

Art Transcends Grief at Aurora Theatre Season Closer

This one-performer show, Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, is powered by a venerable trio: author Didion, director Nancy Carlin, and actor Stacy Ross.

By Lou Fancher

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Grief knows no season or timetable. Mercifully, profound works of art and gifted artists also exist free-form, with no seasonal or clock-related

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restrictions.

Which is why the Aurora's 27th season closer, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, is not a radical choice as much as it is an essential, timely opportunity. A play presented in sunny June about a

woman's grief following the crushing, heartbreaking death of a spouse followed swiftly by the sudden, shattering loss of a daughter? Surely, we think more often in summer of graduations, weddings, family parties, vacations, travel, adventure, warmth, and levity.

But like those unifying celebrations, the experiences described by writer Joan Didion in her best-selling 2005 memoir of the same title and adapted in this 90-minute, one-performer production are common to all of us. Inevitably, if you live long enough, as the actor performing the role of Didion says early on, "It will happen to you." That is, death, and frequently, the "magical thinking" of denial immediately afterward.

Didion lost her husband, novelist John Gregory Dunne, in 2003. After 40 years of marriage, shared literary passion, occasional collaboration, and raising a daughter, Quintana, Dunne collapsed during dinner one night and was gone. "He was there; then he wasn't," Didion tells the audience in the play. Less than two years later, their daughter died. Didion wrote raw, moving memoirs after each loss.

Didion and playwright-director David Hare adapted the *Magical* memoir and include material from the sequel memoir, *Blue Night*, for the stage production. The role was first and notably performed by Vanessa Redgrave. Aurora offers one of the Bay Area's finest actors, Stacy Ross, with direction by the ever-meticulous and insightful Nancy Carlin.

Ross said she and Carlin have worked together only on a handful of projects, but finds they are "simpatico." As artists, they focus on micro and macro levels of a play with equal intensity. For Ross, that means a deep dive into the script. "Directors have to use more brain space, be macro, and not off-load," said Ross. "Nancy has goals. I rely on that. Just talking to her about what can be done physically and with lighting in a scene; it's helpful."

With minimal props, the play is basically a monologue. To avoid "stand-and-deliver" is crucial. Ross when she launches into the three-week rehearsal knows she has to build stamina. She must keep the material engaging; moving around the stage or altering vocal delivery not as gimmicks or "tricks" but with intention. And then there's the content to consider. "Do people want to see a grieving show in the summer?" she asked. "Didion's writing is gold standard. But how do I keep this an interesting conversation?"



She's hit the nail on the head with the statement. Gold standard writing undergirds Didion's signature style that Ross labeled "cool remove." The topic isn't comfortable or cozy and Didion's humor is often buried, a fragile, whispered undercurrent. "She doesn't signal the clever [comment] or joke — and she doesn't use a lot of contractions, which isn't the way we speak," Ross said. Honoring the style is technical and sure to be well-handled by an actor of Ross' caliber, whose practice in recent years includes saying every word of the script before each performance. "I find it's active but meditative. It makes me confident, even if I go through it remotely, moving my mouth. I find it invigorating, satisfying."

Remarkably, it's likely that grief, scribed by Didion, directed by Carlin, and brought to life by Ross, will be the same: An invigorating, satisfying journey through grief that ends with hope and more than anything else, survival.

Joan Didion's The Year of Magical Thinking, June 21-July 27 (opens June 27), 2 p.m., 7 p.m., and 8 p.m., \$35-\$70, Aurora Theatre Company, 2081 Addison St., Berkeley, 510-843-4822
AuroraTheatre.org.

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