



A flawless journey of aching loss

THEATRE

The Year of Magical Thinking

By Joan Didion. Black Swan Theatre Company. Dolphin Theatre, University of WA. Tickets: \$48. Bookings: (08) 9484 1133. Until February 21.

It doesn't take too many death knocks before a journalist realises the bereaved person who opens the door is half-mad with grief.

Esteemed American writer Joan Didion slipped into this transient madness that, for the most part, is an essential step on the road back to sanity. Didion lost her husband and her only daughter in close succession, and chronicled her encounter with life's vast indifference and the cruelty of sudden death.

Few in the opening night audience could have missed the poignancy of such themes at a time when grief is part of the national conversation. But that was not

why this show is so deeply affecting, and so nearly perfect in its execution.

Helen Morse has the fragile, harrowed intensity of Didion. Without moving from her chair for the entire 100 minutes, she commands every scintilla of attention. Under the direction of Kate Cherry (making an impressive debut as Black Swan's new artistic director), Morse makes every small gesture meaningful.

In a beautifully realised but subtle play on grief's isolating nature, set and costume designer Christine Smith has put Morse on an island surrounded by water. Cellist Iain Grandage accompanies Morse from the shadows with tensely plucked strings or gentle snatches of melody that echo happier memories.

Morse's performance is remarkable for its unfaltering delivery of Didion's prose, but also for the way she inhabits the

character of this feisty, highly observant individual. No doubt Matt Scott's exquisite lighting performs the visual magic, but you'd swear that Morse physically changes from the Malibu mother of a young daughter to haggard New York widow before your eyes.

Didion is such a truthful observer of her own reluctance to face death, to let go and give in to cosmic fate, that you find yourself nodding in recognition at her every acute, often witty observation.

Despite Didion's descent into hell, the evening is oddly uplifting. Didion comes to the view that tectonic upheavals are as much part of one's inner landscape as the earth's geology. Impermanence, she says, "is now and ever shall be".

Victoria Laurie