

# THE YEAR OF MAGICAL TRUKKING BY JOAN DIDION

Directed by Charles Newell

January 14 - February 14, 2010

at Court Theatre

-STUDY GUIDE-

# ABOUT THE PLAY

# CHARACTERS

Joan Didion, American author, essayist and journalist.

# STORY

The Year of Magical Thinking is an adaptation of Joan Didion's award-winning, bestselling memoir by the same name (which Michiko Kakutani of The New York Times called "an indelible portrait of loss and grief... a haunting portrait of a four-decade-long marriage). It tells the true story of the year in which Didion unexpectedly lost both her husband, John Gregory Dunne, and daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne, and includes information (mostly related to Quintana's death) not discussed in the original memoire. The play is performed by one actress.

The first theatrical production of *The Year of Magical Thinking* opened at the Booth Theatre on March 29, 2007, starring Vanessa Redgrave and directed by David Hare.



Mary Beth Fisher as Joan Didion in Court Theatre's production of *The Year of Magical Thinking* 

#### THE ONE-PERSON SHOW

The term "one-man show" originated primarily in reference to comedians who stood on stage alone and entertained audiences for an extended period of time. While a one-person show may be the musings of a comedian on a theme, the form also includes "solo performances," which are dramatic works performed by one person, though not necessarily by someone with a background in comedy. In the preface to *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century*, editor Jo Bonney explains that "at the most basic level, despite their limitless backgrounds and performance styles, all solo performers are storytellers." This assumption is based on her assertion that a number of solo shows have a storyline or a plot.

Bonney also suggests that a distinctive trait of solo performance is the lack of a "fourth wall" separating the performer from the audience. She states that a "solo show expects and demands the active involvement of the people in the audience". While this is often the case, as in the shows of performers coming directly from the stand-up comedy tradition, it is not a requirement.

As one-person shows began in the comedy realm, prominent solo performers include comedians Lily Tomlin, Andy Kaufman, Eric Bogosian, Whoopi Goldberg, John Leguizamo, and Lenny Bruce. Several performers have presented solo shows in tribute to famous personalities, including Julie Harris in *The Belle of Amherst* (a biography of Emily Dickenson); Tovah Feldshuh as Golda Meir in *Golda's Balcony*; and Ed Metzger as Ernest Hemingway in *Hemingway*, *On The Edge*.

One-person shows (such as *The Year of Magical Thinking*) may be personal, autobiographical creations like the intensely confessional but comedic work of Spaulding Gray or the semi-autobiographical *A Bronx Tale* by Chaz Palminteri. Other types of one-person shows may center on a certain theme, such as pop culture in Pat Hazel's *The Wonderbread Years*; the history of the New York City transit system in Mike Daisey's *Invincible Summer*; or rebelling against 'the system' in Patrick Combs' *Man 1*, *Bank 0*. Sometimes, however, solo shows are simply traditional plays written by playwrights for a cast of one, such as *I Am My Own Wife* by Doug Wright.

Other art forms also find representation in the solo performance genre; poetry pervades the work of Dael Orlandersmith, sleight-of-hand mastery informs Ricky Jay's self-titled *Ricky Jay and His 52 Assistants*, and magical and psychic performance skills are part of Neil Tobin's *Supernatural Chicago*.

## THE "FOURTH WALL"

In theatre, the "fourth wall" refers to the imaginary wall at the front of the stage in a proscenium theatre through which the audience sees into the world of the play. The term also applies to the boundary between any fictional setting and its audience. When this boundary is "broken" (for example, by an actor speaking to the audience directly through the camera in a television program or film), it is called "breaking the fourth wall."

The term was made famous in the nineteenth century with the advent of theatrical realism. The critic Vincent Canby described it in 1987 as "that invisible screen that forever separates the audience from the stage."

The term "fourth wall" stems from the absence of a fourth wall on a three-walled set where the audience is viewing the production. The audience is supposed to assume there is a "fourth wall" present, even though does not physically exist.

The term "fourth wall" has also been adapted to refer to the boundary between the fiction and the audience. "Fourth wall" is part of the suspension of disbelief between a fictional work and an audience. The audience accepts the presence of the fourth wall without giving it any direct thought, allowing them to enjoy the fiction as if they were observing real events, but without interaction with or acknowledgment from any of the characters on stage. The presence of a fourth wall is an established convention of fiction and drama, this has led some artists to draw direct attention to it for dramatic or comedic effect, thus "breaking the fourth wall" and addressing the audience directly.

#### 'MAGICAL THINKING'

By Matthew Hutson, excerpted from Psychology Today, March 01, 2008

Years after his death, John Lennon went on tour. He visited, among other locations, Oklahoma City, Waco, New Orleans, and Virginia Tech, spreading a message of peace and love at the sites of tragic events. You may not have recognized him, though, covered in scars and cigarette burns. But to hear him, there would have been no mistaking his presence.

On this journey, Lennon assumed the form of a piano, specifically the one on which he composed Imagine. "It gives off his spirit, and what he believed in, and what he preached for many years," says Caroline True, the tour director and a colleague of the Steinway's current owner, singer George Michael. Free of velvet ropes, it could be touched or played by anyone. According to Libra LaGrone, whose home was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, "It was like sleeping in your grandpa's sweatshirt at night. Familiar, beautiful, and personal."

"I never went anywhere saying this is a magic piano and it's going to cure your ills," True says. But she consistently saw even the most skeptical hearts warm to the experience—even in Virginia, where the piano landed just a month after the massacre. "I had no idea an inanimate object could give people so much."

Maybe you're not a Beatles fan. Maybe you even hate peace and love. But you are wired to find meaning in the world, a predisposition that leaves you with less control over your beliefs than you may think. Even if you're a hard-core atheist who walks under ladders and pronounces "new age" like "sewage," you believe in magic.

Magical thinking springs up everywhere. Some irrational beliefs (Santa Claus?) are passed on to us. But others we find on our own. Survival requires recognizing patterns—night follows day, berries that color will make you ill. And because missing the obvious often hurts more than seeing the imaginary, our skills at inferring connections are overtuned. No one told Wade Boggs that eating chicken before every single game would help his batting average; he decided that on his own, and no one can argue with his success. We look for patterns because we hate surprises and because we love being in control.

Emotional stress and events of personal significance push us strongly toward magical meaning-making. Lancaster University psychologist Eugene Subbotsky relates an exemplary tale. "I was in Moscow walking with my little son down a long empty block," he recalls. Suddenly a parked car started moving on its own, then swerved toward them, and finally struck an iron gate just centimeters away. "We escaped death very narrowly, and I keep thinking magically about this episode. Although I'm a rational man, I'm a scientist, I'm studying this phenomenon, there are some events in your life that you cannot explain rationally. Under certain circumstances I really feel like someone or something is guiding my life and helping me." (Personally I would have felt like something was trying to kill me and needed to work on its aim.)

"There are many layers of belief," psychologist Carol Nemeroff says. "And the answer for many people, especially with regard to magic, is, 'Most of me doesn't believe but some of me does.'" People will often acknowledge their gut reaction and say it makes no sense to act on

it—but do it anyway. Other times, they'll incorporate superstition into their worldview alongside other explanations. "For example," says Susan Gelman, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, "God puts you in the path of an HIV-positive lover, but biology causes you to contract the virus from his semen."

Often we don't even register our wacky beliefs. Seeing causality in coincidence can happen even before we have a chance to think about it; the misfiring is sometimes perceptual rather than rational. "Consider what happens when you honk your horn, and just at that moment a streetlight goes out," observes Brian Scholl, director of Yale's Perception and Cognition Laboratory. "You may never for a moment believe that your honk caused the light to go out, but you will irresistibly perceive that causal relation. The fact remains that our visual systems refuse to believe in coincidences." Our overeager eyes, in effect, lay the groundwork for more detailed superstitious ideation. And it turns out that no matter how rational people consider themselves, if they place a high value on hunches they are hard-pressed to hit a baby's photo on a dartboard. On some level they're equating image with reality. Even our aim falls prey to intuition.

#### 1. Anything can be sacred.

To some, John Lennon's piano is sacred. Most married people consider their wedding rings sacred. Kids with no notion of sanctity will bust a lung wailing over their lost blanky. Personal investment in inanimate objects might delicately be called sentimentality, but what else is it if not magical thinking? There's some invisible meaning attached to these things: an essence. A wedding ring or a childhood blanket could be replaced by identical or near-identical ones, but those impostors just wouldn't be the same.

What makes something sacred is not its material makeup but its unique history. And whatever causes us to value essence over appearance becomes apparent at an early age. Psychologists Bruce Hood at Bristol University and Paul Bloom at Yale convinced kids ages 3 to 6 that they'd constructed a "copying machine." The kids were fine taking home a copy of a piece of precious metal produced by the machine, but not so with a clone of one of Queen Elizabeth II's spoons—they wanted the original.

In many cases the value of an object comes from who owned it or used it or touched it, an example of "magical contagion." In one study, 80 percent of college students said there was at least a 10 percent chance that donning one of Mr. Rogers' sweaters, even without knowing it was his, would endow wearers with some of his "essence"—improve their mood and make them friendlier. Gloria Steinem once related a tale from before she was famous. Another girl had seen her touch members of the Beatles. In turn, the girl asked Steinem for her autograph.

Paul Rozin at the University of Pennsylvania and Nemeroff contend that magical contagion may emerge from our evolved fear of germs, which, like essences, are invisible, easily transmissible, and have far-reaching consequences. Well before humans had any concept of germ theory, we quarantined the ill and avoided touching dead bodies. The deep intuition that moral or psychological qualities can pass between people, or that an object carries its history with it, could just be an extension of the adaptive tendency to pay close attention to the pathways of illness.

But that doesn't mean we're good at evaluating sources of contagion. Nemeroff found that people draw the germs of their lovers as less scary-looking than those of enemies, and they say those germs would make them less ill. She also found that undergrads base condom usage on how emotionally safe they feel with a partner more than on objective risk factors for catching STDs.

#### 2. Anything can be cursed.

Essences are not always good. In fact, people show stronger reactions to negative taint than to positive. Mother Teresa cannot fully neutralize the evil in a sweater worn by Hitler, a fact that fits the germ theory of moral contagion: A drop of sewage does more to a bucket of clean water than a drop of clean water does to a bucket of sewage. Traditional cleaning can't erase bad vibes either. Studies by Rozin and colleagues show that people have a strong aversion to wearing laundered clothes that have been worn by a murderer or even by someone who's lost a leg in an accident.

Magical contagion can also flow in reverse. Many people wouldn't want an AIDS patient taking over a hospital bed that they had just left, and about a third of undergrads would feel uncomfortable if an enemy possessed their used hairbrush. "This rests on the assumption that there is no separation of space and time," Nemeroff says. "The hairbrush and I were in contact, we merged. At that mystical level where all is one, acting on it is acting on me."

#### 3. Mind rules over matter.

Wishing is probably the most ubiquitous kind of magical spell around, the unreasonable expectation that your thoughts have force and energy to act on the world. Who has not resisted certain thoughts for fear of jinxing oneself? Made a wish while blowing out birthday candles? Tried to push a field goal fair mid-flight using nothing but hope and concentration?

Emily Pronin and colleagues at Princeton and Harvard convinced undergrads in a study that they had put voodoo curses on fellow subjects. While targeting their thoughts on the other students, hexers pushed pins into voodoo dolls and the "victims" feigned headaches. Some victims had been instructed to behave like jackasses during the study (the "Stupid People Shouldn't Breed" T-shirt was a nice touch), eliciting ill will from pin pushers. Those who dealt with the jerks felt much more responsible for the headaches than the control group did. If you think it, and it happens, then you did it, right? Pronin describes the results as a particular form of seeing causality in coincidence, where the "cause" is especially conspicuous because it's hard to miss what's going on in your own head.

#### 4. Rituals bring good luck.

Whenever I fly, I place my hands on the fuselage as I step onto the plane. The habit began when I was a kid innocently in awe of flying machines, but over the years as I continued to touch the plane and continued to not die horribly, my brain decided I was keeping the apparatus aloft, and now I do it for peace of mind.

To witness the mindless repetition of actions with no proven causal effect, there's no better laboratory than the athletic field. The anthropologist George Gmelch of Union College in Schenectady has paid close attention to the elaborate dances players do during baseball games. Because performance while hitting and pitching is so unpredictable (compared to fielding), most behavioral tics occur on the mound or at the plate. Mike Hargrove was nicknamed "the human rain delay" because of his obsessive shenanigans while at bat. B.F. Skinner famously showed "superstition" in pigeons by locking them in a box, feeding them at regular intervals, and watching them associate random behaviors with food rewards, eventually building up intricate routines of behavior. When you combine kicking dirt and readjusting your helmet with strikes and home runs, you can see how the batter's box would quickly become an open-air Skinner box.

We use ritual acts most often when there is little cost to them, when an outcome is uncertain or beyond our control, and when the stakes are high—hence my communion with the fuselage. People who truly trust in their rituals exhibit a phenomenon known as "illusion of control," the belief that they have more influence over the world than they actually do. And it's not a bad delusion to have—a sense of control encourages people to work harder than they might otherwise. In fact, a fully accurate assessment of your powers, a state known as "depressive realism," haunts people with clinical depression, who in general show less magical thinking.

#### 5. To name is to rule.

Just as thoughts and objects have power, so do names. Language's ability to dredge up associations acts as a spell over us. Piaget argued that children often confuse objects with their names, a phenomenon he labeled nominal realism. Rozin and colleagues have demonstrated nominal realism in adults. After watching sugar being poured into two glasses of water and then personally affixing a "sucrose" label to one and a "poison" label to the other, people much prefer to drink from the "sucrose" glass and will even shy away from one they label "not poison." (The subconscious doesn't process negatives.) Rozin has also found that people are reluctant to tear up a piece of paper with a loved one's name written on it. Arbitrary symbols carry the essence of what they represent. Along a similar vein, "the name Adolf dropped off very sharply in the 1940s," Rozin points out.

#### 6. Karma's a bitch.

In eighth grade, a conniving kid named Kevin made a sport of getting under my skin, mocking me for everything from my haircut to my shoelaces. I wanted nothing more than to kick him where it counted. But I never had to. On field day he had a little incident with a bicycle handlebar. With his manhood maimed, I couldn't help but feel a sense of justice in the universe. He was asking for it.

Belief in a just world puts our minds at ease: Even if things are beyond our control, they happen for a reason. The idea of arbitrary pain and suffering is just too much for many people to bear, and the need for moral order may help explain the popularity of religion; in fact, just-worlders are more religious than others. Faith in cosmic jurisprudence starts early. Harvard psychologists showed that kids ages 5 to 7 like a child who found \$5 on the sidewalk more than one whose soccer game got rained out.

But belief in a just universe can also prevent one from fighting for more justice—the blame-the-victim effect. If a test subject is submitted to painful shocks that he can't escape, people think less of him; it's comforting to assume that he must deserve it somehow.

Jinxes—in the form of tempting fate—are closely related to karma. Jesse Bering, a psychologist at Queen's University in Belfast, studies the evolutionary psychology of religion. He argues that assuming that an omniscient being can read our minds and strike us down for our immorality keeps us from misbehaving and thus being ousted by our social group. I'm an atheist, but I asked him if fear of targeted lightning bolts might explain why I nevertheless feel the need to knock on wood when I merely think to myself something like, "Gee, I haven't had a cold in months" (a habit that also implicates rules 3 and 4). "We're still thinking that the universe is keeping moralistic tabs on us; if we think we've outsmarted this agency or somehow cheated it—from giving us a cold like everyone else, for example—it will seek to humble us through a sharp dose of reality. The ritual of wood-knocking somehow satisfies or pleases the universe and preempts it from intentionally punishing us."

#### 7. The world is alive.

To believe that the universe is sympathetic to our wishes is to believe that it has a mind or a soul, however rudimentary. We often see inanimate objects as infused with a life force. After watching The Velveteen Rabbit as a kid, I desperately wanted my own plush bear to come alive. When I asked my mom if loving something enough can make it real, she said no. It broke my heart. It's not that we think all matter is fully alive—even babies are surprised when inanimate objects appear to move on their own—it's that we feel all matter has that potential. I know intellectually that I can't bring objects to life, but I still feel irrational anger toward a piece of toast when it drops from my hand—and have been known to stomp on it in retaliation.

Marjaana Lindeman, a psychologist at the University of Helsinki, defines magical thinking as treating the world as if it has mental properties (animism) or expecting the mind to exhibit the properties of the physical world. She found that people who literally endorse phrases such as, "Old furniture knows things about the past," or, "An evil thought is contaminated," also believe in things like feng shui (the idea that the arrangement of furniture can channel life energy) and astrology. They are also more likely to be religious and to believe in paranormal agents.

Subbotsky says there are benefits to thinking animistically. "It's much more comfortable to think that your fate is written down in a constellation of stars than that you're one of a certain group of intelligent animals who are lost in frozen space forever." And magical thinking doesn't necessarily interfere with practical life, he adds: "You can be a believer in astrology and still be a good astronomer."

# THE KÜBLER-ROSS (OR THE "FIVE STAGES") MODEL OF GRIEF

The Kübler-Ross model, commonly known as the five stages of grief, was first introduced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*. It describes, in five discrete stages, a process by which people deal with grief and tragedy, especially when diagnosed with a terminal illness or catastrophic loss.

#### **The Five Stages of Grief**

**Denial** — "I feel fine."; "This can't be happening to me."

Denial is usually only a temporary defense for the individual. This feeling is generally replaced with heightened awareness of situations and individuals that will be left behind after death.

**Anger** — "Why me? It's not fair!"; "Who is to blame?"

Once in the second stage, the individual recognizes that denial cannot continue. Because of anger, the person is very difficult to care for due to misplaced feelings of rage and envy. Any individual that symbolizes life or energy is subject to projected resentment and jealousy.

**Bargaining** — "Just let me live to see my children graduate."; "I'll do anything for a few more years."; "I will give my life savings if..."

The third stage involves the hope that the individual can somehow postpone or delay death. Usually, the negotiation for an extended life is made with a higher power in exchange for a reformed lifestyle. Psychologically, the individual is saying, "I understand I will die, but if I could just have more time..."

**Depression** — "I'm so sad, why bother with anything?"; "I'm going to die . . . What's the point?"; "I miss my loved one, why go on?"

During the fourth stage, the dying person begins to understand the certainty of death. Because of this, the individual may become silent, refuse visitors and spend much of the time crying and grieving. This process allows the dying person to disconnect oneself from things of love and affection. It is not recommended to attempt to cheer up an individual who is in this stage. It is an important time for grieving that must be processed.

**Acceptance** — "It's going to be okay."; "I can't fight it, I may as well prepare for it."

This final stage comes with peace and understanding of the death that is approaching. Generally, the person in the fifth stage will want to be left alone. Additionally, feelings and physical pain may be non-existent. This stage has also been described as the end of the dying struggle.

Kübler-Ross originally applied these stages to people suffering from terminal illness, later to any form of catastrophic personal loss (job, income, freedom). This may also include significant life events such as the death of a loved one, divorce, drug addiction, an infertility diagnosis. Kübler-Ross claimed these steps do not necessarily come in the order noted above, nor are all steps experienced by all patients, though she stated a person will always experience at least two. Often, people will experience several stages in a "roller coaster" effect - switching between two or more stages, returning to one or more several times before working through it.

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Joan Didion (born December 5, 1934) is an American novelist and writer of personalized, journalistic essays. The disintegration of American morals and cultural chaos upon which her essays comment are explored more fully in her novels, where the overriding theme is individual and social fragmentation. A sense of anxiety or dread permeates much of her work.

Didion was born in Sacramento, California to parents Frank Reese and Eduene (Jerrett) Didion. Didion recalls writing things down as early as age five,



though she claims that she never saw herself as a writer until after being published. She read everything she could get her hands on after learning how to read and even needed written permission from her mother to borrow adult books, biographies especially, from the library at a young age. With this, she identified herself as being a "shy, bookish child", who pushed herself to overcome these personal obstacles through acting and public speaking.

As a child, Didion went to kindergarten and first grade; however, as a direct result of her father's involvement in World War II in the Army Air Corps, she did not attend school on a regular basis because of her family's constant relocation. It was not until the age of nine or ten that her family stopped moving around, settling back in Sacramento in 1943 or early 1944. During this time, her father went to Detroit to settle defense contracts for World War I and II. Didion states that moving as often as her family did had a profound influence on her, claiming that she often felt like a perpetual outsider. In 1956, Didion graduated from the University of California, Berkeley with a Bachelor of Arts in English. During her senior year, she participated in an essay contest sponsored by *Vogue*, winning the first place prize of a job at the magazine's New York office.

At *Vogue*, Didion worked her way up from promotional copywriter to associate feature editor, remaining there for two years. While at the magazine, she wrote her first novel, *Run*, *River*, published in 1963. While in New York, Didion met her future husband of almost forty years, John Gregory Dunne, who at the time was writing for *Time Magazine*. The couple married in 1964 and moved to Los Angeles, California soon after, with intentions of staying only temporarily. California ultimately became their home for the next twenty years.

In 1968, Didion published *Slouching Towards Bethlehem,* her first work of non-fiction. Didion also co-wrote a number of screenplays with her husband, including *The Panic in Needle Park* (1971), *A Star Is Born* (1976) and *True Confessions* (1981), an adaptation of Dunne's own novel.

The White Album, a collection of journalistic essays from her time at Life, Esquire, The Saturday Evening Post, The New York Times, and The New York Review of Books, was published June 17, 1979 by Simon & Schuster. It is said to function as a follow-up to Slouching Towards Bethlehem.

In December, 2003, in the midst of dealing with their only daughter's life-threatening illness, Dunne suffered a fatal heart attack one night while at the dinner table. At the time of her father's sudden death, Quintana Roo Dunne was in the ICU with pneumonia, which subsequently put her into septic shock and a coma. Didion put off Dunne's funeral arrangements for approximately a month until her daughter was well enough to attend the service.

She began writing *The Year of Magical Thinking* on October 4, 2004 and finished 88 days later on New Year's Eve. She went on a book tour following the release of this memoir that she has described as "therapeutic" during her period of intense mourning. Unfortunately, it was not long before tragedy struck Joan Didion once again; while her daughter exited a plane at LAX, she collapsed from a massive hematoma that required six hours of brain surgery at UCLA Medical Center. While Didion was in the middle of her New York promotion for her memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Quintana died on August 26, 2005 at the age of 39.

In 2007, Didion began working on a one-woman adaptation of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Produced by Scott Rudin, the Broadway play featured Vanessa Redgrave. Although at first she was hesitant about the idea of writing a play, she has since been quoted as finding this new genre to be quite exciting. Physically, Didion is most commonly described as being a thin, frail woman. She claims to have an Okie accent, which she attributes to attending Sacramento high schools. Didion currently resides in an apartment on East 71st Street in New York City.

## JOAN DIDION: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Political Fictions (2001)
The Last Thing He Wanted (1996)
After Henry (1992)
Miami (1987)
Democracy: A Novel (1984)
Salvador (1983)
The White Album (1979)
A Book of Common Prayer (1977)
Play It as It Lays (1970)
Slouching Towards Bethlehem (1968)
Run River (1963)



# **DISCUSSION & FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS**

- > Didion spends a lot of time in the play addressing "the question of self-pity". Does Didion pity herself? In what ways does she indulge that impulse, and in what ways does she deny it?
- > Discuss the notion of "magical thinking." How do you think it helps (or hinders) healing? Have you ever experienced anything like this, after a loss or some other life-changing occurrence?
- ➤ How does Didion use humor? To express her grief, to deflect it, or for another purpose entirely?
- After John's death, Didion comes to understand the degree to which her identity was shaped by her relationship with John. How does John's death force Didion to re-evaluate her identity?
- > To Didion, there is a clear distinction between grief and mourning. What differences do you see between the two?
- ➤ Is Didion's message ultimately uplifting or depressing? Why?
- ➤ Is there a significant turning point in the play? If so, where would you place it and why?
- > Didion emphasizes that "information is control." Do you think her beliefs change over the course of her year of magical thinking? If so, how?