

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 it to 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", travelling 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, her daughter, 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 which 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 and 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

THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING  
PLAYS FROM 25 MARCH AT WHARF 1.  
FOR BOOKINGS PHONE (02) 9250 1777 OR  
[SYDNEYTHEATRE.COM.AU/MAGICAL](http://SYDNEYTHEATRE.COM.AU/MAGICAL)

ASSOCIATE SPONSOR

TIFFANY & Co.

'SHE GUIDED  
ME TO A CHAIR IN HER  
LIVING ROOM WHICH WAS  
LARGE AND WHITE...I SAT IN  
THE CHAIR THAT ENCOMPASSED  
MY FRAME PERFECTLY AND  
I IMMEDIATELY  
RECOGNISED A  
WOMAN OF MY OWN  
SCALE...I HAD AN  
INNER SMILE.'

ROBYN NEVIN