

When life changes in an instant

Robyn Nevin makes a magical return to the stage in Joan Didion's play about unfathomable sorrow and the harrowing landscape of grief, Lynne Minion

In an otherwise fortunate life, one day everything was horribly altered. For American author Joan Didion, tragedy arrived at the dinner table one evening and her grief became the basis of a play about a time she wishes was magically different.

The Year of Magical Thinking opens with domestic ordinariness. They talk about what's for tea. He is in his study. She gets him a drink. She's making a salad. The fireplace is lit. He tells her something, she can't remember what.

The doings of a couple in their everyday moments might usually be viewed with little interest, but they are compelling here because something dreadful, we know, is about to occur.

As Joan Didion's play says: "Life changes fast. Life changes in an instant. You sit down for dinner and life as you know it ends."

For her, life as she knew it ended the night her husband died of a heart attack.

Performed on Broadway by Vanessa Redgrave during a lauded 24-week run, this one-woman show based on true life events is now a Sydney Theatre Company production directed by Cate Blanchett, with acclaimed Australian actor Robyn Nevin onstage. Currently on tour, it will run at the Canberra Theatre Playhouse from July 2-5.

In it Didion describes navigating her way through the grieving process, through its evasions, denials and insanities, with an ironic candour.

She writes of returning home to the apartment with the dinner table in it, with the detritus of her husband's death strewn on the floor: "When Lynn arrives we do not sit in the part of the living room where the blood and the syringes and the EKG electrodes are still on the floor."

In the months that follow she finds that she is required to go through certain rituals, like giving away his clothes.

But she can't pack up his shoes because she is indulging in "magical thinking".

It's a phrase used in anthropology to explain the behaviour of primitive cultures: "If we sacrifice the virgin - the rain will come back." For Didion, though, the phrase is applied to her circumstances: "If I keep his shoes -"

As a successful and intelligent woman, she knows logically that John Gregory Dunne, her



husband of almost 40 years, has died, but she simply can't help but wait for him to come back. "I continue to wait. I continue to play along. I mention this to no one. For one thing no one wants to hear it. They want to believe that I am 'being strong'."

She does require remarkable resilience too, because at the time of Dunne's death their newly married daughter, Quintana, is in hospital in an induced coma from what began as pneumonia and has developed into septic shock.

She has always told her only child that she would keep her safe - "You're safe, I'm here. I say it every time I walk into the ICU. I have been saying it to her all her life."

She has always held onto her little girl, she writes, to stop the water from taking her.

So as she tends to Quintana's rehabilitations and relapses, Didion's mind plays intermingled memories of her daughter's childhood and those

of the man she had married in a short white silk dress and her sunglasses in 1964.

Robyn Nevin says Didion has captured the unique character of grief.

"The play in a way gives permission for people to grieve as they will. Grief is a very individual experience. There's no proper or appropriate or conventional way to grieve and there's no time limit or set time at which you should be grieving."

During each performance Nevin, 66, inhabits the role of a woman who is suffering unfathomable sorrow, which makes it a harrowing role, but not one without its moments of light within the narrative shade.

"I travel through a landscape of grief but it's not all about grief... she's very objective this writer, so she writes with a very clear sense of the absurdity of her behaviour. So there's a lot of irony in it and that's a relief. You couldn't just do



American writer Joan Didion; top, Robyn Nevin, centre, with Cate Blanchett and her husband Andrew Upton at a Sydney Theatre Company event; and Nevin on stage in a scene from Didion's play *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

something that was in an indulgent or sentimental way depicting grief."

It's Nevin first role since stepping down as artistic director of the Sydney Theatre Company after an eight-year reign, during which she oversaw the 2004 opening of the new Sydney Theatre at Walsh Bay in 2004 and formed a permanent ensemble, the Actors Company.

The formidable Nevin, who is a powerful figure in Australian theatre, juggled multiple roles for all those years, as artistic director, actor and the director of productions such as Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, starring Cate Blanchett, which garnered rave reviews in Australia but was said by *The New York Times* critic Charles Isherwood to "merrily desecrate" the classic play when it was exported to New York.

The theatre matriarch concedes that despite her reputation for prodigious energy, the workload was exhausting. "I look at that now and think,

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