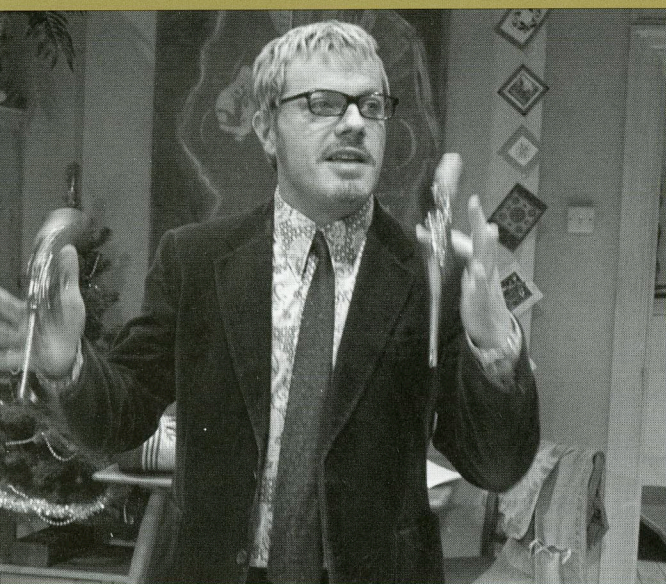


UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY WINTER 2003

A DAY IN THE DEATH OF JOE EGG



Eddie Izzard in the London production of *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*.

"He Who Laughs, Lasts!"

-- Mary Pettibone Poole

An Introduction to *Joe Egg*:

"You have been asked, for the moment, to see the man on the stage in London through the eyes of an itchy, sullen schoolboy. He is your teacher, and he seems like a major jerk. He is hostile, impatient, unfair and uncomfortable. Not so different, come to think about it, from the students he is dressing down."

You can't help resenting this man, found in the revival of A Day in the Death of Joe Egg by Peter Nichols, as he stands in front of a giant chalkboard, hurling teacherly abuse into the audience. At the same time, you can't help identifying with him. Somehow you've already been implicated in everything that's going to follow, which will be both very funny and very upsetting.

So goes the opening scene [of Joe Egg], starring the stand-up comic Eddie Izzard in a role he was born to play. The curtain raiser is a classic declaration of intent from Mr. Nichols. He is going mano a mano with theatergoers, and he isn't letting anyone off easy: his characters, his audience or himself."

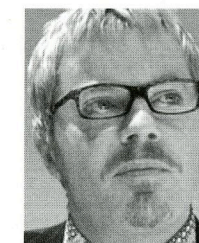
¹Brantley, Ben. "Critic's Notebook; A Revival for a Playwright Who's Funny and Upsetting." *The New York Times* 14 February 2002.

It could be argued that *Joe Egg* was written by Peter Nichols as a way to use his sense of humor to deal with the adversity in his life. It is a play based on his daughter Abigail, who was born mentally and physically disabled. In particular, *Joe Egg* concerns Bri and Sheila, and their handicapped child (nicknamed Joe Egg) age 10. The parents invent conversations and personality traits for the child, even though she seems unable to communicate in any way. As Bri and Sheila begin to fabricate scenarios, their marriage comes under increasing strain.

In the pages that follow, we have included a variety of perspectives on the themes explored in *Joe Egg*. We have interviewed Laurence Boswell, the director, and Esmerelda Devlin, the set and costume designer. These artists have found ways to bring Mr. Nichol's work to life, collaborating to explore the theme of humor in the face of adversity. You will also find interviews with other high school students regarding their opinions on dealing with challenging situations.

Before you come to the theatre, we encourage you to take a look at the activities in the back of the guide in order to explore how this play can relate to your own life. As you watch the characters of this play make choices to deal with the adversity of their lives, think about what stresses you out, how you deal with that stress, and how you face and overcome challenges in your own life. **UPSTAGE**

Who's Who in *JOE EGG*



Bri (*Eddie Izzard*)

An unsatisfied school teacher in his early thirties, Bri struggles with a multitude of frustrations, especially the frustration of fathering a handicapped child who is unable to function on any level.



Sheila (*Victoria Hamilton*)

Sheila is the patient, overly optimistic wife of Bri who devotes her life and her attention to the idea that all living beings deserve to have a happy and meaningful life.

Joe (*Madeleine Martin*)

Josephine, referred to as Joe, who is unable to communicate in any way, is the spastic ten-year old daughter of Bri and Sheila who is confined for life to an invalid chair.

Freddie (*Michael Gaston*)

Freddie, an old school acquaintance of Bri, is the well-meaning yet stuffy, seemingly charitable friend of the couple.

Pam (*Margaret Colin*)

Pam is the often self-centered, snobbish wife of Freddie.

Grace (*Dana Ivey*)

Grace is Bri's typically nagging, possessive and self-pitying suburban mother.

UPSTAGE

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COVER:
Artwork for the Roundabout Theatre
Company production of *A Day in the Death
of Joe Egg*. Photo by Manuel Harlan

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Devlin's Designs

A Talk with Es Devlin, costume and set designer for *Joe Egg*

UPSTAGE: I understand you have already done set and costume design for this show in its recent London production. Tell us about the set design you created then.

DEVLIN: In London, we had a revolving set. We wanted to honor the dramatic place that Nichols goes to in the direct address to audience element of the piece. We allowed the audience into the space the actors pass through the moment before they make an entrance - the backstage area immediately behind the set. The audience got to see the back of the box set as it revolved. In fact, our solution for the New York production achieves a similar thing in a different way.

In the States it's not often that you find the same person designing costumes and sets. Will you discuss the advantages and disadvantages of doing both jobs?

DEVLIN: The advantage is that you are designing a total stage picture. Particularly in something like Shakespeare, where the action was written fluidly to evoke shifts from place to place with the minimum of scene shifting, the costumes become the environment. When you're dealing with a block of chorus in opera, the color of that volume becomes a huge scenic element that needs to work as a whole with anything else within the audience's frame of vision. The disadvantage is that you have to be in a few places at the same time.

What type of research did you do before you made sketches to show the director? How did you enter the world of the play and begin to create character with your designs?

DEVLIN: I found circa 1967 Vogues and House Beautiful magazines. I watched various films of the period, and visited a house in Bristol on which the room is exactly based. I also visited the author's house, met his wife, on whom the character Sheila is based, and looked through his photo albums showing images of his daughter, on whom the character Joe is based.

In terms of costumes and hair, the 1960s Vogue magazines were indispensable research for hair and makeup as well as clothes. In a way the



Victoria Hamilton in the London production of *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*.

Manuel Harlan

“Sixties retro has become so chic that many garments from the period can be seen almost verbatim on the catwalks today.”

diversity of character types on stage works in the designer's favor because each can be defined in contrast to the others.

How differently did people dress in the UK in the late 60's from how they dress now?

DEVLIN: There was more of a sense of formality in '67. There was more structured underwear, gloves, hats, more stylized hair and makeup, more made to measure or homemade garments. The differences are more pronounced for women's wear than for men's, however. Sixties retro has become so

chic that many garments from the period can be seen almost verbatim on the catwalks today.

What do you look for from a director when you are meeting to discuss a play you are about to design? How did you and Laurence Boswell, the director, come up with the design concept for *Joe Egg*?

DEVLIN: For *Joe Egg*, Laurence and I started with the people. We put ourselves in the mind of Sheila and considered what choices she might have made for the room, like organic, floral patterns in wallpaper and curtains. All that should feel real in relation to her clothes choices too. Then we allowed Bri's expression just in his dominant paintings.

With any director, I need to find out what kind of event she's got in mind; what kind of theatrical grammar she's prepared to consider; what parameters of expressionism/naturalism she's ready to work within. **UPSTAGE**

A Day of Directing Joe Egg

Laurence Boswell discusses *Joe Egg* with UPSTAGE

UPSTAGE: Why did you decide to direct *Joe Egg*? What about its style and theme attracted you?

BOSWELL: The play has a compelling story to tell, a story that touches a lot of people. How do a young married couple reconcile the demands of their own individual ambitions and dreams with the responsibilities and sacrifices of being a parent to a disabled child? It also shows how life throws some irresolvable dilemmas at us, and whichever choice we make will mean a certain amount of loss and pain.

The play deals with big issues, important issues, dilemmas that are alive and with us in our lives now. At what point is human life sustainable? Is mercy killing acceptable or is any form of human life sacred, whatever amount of suffering it involves? Also, there is still a lot of fear and ignorance that surrounds those with big physical and emotional challenges.

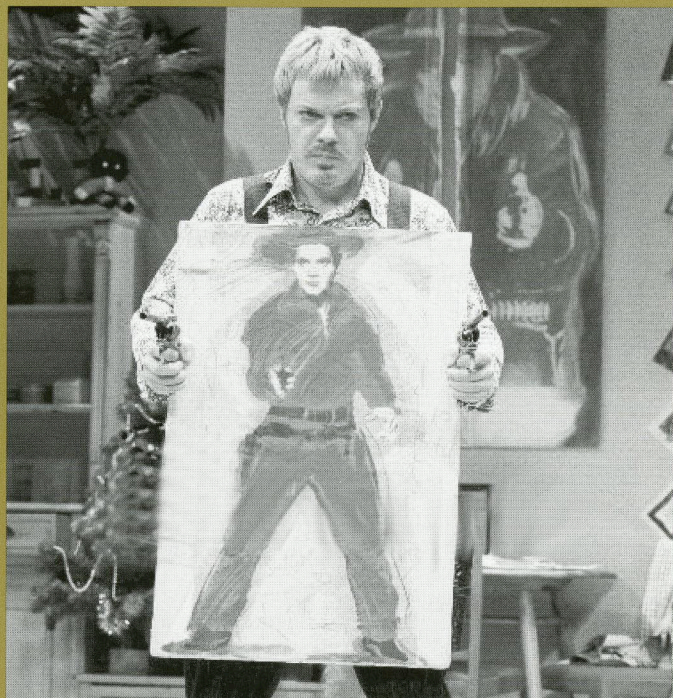
BOSWELL: When we did the play in London, it was an emotionally shattering journey for some people, but others just found it so funny. Some people side with the husband, some with the wife, some with Brian's friend, Freddie. Some of the most powerful responses have come from the people who feel that Peter Nichols has reflected their struggle with bringing up a severely handicapped child very honestly, directly and un sentimentally.

Why is a play written in 1967 still so powerful from your point of view?

BOSWELL: Peter Nichols was ahead of his time. His play works because he dramatizes very real and lasting dilemmas. He writes with honesty and passion; his play is original and playful. Peter learned a lot writing reviews and sketches during his time of military service in the Far East. He loves the English traditions of popular theatre, music hall, variety, and stand up comedy. He brings that energy and direct relationship with the audience, which is a central characteristic of that kind of work, into his plays.

You kept the setting in the late 60's. Why?

BOSWELL: There are a number of things within the play that are particular to



Eddie Izzard in the London production of *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*.

that time and place which cannot be changed without complete rewriting of the entire text. For example, these days, I think parents put in that kind of position at the birth of a child would be more likely to sue the doctor rather than keep quiet and suffer in silence.

How do you direct someone to play Joe's character?

BOSWELL: Joe is so severely disabled that she has no movement or reaction to outside stimulus, so directing the young girls who play the part is about helping them relax and do nothing. Peter has always taught the girls how to do the fits, he remembers how they afflicted his daughter. They need more directing when they start talking and skipping. Peter Nichols has written his story with an originality and playfulness that make it exhilarating to perform and direct.

Any other insights that may help us educate our audiences about this production of *Joe Egg* you've directed?

BOSWELL: Peter Nichols is an excellent author, original and fresh; some people may find it worth studying some of his other plays before they see this one, but I am always apprehensive about saying too much about my productions. The work should do the talking for me. So come and see the show. And enjoy! **UPSTAGE**

"The play has a compelling story to tell, a story that touches a lot of people."

About the AUTHOR

Peter Nichols has been classified in the same league as such contemporary playwrights Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter. Judging from the recent revival of Nichols's works, it is easy to see why. After the initial run of most of his plays in the 1960's, 70's and early 80's, two of his plays, *Joe Egg* and *Privates on Parade*, were both revived in London last year, with Roundabout producing another revival of *Joe Egg* on Broadway this year.

Previously, Roundabout produced *Privates on Parade* in its 1988/89 season, which won the New York Theatre Drama Critics Award for Best Foreign Play. Also, when Roundabout first revived *Joe Egg* in its 1984/85

season, the play received the Tony, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle Awards for Outstanding Revival.

Audiences are enjoying this rediscovery of Peter Nichols, mostly because of his ability to make the audience both amused and uncomfortable, which can be seen in many of his works. Nichols often strives to shatter the "two-way mirror" which exists between the actors and the audience. In much of his work, the artificiality of the theatrical world is directly addressed and used in order to explore the characters on stage more deeply. In addition, most of his plays are taken from details of his own life, which adds another element of truth to what happens on stage. **UPSTAGE**

Principle plays by Peter Nichols:

<i>The National Health</i>	1969
<i>Forget-me-not Lane</i>	1971
<i>Neither Up nor Down</i>	1972
<i>Freeway</i>	1974
<i>Chez Nous</i>	1974
<i>Privates on Parade</i>	1977
<i>Born in the Gardens</i>	1979
<i>Passion Play</i>	1981
<i>A Piece of My Mind</i>	1987



Victoria Hamilton and Eddie Izzard in the London production of *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*.

Manuel Harlan



George Keveson

On Location with George

Because the characters in Joe Egg choose to cope with difficult situations by using humor, we thought we'd approach local high school students with a similar dilemma:

"HOW DO YOU COPE IN EXTREMELY STRESSFUL SITUATIONS?"

George Keveson, Roundabout Education Department's High School Intern, on location at Public School Repertory Company on 43rd St. in Manhattan, asked his fellow students this question, and received a variety of responses, ranging from light-hearted to quite serious, from introverted to outgoing, from expressive to reflective. Perhaps you can relate to some of these students.

Angelique, age 14 - "I write in my journal sometimes."

David, age 20 - "I head straight for the kitchen [to cook].

I also use humor to deal with stress."

Mark, age 19 - "I write poetry. I express my anger on paper."

Shamali, age 18 - "I take a hot bath."

Matthew, age 17 - "I listen to music."

Ari, age 16 - "I pray to God."

Jonathan, age 15 - "I bring it out in my dance."

Shamica, age 18 - "I look in the mirror, to remind myself how beautiful I am. Sometimes I sit in the park and play with my daughter."

Jasmine, age 15 - "I cry."

Chantresse, age 15 - "I tease my boyfriend and make him dress up."

Benz, age 17 - "I go to the pool. I swim."

Gloria, age 16 - "I listen to music. Music is my passion, that's what releases stress."

Activities

DISCOVERING YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE

Before you go

Identify and explore the challenges in your life. Think about movies you have seen recently or television shows that have had to deal with difficult subjects or challenges, especially those that used humor to cope. As you watch these shows, keep the following questions in mind.

1. What are the challenges these people face?
2. How are they dealing with adversity?
3. What is the point of view of the writer? How do you know this?
4. How is humor used? Is it physical or verbal?
5. Is their method of coping positive or negative?

At the Theatre

Watch and listen for the characters' use of humor to cope with the challenge in their life.

Here are some ideas to think about:

1. What is Peter Nichols' point of view regarding this issue? How do you know?
2. How does Peter Nichols use humor to support his point of view?
3. What styles of humor were used?
4. Were the characters successful in using humor to cope with their challenges?

After the Show

Write a letter to a character in the play. What did you think of the choices they made? After reading about the play and the playwright, let us know what you thought about the characters' choice of humor. As you develop your piece, here are some questions to ask yourself:

1. How do you think that character should have dealt with the adversity he or she faced? Are there more effective ways to cope?
2. What would you have done in this situation?

Send your work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the artists who created Joe Egg.

Mail it to: Education Department
Roundabout Theatre Co.
231 W. 39th St., Suite 1200
New York, NY 10018

Or email to: lindsaye@roundabouttheatre.org

When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

TICKET POLICY

As a student participant in *Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

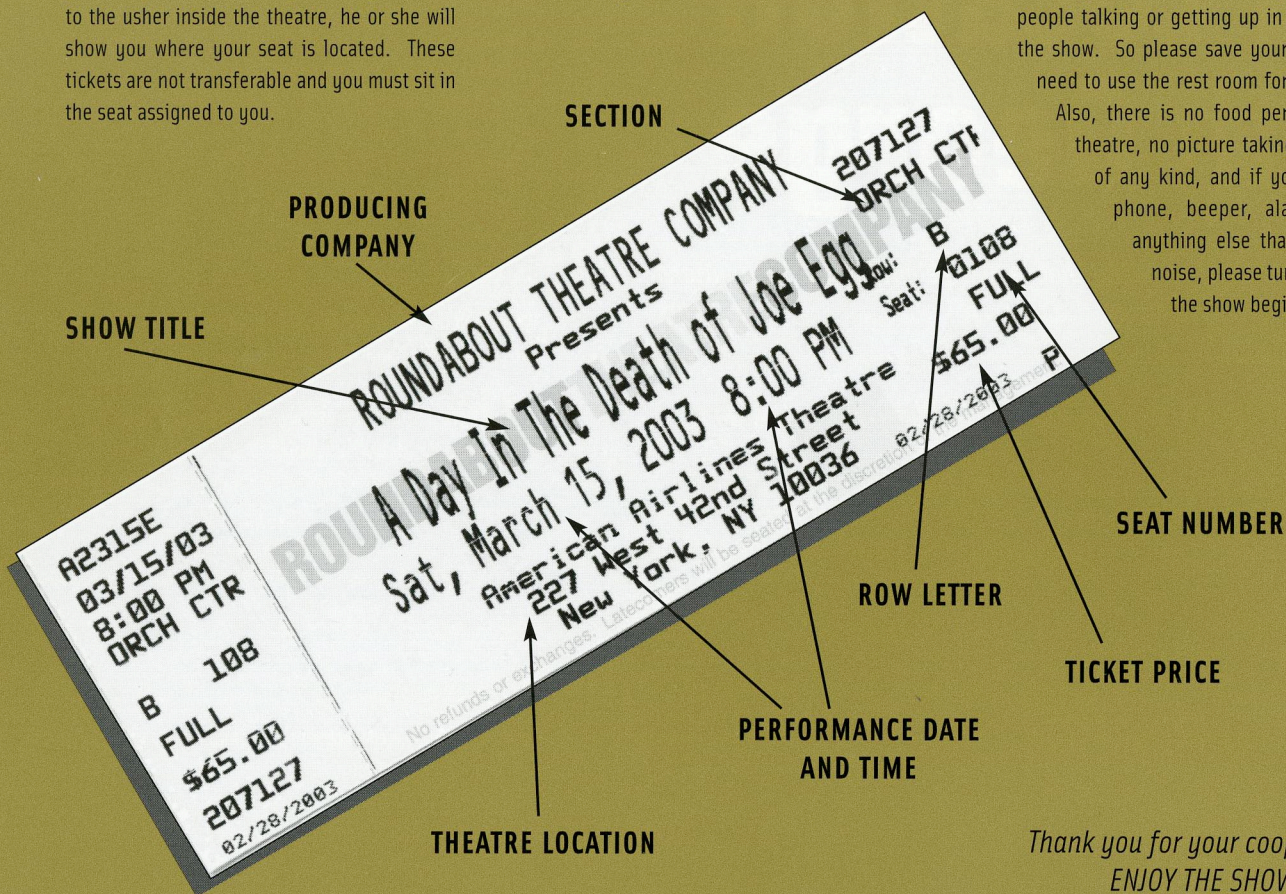
PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission.

Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



Thank you for your cooperation.
ENJOY THE SHOW!

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