



# Writer's pain behind every line

The memoir of a family drama has been translated for the Perth stage, writes **Mark Naglazas**

**I**n December 2003, American writers Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne returned to their Manhattan apartment after visiting their daughter Quintana in hospital.

Weeks earlier, Quintana — who'd recently married — had succumbed to septic shock from pneumonia and been put into an induced coma.

While the couple were talking over the day's events, as this legendarily inseparable pair had done almost every day for five decades, Dunne slumped into his chair with one hand raised, dying so suddenly that for a moment his wife took the event for a bad joke.

*Life changes fast.*

*Life changes in an instant.*

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

*The question of self pity.*

Thus begins Didion's memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in which this most famously cool-headed and precise of writers set out to document every wrenching detail of her *annus horribilis*, in which she lost her husband and professional partner and endured her daughter's struggle for life.

The book became an instant bestseller in 2005, a chronicle of grieving and recovery by one of America's consummate prose stylists who set out to understand what was happening to her and, literally, write herself back into functioning existence.

"We write stories in order to live," is one of Didion's most oft-repeated quotes, and every page of *Magical Thinking* resonates with her struggle to pin down and dissect what was happening and what she was thinking.

Writing things down, says Didion, is the only way she grasps things. "I don't really get things very intuitively," she told *The Guardian*. "I mean, I don't really understand things. The only way I really get it is by writing it down."

So exacting and distanced is Didion's approach that *The Year of Magical Thinking* reads more like the journal of a scientist than a reporter, essayist and novelist, beginning with the moment

she began ("May 20, 2004, 11pm") and the name of the Microsoft Word document ("Notes on change.doc").

The Didion method is most vividly realised in her journalistic pieces and essays such as *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, a zeitgeist-defining examination of the 1960s in which she channelled her own neuroses into every encounter with the counter-culture, *The White Album* and *Political Fictions*.

While Didion found a whole new audience with *Magical Thinking* — the memoir has become a touchstone in discussions about death and dying and the grieving process along with Helen Garner's *The Spare Room* — it's not promising material for dramatisation.

Yet Didion, with the aid of the great British playwright David Hare, managed to transform *Magical Thinking* into one of the theatrical events of the 2006 Broadway season, with Vanessa Redgrave playing the writer in the one-woman show.

It is now being staged by Black Swan for this year's Perth International Arts Festival, with Kate Cherry directing her first work for the company since taking the reins from Tom Gutteridge, and featuring Helen Morse as Didion.

It was not Didion but the canny movie and theatre producer Scott Rudin who saw the stage potential of *Magical Thinking*. He compared it to that classic of war-time journalism *Dispatches*, likening Didion's "reporting from the frontlines of heartache" to Michael Herr's graphic reports from the battlefields of Vietnam.

"(She's) the first journalist to get out of the hot zone," the ebullient showman says with typical rhetorical flourish.

Didion, however, did not share Rudin's passion to turn *Magical Thinking* into a play, but it was not because it meant re-opening an agonising chapter in her life.

It wasn't even the death of Quintana, not long after the publication of *Magical Thinking*, which adds poignancy to every page in which she deals with her 39-year-old daughter's

illness.

It was simply that she had never written a play, despite her long career as a screenwriter (she and Dunne had co-written such films as *The Panic in Needle Park*, the Barbra Streisand-Kris Kristofferson *A Star Is Born* and the Robert Redford-Michelle Pfeiffer vehicle, *Up Close and Personal*).

"Everything had changed," Didion told the *Los Angeles Times*. "(Rudin's offer) came a few months after Quintana had died . . . and I really didn't know what I was going to do."

Didion then realised that tackling *Magical Thinking* might be just the thing "to try something I had never done before, and it might be entirely absorbing and teach me something".

Her reputation meant that she could attract the best teacher in the world, British playwright David Hare, who would go on to direct the adaptation with Redgrave as the grieving writer.

Under Hare, Didion reconceived the work, so much so she ceased to regard it as an adaptation. "I think of it as something I sat down and wrote — the same way I wrote the book. You just start from a different place," she says.

That place is a long way from the Didion of the book, who revisits the experience and sifts through medical, psychological and even etiquette literature for a new understanding of life without a loved one.

The person on stage, on the other hand, isn't always together. "You've got a narrator who is telling you something that sometimes you believe, and sometimes you don't," Didion says.

"In the book, I'm trying to tell you that I'm trying to figure it out. I'm not evading the subject. The character on stage is, a lot of the time, trying to avoid telling you what she's there to tell you."

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**The Year of Magical Thinking is at the Dolphin Theatre from February 11 to February 25 (previews begin this Saturday). Bookings through BOCS.**



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Broken family line: Quintana, left, and her literary parents at home in 1976.



Collaborators: Joan Didion with a portrait of husband John Gregory Dunne.