ideas palatable for the audience in *The Year of Magical Thinking*?

5. Design Comment on the line, colour and texture of Alice Babidge’s set: a field of chairs – in New York and Malibu. How does the actual theatre space impact on your response to the play?

6. Discuss various aspects of Joan Didion’s character: e.g. her need to control – “I do not distrust those in charge here, but I do feel compelled to manage them.” Didion quotes her husband John Gregory Dunne, when they fought, “Must you always have the last word? Must you always be right? For once in your life just let it go.” Robyn Nevin has described Didion as “fragile yet formidable.” How can you tell the play is about a writer?

7. Reference: Sacha Molitorisz, “Too close for comfort” in Spectrum in The Sydney Morning Herald, 1-2 March 2008 – about memoirs – “It is easy to be suspicious of memoirs; too often they’re indulgent and poorly written. It’s not that people’s lives are insufficiently interesting – just about everyone’s life has enough oddity and drama for a memoir – but few people have the writing skills and good judgment to tell their story in a manner that’s coherent, compelling and concise. What’s more, a memoir should have wisdom to impart.”

**Does *The Year of Magical Thinking* succeed in fulfilling this intention? :**

8. How does lighting contribute to the mood of the scenes? What effect do these lighting states achieve? List some that were used.

**How does music and other sound design contribute to the production?**



## **Bibliography**

ORIGINAL TEXT: *The Year of Magical Thinking* – Fourth Estate London 2006 - , with many of its lines lifted directly from Didion's memoir, an account of the year that followed the death of her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne. The stage version emphasises the everywoman aspect of Joan Didion's personal anatomy of grief. Like the book, the play is shaped by the harrowing stories of the death in late 2003 of Dunne, and of the long, baffling illness of their daughter, Quintana, who died in the summer of 2005. (Her death, at 39, which occurred after Joan had completed her memoir, forms a new final episode in the play.”

There are no stage directions in the play text.