

## THEATER REVIEW

## 'The Year of Magical Thinking': Intense, challenging

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Everyone knows they're going to die, but no one really believes it.

This ironclad belief in our own immortality also spreads to family and friends: It's inconceivable that someone we love will die.

Which is why it can be so difficult to accept when it does happen.

It's incomprehensible; the mind refuses to believe it.

*He can't really be dead, we think. Surely he's coming back.*

The writer Joan Didion experienced this when her husband, John Gregory Dunne, also a writer, had a heart attack and died suddenly at their dining room table. Though paramedics worked on him for 45 minutes, they were unable to revive him. He was 71.

Later, though she knows he is dead, Ms. Didion can't bring herself to throw out his shoes. "He would need shoes if he were to return," she says.

She wants an autopsy, because she reasons that if they're able to discover what went wrong, they might be able to fix it.

She calls this magical thinking, a state of mind that can occur during grieving where one reasons, "If I do this, then this will occur" — even if the reasoning's not logical at all.

She wrote about her husband's death and the year that followed in "The Year of Magical Thinking." A bestseller and winner of a National Book Award, the book was adapted into a one-woman Broadway play starring Vanessa Redgrave. (Although the play also deals with Ms. Didion's daughter's health problems and unexpected early death, the author did not write about her daughter's death in the book.)

Florida Repertory Theatre's staging of "The Year of Magical Thinking," running through Feb. 4 in the studio theater adjacent to the main stage in downtown Fort Myers, stars Sara Morsey, who was last seen at Florida Rep as the pill-popping alcoholic matriarch in last season's "August: Osage County."

The play is, in a word, intense.

Almost like a Greek tragedy, it begins with a warning to the audience: "This

happened on Dec. 30, 2003. That may seem a while ago, but it won't when it happens to you.

"And it will happen to you. The details will be different, but it will happen to you.

"That's what I'm here to tell you."

She quotes the first lines she wrote after her husband died, the first words that became the opening to her best-selling memoir: "Life changes fast. "Life changes in the instant.

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

For those who've experienced a loss, seeing "The Year of Magical Thinking" is a comfort in some ways. *Someone else has experienced what I'm going through, you think. But it is also, in many ways, a grueling night at the theater.*

To say the subject matter is difficult is an understatement. And this might keep some people away. (On opening night, the tiny studio theater was not sold out.)

But Ms. Morsey is superb actress, and Maureen Heffernan a masterful director. (She directed "August: Osage County," "Doubt" and "Dancing at Lughnasa," to name a few, at Florida Rep.)

Ms. Heffernan has staged the play well. Throughout its 100 minutes of one woman talking to the audience and retelling her story, Ms. Morsey gets up and moves about the tiny space in ways that seem quite natural, effectively breaking up the monologue.

Costume designer Judith Skyles has dressed Ms. Morsey in a simple white cowl neck sweater and brown pants with a scarf used as a shawl. Christopher Simpson's set is solid and substantial for the small space, creating a room with a fireplace and wainscoting, a flower-print easy chair and rug. The back wall is shorn in half, as if a great

quake has separated it, and one side of the curtains on the window are ragged and torn.

The lighting, by Kate Smith, is distracting, however, because we're not only able to see the other audience members but even the lighting and sound board. Throughout the play, I was unfortunately hyper-aware of the various sounds that were introduced, such as the sound of waves when Ms. Morsey talks about the beach.

## Some issues

With such a talented actress and director, I was expecting to be bowled over by "The Year of Magical Thinking" and was very surprised when I wasn't.

The problems with the play stem from the material: Ms. Didion is a very stylized writer. Her carefully crafted sentences are so mannered they don't let us get lost in the play.

We're constantly reminded that we're sitting in a theater, listening to someone; we're not drawn in as we normally would be.

Also, Ms. Didion has an odd habit of keeping us at arm's length, at pushing us away. Yes, she's talking about personal matters, but she also simultaneously keeps us removed from the emotions. We don't really get a feel for what her relationship with her husband was like; we don't get a sense of their camaraderie or their closeness. We do get stories about her walking out on him, or always needing to have the last word in an argument.

Are there things she's not telling us, or was their relationship more business-like and cerebral? The cold detachment of the words has an off-putting effect.

Ms. Morsey does show emotion a few times, such as the tenderness displayed when she's talking to her daughter Quintana, who was in a hospital herself, in a

coma, when her father died.

Those rare moments in the play are moments of life and connection. It's unfortunate there aren't more of them.

Ms. Didion is called "a cool customer" at the hospital when her husband, dead on arrival, is brought in.

Part of that, surely, is from the shock and from having to force herself to function and talk and take care of matters in a calm, adult way.

But I wonder how much of that is also her actual personality, if she's always "a cool customer." She seems to be someone who always needs to be in control of a situation and her emotions.

That tight grip presents a challenge to Ms. Morsey. In staying true to the character, the person of Joan Didion, she cannot display warmth or great emotion, which hinders her connection with the audience.

On the tables and shelves facing the actor are numerous photographs of Ms. Didion and Mr. Dunne, and photos of her with her daughter. They're facing the actor and are not really seen all that well by the audience.

On the mantel, which the audience can see, stand more photo frames, but they contain no images, only blackness.

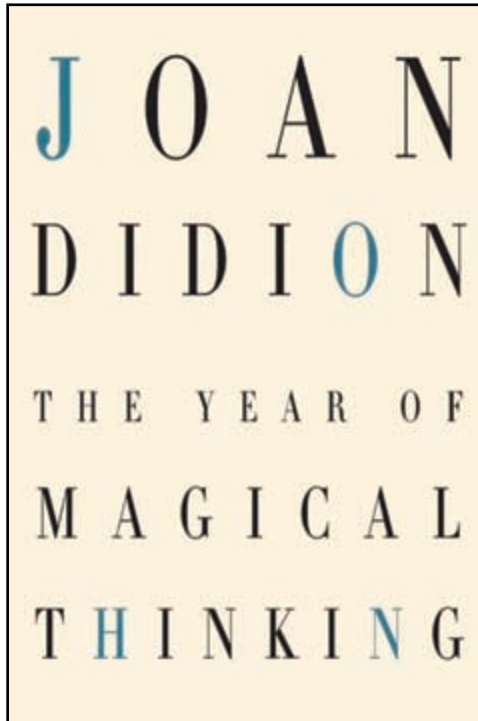
This is a good analogy for Ms. Didion's play: She sees more and knows more than she's telling us. We're not getting the whole picture.

"The Year of Magical Thinking" has moments of insight, moments of emotion and moments that are food for thought.

In trying to comprehend what happened, the playwright gathered up the paramedics' records and hospital records, the autopsy report and even the doorman's record log.

But drama is found in emotions, not the recitation of facts.

The audience leaves wiser, but somber and subdued. ■



in the know

## "The Year of Magical Thinking"

&gt;&gt; When: Through Feb. 4

&gt;&gt; Where: Florida Repertory Studio Theatre, downtown Fort Myers

&gt;&gt; Cost: \$40

&gt;&gt; Info: 332-4488 or www.floridarep.org

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