

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.



ONLY AN ACTOR

ROBYN NEVIN AND THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING

Her new role performing in 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 that acute shock of a double loss. The phrase 'magical thinking' captures a surreal emotional landscape where Joan can not give away her husband's 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 at STC. "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."