A DAY IN THE DEATH OF JOE EGG

Educational Resources

October/November 2011
INTRODUCTION

This resource pack aims to give teachers and students an insight into the process of creating A Day in the Death of Joe Egg at the Citizens Theatre. The pack is particularly aimed at helping students of Higher Drama answer any question in the paper which asks the candidate to 'write about a production you have recently seen by a Scottish theatre company'. The section in the pack titled 'Elements of the Performance' is specifically focused on this, and there are interviews with the director, designer and one of the actors which will add more depth to your understanding of the whole process.

This pack also contains a selection of production photographs, images from the 'mood book' of designer Max Jones and some pages from the notebook of director Phillip Breen showing his thoughts on aspects of the production. There are also marked up pages from Phillip's copy of the script and that of actor Sarah Tansey, showing how they use their scripts in different ways as working documents.

In the play Jo, the couple's young daughter has cerebral palsy and the cast received useful guidance and advice from the Bobath Society Scotland. This organization provides support for people with this condition and their families. Below are contact details for the Bobath Society and other websites which will tell you more about cerebral palsy.

We welcome feedback on our work for schools so please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or comments on: 0141 418 6273 or by email: louisebrown@citz.co.uk.

Best wishes,

LOUISE BROWN
Education Officer
Citizens Learning and TAG
USEFUL CONTACTS

NHS Choices
nhs.uk/conditions/cerebral-palsy/pages/introduction.aspx

BBC Health
bbc.co.uk/health/physical_health/conditions/cerebralpalsy1.shtml

The Bobath Society Scotland
providing Bobath therapy to children in Scotland with cerebral palsy
bobathscotland.org.uk
It seems to me that this play is about trying to survive in difficult circumstances, being trapped. What would you say to that?

Increasingly, I think the play is saying 'all you need is love'. Her mother and father stand over Joe and they are concerned about what does she do and what will she be, what will she do? The budgies and the plants and the fish don’t DO anything; they require just to be cared for and to be fed and to be loved. The argument at the centre of the play, I suppose is: what is a life? What does life mean? What is the quality of Joe’s life? Yes, exactly, who is more trapped? Is it Bri? Is it Joe? Is it Sheila? Is it Freddie in his espousing all the kind of normative, received views? As with any great play it will be different any night you see it. So much will depend on, for example, how Sheila exits at the end. Does she know Bri’s leaving? The way in which Joe is handled by Bri on a particular night might make us think: he’s definitely going to kill her; that’s definitely his plan. On another night it will be different. Great plays give you questions and less great plays give you answers.

Joe Egg caused a stir when it was first performed at the Citizens. It’s rooted in a certain time period. I wonder, what are the things which make it relevant to now?

Well it’s a genuine classic and its themes are timeless. It’s relevant now because it’s always relevant. I think that in some ways it reminds us of a more optimistic age. In the sixties people genuinely believed that they could change their lives and there were thinkers like Lang, and other existentialists, who had this idea that once we understood the nature of our prison we could then step outside that. An optimistic reading of the end of the play is that what Bri does, is come to an understanding about his situation and change it. ‘Do we think that he will come back?’ is another question. Do we think he’s able to escape?

I think it’s very interesting to do the play after The Caretaker. In the Birthday Party, Pinter’s first play, he’s writing’s the most profoundly existentialist play about the pernicious cages of normative thought that stop us being fully human, a passionately existentialist play. Then he has a son and he’s sitting there thinking ‘If I believe in existentialism, that the family is this social construct and I am an autonomous being, why do I feel protective of this child?’ What is natural to us and what do we learn? I think this play deals with a very
similar idea and Nichols himself is the exploring the idea of, if logically I understand that Joe doesn’t feel anything, she doesn’t understand anything, she doesn’t do anything, why can’t I bring myself to kill her? Or why do I love her in spite of myself? Throughout the play, what you learn when you get it up on its feet, is that every time the adults argue, Joe does something and everyone starts to become more human again. You follow the stage directions and as with any great play, you just get a great sense of the structure of the piece. It just works. It’s a very, very good machine. You’ve just got to be true to it and hopefully on some level it’ll be true back to us.

Is Joe there as a device just to reveal more about other characters? Is she a character herself?

Joe does many things. She humanises and brings Bri and Sheila back together even though she is the cause of much their difficulty. Clearly they speak through her, they live through her. The way Joe is portrayed on stage and the language that is used about her was probably shocking at the time, and I think shocking now as well. But Joe’s illness is not what the play’s about. It’s a way in to the argument about what is a life. And Joe’s more aware than people giver her credit for. Every time the parents have an argument, when it gets to the really difficult stuff in their relationship, Joe will do something, she’ll sneeze or fit. So there’s a sense that she’s plugged in to this.

She’s alive; she’s not an inert presence.

This is a hugely complicated play. How did you start to approach it with your actors?

I think increasingly, what I do is a lot like conducting. Just showing the actors the dots, and how to play the dots; the music is kind of up to them. Showing where it’s asking you to stop, showing where it’s asking you to go quickly and if you do that, how does it make you feel? So we start with the text.

The second thing we encouraged them to think about was pop art. Pop art is a collage of lots of different styles, taking everyday objects and putting them in odd situations in order that you might see them in a new way. Some famous examples are things like Andy Warhol’s soup tins. In Joe Egg, Nichols is dealing with symbols of ‘theatre’ and putting them in a new context. For example we get some routines like stand up, bits of comedy sketch show, a kind of debate play in the second act, high farce at the end. You get heartbreaking drama. And somehow the combination of all these things, on the one level being unreal, the combination is somehow very real, actually. It is without question the most technically difficult play I’ve ever done because of the variety of different styles.

Also I got them to try to learn it before rehearsals started because I don’t think you can rehearse a complex play like this with a script in your hand. Because this about how you respond to the other person. What I’ll constantly be saying in rehearsal is I don’t care how you feel. I’m not remotely interested in what you feel or think. What is it about what the other person is doing that makes you speak? It’s not about you; the solution is always on the other side of the room. The play’s got to happen between people.
What helps the actors get into character?

With a great a play like this or with a writer like Shakespeare, for example, everything you need to know about your character is in the text. Don’t turn up with a bunch of opinions. I had a student once who was playing Jacques (from As You Like It). He said ’I want to do him like Russell Brand’. And he started talking about black nail polish and all these kind of extraneous things. Get to the heart of the matter first. Why does my person speak in the way they speak? If you’re true to that question on every line you get something that’s true and real.

To begin with I divide the play up into manageable chunks and with the actors we sit around and the first thing we do is ask, ’Right, what are the immutable facts here?’ Things like, Bri has a handkerchief in his pocket, because that’s the stage direction, what kind of person has a handkerchief in his pocket? He has a daughter. He works. How far away from home does he work? Freddie has a certain amount of money in his pocket; what does that say about Freddie? He gets out a couple of shillings. What would that have bought you today? So we work out the logic of the play. Sometimes the immutable facts are very small and seemingly insignificant, but sometimes, actually, they are incredibly relevant. For example, rehearsing Miriam’s first monologue (Miriam Margolyes who plays Grace) we asked ’where has she come from?’ We look at what she says and we realise that what we’ve got here is a story of betrayal, that Miriam’s character, Grace, has been betrayed by Mrs Parry. They normally meet on a Tuesday and this time she bums her off with some story about a vacuum cleaner. Grace talks about spending all weekend in on her own and we get this lovely picture of this seventy year old, fretting all weekend about Mrs Parry and this meeting on Tuesday. Going to have tea at the Odeon cinema and watch a Julie Andrews film is a massive, massive moment for Grace who’s got all dressed up for it and been let down. So using those facts gives the actor a massive springboard into the character.

GETTING INTO CHARACTER

After having divided the play into sections, director Phillip Breen goes through the whole text, and, taking one character at a time, he writes down everything other characters say about that character, and everything they say about themselves. In this way he builds up a very clear picture of each character. The following two pages from Phillip’s notebook show you examples of this:
Joe Egg = Communist

Bri

Grace: "He's always been susceptible to cold."

Grace: "He didn't say..."

Grace: "He was pushing me off my feet."

Sheila: "Brian must have put a screw top on..."

Sheila: "He's gone mad..."

Sheila: "He's meaning about outside."

Bri: "I took her outside."

Bri: "I was going to leave her in the garden but I couldn't."

Bri: "In the end I just put her in the car. I don't know what I wanted — just to stop them seeing her again."

Bri: "I said no more. Cheno."

Bri: "I'll be in touch."

Bri: "I nearly choked with longing for that London stove that traced patterns on the..."
HE HAS A WATCH.

Bri Bri

Bri: “I was too young. Bri: “I thought it
for it [the marriage].” was alright

Bri: “I was one of the doctors being block.”

manurcic.” Shirl “Dad?”

Bri: “Skeching me I wouldn’t Shirl “Dad” (3)
only be about me...”

but also my ambition... Bri: “I must go
in school.”

Bri: “I’m going to school. Christmas and-

This backache’s worse than Bri: “I’ve fed up
yesterday - the patter on Zoo and strolled up
the ceiling...” So in the end

I’d both just creep away Bri: “I was round
without a word” the ward...”

Bri: “I haven’t decided where Bri: “I’ll go and
I’m going yet. Up the smoker ring the school?”

I suppose, got lost

among the Australians.” Bri: “I’ll be in
the car...”

Bri: “Want a new hair job.” Shirl: “Daddy...”

Bri: “I’ve got school.” He is good.”

Bri: “I thought they were Shirls “What a
keeping her in a few days” Daddy.”

Shirl: “Dad”. O
MAX JONES
The Designer

The play is set in the mid-sixties. What impact did that era and its mood/style/atmosphere have on you as the designer?

Not a huge amount actually... it’s just when the play happens to be set. In the short amount of time I have, I find my role is more to try and identify the mood, style, atmosphere and circumstances of the play, and then to try and find the most appropriate visuals within whatever period context I am required to work. It’s important to always refer back to the content, to explore the specifics of the play and the characters primarily, whilst simultaneously keeping an eye on the broader context (in this case the mid-sixties). For example, I don’t feel the visual world of the play is quite what we might commonly recognise as the sixties from magazines, i.e. Twiggy, psychedelia, ’swinging sixties’. The environment is far more day to day; this is a middle class family in difficult circumstances and of fairly limited financial means. Homes are very personal spaces and it’s very important they primarily reference the inhabitant’s life choices, circumstances and style as well as the era’s. This is a play that spends a lot more time looking in than it does looking out.

I’ve seen your Mood Book full of images and ideas. Can you say something about how this Mood Book works and how important it is for the rest of the creative team?

I wasn’t alive in the sixties and although it wasn’t that long ago, this ‘contemporary’ play is now a period piece. So it’s very important that I approach the design as thoroughly as I would any other period, by means of collecting as much accurate visual reference as possible as well as any useful historical and social information which may be relevant to the themes and context of the piece. I try to create a ‘visual world’ in which I can immerse myself when starting to work on the designs. This usually takes the form of many photocopied images from art books, the internet and other archives which I compile into a series of reference folders which then become the foundations of my visual work. These occasionally might be referred to as ‘mood boards/books’ - an ambiguous collection of styles, shapes and coloured images, textures, anything from any medium that might help to inspire not only myself, but those around me working on the project, starting with the director, then right through to the stage management team, scenic artists, costume department, workshop and anyone responsible for producing the final product. Sometimes an image might just be a starting point for an idea. Other times it might be exactly what
I’m looking for and a theatre department might be required to reproduce it exactly (e.g. a picture of a piece of furniture or a painting/photograph of a costume).

**What kind of impact did you want the set to make on the audience?**

A room is a room is a room. I’ve designed quite a few now, but I will always try to identify a way of making each one unique to its own production. With Joe Egg I’ve tried to explore the idea of a fish eye lens distortion in the living room. If successful, it will have a few interesting effects. One is that it will ‘open up’ the room to the audience without having to compromise its natural architectural proportions too much. For example, the subtle curved back wall allows me to set the side walls at a slight diagonal whilst maintaining a natural right angle in the corners of the room. This allows everyone in the audience to see the dresser stage right and window stage left. Another effect of this architectural distortion, I hope, may be a slightly sickening effect when looked at for an extended period of time, similar to that of an optical illusion. The circumstances that the family in this play find themselves in are quite abrasive. I’d like to think these feelings could be visually amplified by the setting; a physical manifestation of Brian’s warped perspective on his own life.

Finally, there’s an unexpected effect that takes place when we break our theatrical convention momentarily, as the play does. Our hyper real environment is trucked upstage, revealing a black-mirrored floor for the sketch sequences between Brian and Sheila. It’s always nice to surprise an audience, especially in what might first appear a very conventional setting.

**The detail of the room is amazing! Are there any key features that are particularly essential?**

A ceiling - I find a level of architectural accuracy is as important as the detailing. People inherently recognise correct ‘room proportions’ - we spend most of our lives in them. Theatrical productions quite often distort those proportions in order to ‘open up’ a play to the auditorium. In Joe Egg I’ve tried to do this as subtly as possible. Ceilings can quite often get removed to allow for clear sight lines and stage lighting but by doing this you immediately lose any heightened sense of claustrophobia - the characters have too much space available. I think it’s important in Joe Egg that they all feel on top of each other a bit. It’s a very real situation that Brian finds himself trapped in. If you can get the room right, the detailing will follow. This is when I would refer back to my reference folder for ideas on furniture, wallpapers, dressing etc. You can also use the architectural layout of a room to emphasise aspects of detailing (e.g. our fish tank is being set into the back wall, a nice design touch as I expect Brian will be able to look through it into the living room). It’s important not to forget things like skirting boards, light switches, moldings on woodwork and windows, exterior views outside windows and through hallway doors. All of these things stop a set from looking like a set. This style of hyper real design can be quite hard work however, because once you commit to this level of detailing, its very difficult knowing when to stop. Unlike TV, a theatre audience is constantly viewing a ‘wide shot’ so I try to spend as much time as possible getting the framework right before its too late and the workshop starts building it. Interior detailing I am able to tweak right up until the opening night.
Could you say something about the costume and how you approached that – via the Mood Book?

Costume research starts at the beginning of the design process alongside the ‘set’ research. I make a reference folder dedicated to costume. This will initially be quite broad, then as I work through the play more I will gradually sub-divide this folder by character, and apply a finer level of detailing to my visual reference material. As clearer ideas form in my mind, I may also produce costume sketches. The next step is to have a meeting with my costume supervisor (in this case Head of Wardrobe Elaine Coyle) who, along with her team, is responsible for producing/providing all the costumes. We will sit down and discuss all my ideas and might also start looking through the Citizens costume store for suitable options, as well as other local theatres or costume hire companies. We then arrange a first ‘costume fitting’. During this I will discuss ideas with each of the cast, and also get them to try on a few things we have found. Some things may fit first time, others may not be quite right. I might need a specific colour dress that we can’t find, so the wardrobe department might make one from scratch with a bought fabric of the appropriate colour, based on the style of vintage dress we have tried in the ‘fitting’, or on one that I have a visual reference for in my costume research folder. Because people come in all shapes and sizes, I prefer to explore costume on the individual first, and then base any design choices on what suits them best. This can save a lot of time and error, especially if you don’t yet know who the cast members are when you are designing the show months beforehand.
DESIGN STIMULI
Who do you play and what kind of character would you say he is, in terms of personality/attitudes/situation?

I play Bri, a teacher. He is a man who at first seems silly and playful, but is also carrying a lot of anger and frustration around with him. He is interested in jazz and modern art, and has liberal/hippyish tendencies. He is very ambitious. He loves his wife Sheila, but they have a very difficult marriage. Because their daughter is so ill they are both trapped. Despite being in his early thirties, Bri is prone to deeply childish behaviour.

If you met this person in real life, what might you think of them?

At first I would think of him as quite silly and fun, but before long I think you’d get a sense of what an angry and troubled man he is, not least because he has ambitions that he has yet to achieve. He is often very funny, but can quickly become unpleasant.

Can you describe something of the process you used to get into the character? What preparation did you do before AND during rehearsals?

The very first thing I did was simply to read the script. It’s always tempting when you are going to play a part, or at least audition for it, to just skim read chunks of it, and get to your bits. But it’s really important to read the whole piece thoroughly, so that you understand as much as you can from the evidence available about why your character says and does the things that he does. I always want to start saying the lines out loud as soon as possible, and I think that’s the start of the process of getting into character - the first time you get the words off the page and speak or hear them. You’ll normally have a few immediate instincts about certain aspects of a character’s speech - their rhythms and cadences. Reading a line out loud in a number of different ways, trying to work out or guess how a character might say a particular sentence and which words they might stress forces you to think more deeply about their personality.

I know that in the last few years there have been a number of fairly high-profile
productions of A Day In The Death Of Joe Egg, and I made a very definite decision not to watch recordings of them as I was very keen not to be able to hear anyone else’s voice saying the lines.

I’m the same age as Bri and I am also married and a father, so those are some immediate connections I have with Bri’s situation. I also have a few family members who have been involved in teaching, and so I understand a little bit about the profession from that perspective and not just from the point of view of a school boy. Our director, Phillip, was a teacher for a brief and unhappy period and so we spent some time early on in the rehearsals talking about teaching and how the job can make people feel.

This is a play about a marriage, and so the relationship I have with the actor playing my wife is really important. Sarah Tansey and I spent the first week of rehearsals just working together before the rest of the cast arrived. It was important to spend a lot of time together and become relaxed in each other’s company. You need to have some sort of spark between you, I think, to play a couple realistically, and you have to be get relaxed about intimacy pretty quickly so that any of that sort of stuff looks as real and unforced as possible.

What I knew little about was the illness that Joe suffers from in the play. Much of the play is based on the life of its author, Peter Nichols (who had a daughter with cerebral palsy) and so a lot of information and understanding could be gleaned from his diaries and memoirs. Also some people who work with disabled children came in and spoke to us, and explained aspects of the illness and the impact, physical and mental, that this has on parents of severely disabled children.

**Do you think the way you are playing your character has changed over the rehearsal period?**

It has taken me quite a while to understand the childish aspect of Bri. At first I thought he was just a clever, quite argumentative guy. But at times he’s just like a surly teenager.

**What impact do you think a live audience will have on the piece and on your performance? I’m thinking particularly about the actor/audience relationship, given there’s so much direct address to the audience.**

I think those bits of the play should be really exciting. When we address stuff directly to the audience, it won’t just be people standing there reciting monologues. We really will be talking to the audience, and in those moments we’ll no longer be in the sitting room of a house in Bristol, but in the same room as the audience and with nothing between us and them. I’m sure this will inevitably result in some interaction or improvisation, but also at times really change the tone of the piece and the atmosphere in the room.

**What have been some of the biggest challenges for you in this play?**

At times it really is difficult to work out exactly why a character is saying or doing a particular thing. Not because there doesn’t seem to be a reason for it, but because there could be so many different reasons, and so consequently there’s quite a lot of complex
decision making, and a lot of discussion is necessary between the actors and the director. Each character in the play has a very distinct relationship with each of the other characters, and these change and evolve. Thus it’s really important to keep watching each other. What are they doing? What do I think about it?

One problem I have is that Bri’s behaviour sometimes makes me very angry. Sometimes I understand why he does what he does, but at others I have no personal sympathy for him at all. But it’s not my job to give an objective overview of Bri, and to react to him as a person. I just have to disregard my own judgements and be him. It’s funny, because in the play, Bri twice admonishes himself for judging other people.

If you had to isolate one or two lines Bri says that seem particularly important to you, in terms of helping you play him, what would those lines be?

“I’m instant man”
“I must find something else”
“I don’t know what I wanted”

There’s also a few lines from other things that I think about: in the film ‘Clockwise’ John Cleese’s character says at one point, “it’s not the despair; I can stand the despair. It’s the hope; I can’t stand the hope.” That seems relevant.
Extracts from real scripts
BRI gives a short burst of laughter then resumes.)

BRI: You want to get to a decent school.

SHEILA: I don't want to be shunted into some secondary modern slum, she says----

(Kisses her again.)

BRI: Like the one where Daddy works----

SHEILA: Share a room with forty or fifty council-house types and blackies.

BRI: No, I've had enough of them, she says, at the Spastics' Nursery. You want to go on to the Training Centre, help to make those ball-point pens.

(Rummages in grip.)

JOE: Aaaah!

SHEILA: I'm trying my hardest, she says. -- (as Sheila?)

BRI: You keep it up, my girl. Here's a note from Mrs.----:

SHEILA: From the Nursery?

BRI: A school report, Mum. (Reads.) "Thank you for the present for Colin's birthday." Which is Colin?

SHEILA: Little boy who had meningitis. (eclat)

BRI: Never stops whimpering?

SHEILA: That's him.

BRI: Did you send him Many Happy Returns?

SHEILA: I sent a card. And a cuddly bunny.

BRI: It's the thought that counts. (reads) "Quite a few of the parents remembered and the kitchen ladies made a lovely cake with seven candles and we held up Colin so he could see them burning, then we all helped him blow them out."

(Without looking at each other, they make the "Aaah" sound of a cinema audience being shown a new-born lamb.)

'The physiotherapist lady came and looked at us all today and said Josephine's shoulders show signs of improvement. She says keep on with the exercises.'

SHEILA: Do your homework like a good girl. Daddy help.

BRI (to JOE): She won't be able to help. She's going out for a bit on the side.

SHEILA: Let me call your mother, Please.

BRI (ignoring her, reading on): Hello, hello, what's this I see?

What's this? "She's had a few fits today but I think it must have been the excitement over Colin's cake."

(Moves about, acting cross father. SHEILA stops the comedy and begins to be seriously concerned.)

SHEILA: Oh, dear, now why's that, I wonder?
SHEILA: Once you get to a certain stage with a man, it's hard to say no.

BRI: Most women manage it. With me, at any rate. Three out of God knows how many tens of thousands I tried.

SHEILA: They didn't know a good thing when they saw it. You were the only one who gave me any pleasure.

BRI: When you first told me that I was knocked out. I walked round for days feeling like a phallic symbol. I thought well, perhaps I didn't ring the bell very often but at least I rang it loud.

('She smiles.)

She'll stick with me, I went on happily, because I've got magic super-zoom with added cold-start.

SHEILA: You have, yes. Still, not just in the past — to encourage.

BRI: Till Freddie——

SHEILA: O ye Gods——

BRI: Of all people!

SHEILA: He's never been near me.

BRI: I think we should still be honest. Even about him.

SHEILA: He leaves me cold. — Fact

BRI: And yet you'd rather spend the evening with him than me.

SHEILA: You pushed me into this drama lark. You said I should get out — I'm doing this for you.

BRI: What's his speciality? His forte. Does he keep his mac on? (i) (SHEILA faces him for several seconds. Then goes off and upstairs. BRI shrugs, turns back to the room. Sighs. JOE sneezes.)

Bless you.

(She sneezes again, falls forward on to the tray and bumps her face.)

Oops.

(She begins crying, feebly. He goes to her.)

Did she hurt? Did she bump her nose? (Props her up again.)

Better? (Looks at her closely.) You look pale, Joe. Is it: those nasty fits? Never mind. (Fondles her hand.) Lovely soft hands you've got. Like silk. Lady's hands. They've never done rough work. (Crouching by her chair.) Now. Mum's gone to take her part. Practise
BRI gives a short burst of laughter then resumes.

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(Kisses her again.)

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"The physiotherapist lady came and looked at us all today and said Josephine's shoulders show signs of improvement. She says keep on with the exercises."

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(Moves about, acting cross father. SHEILA stops the comedy and begins to be seriously concerned.)

SHEILA: Oh, dear, now why's that, I wonder?
SHEILA: No, but it's something to do. When you're up against a ---disaster of this kind——an Act of God——
(BRI clears his throat.)
It's so numbing you feel you must make some sense of it—otherwise—you'd——
BRI: Give up hope?
SHEILA: Yes. My husband doesn't feel the need to make sense of anything. He lives with despair.
BRI: (coming out of character): Did you tell him that?
SHEILA: Why not?
BRI: Bit saucy.
SHEILA: Well, don't you?
BRI: Can't argue now.
SHEILA (resuming scene): He says I shouldn't look for explanations.
BRI: He doesn't believe in God?
SHEILA: His own kind of God. A manic-depressive rugby footballer.
BRI: It's a start. Provides some basis for argument.
(He smiles.)
SHEILA: He doesn't like me praying.
BRI: You have been praying?
SHEILA: What else can I do? I look at that flawless little body, those glorious eyes, and I pray for some miracle to——
get her started. It seems, if we only knew the key or the combination, we could get her moving. Do you think the story of the Sleeping Beauty was about a spastic?
BRI: Who can say indeed? (He stands, moves about.) My dear, your child's sickness doesn't please God. In fact, it completely brings Him down.
SHEILA: Why does He allow it then?
BRI: How can we know?
SHEILA: Then how can you know it doesn't please Him?
BRI: We can't know. Only guess. It may be disease and infirmity are due to the misuse of the freedom He gave us. Perhaps they exist as a stimulus to research.
SHEILA: Research?
BRI: Against infirmity and disease.
SHEILA: But if He didn't permit disease, we shouldn't need research.
BRI: But He does so we do.
(She sighs, shakes her head.)
A DAY IN THE DEATH OF JOE EGG
ELEMENTS OF THE PERFORMANCE

The Theatre Space

The main auditorium of the Citizens Theatre features a Proscenium Arch stage. By going to http://citz.co.uk/about/technical/virtual_tours you can 'look around' the auditorium from all directions, including seeing the view from the stage. The Citizens is a traditional Victorian theatre space. What are some of the features of the main auditorium that are typical of theatres of this era?

When you saw Joe Egg, what did you notice about the way the stage was used? What did you think about the way the set was positioned? Did it take up the whole stage? How was the playing area defined? Half way through the play there’s a sudden change to the playing space the actors use. What impact did this change of space have on the audience and the relationship between the actors/audience? Why was this particularly effective in a traditional space like the Citizens Theatre?

Could Joe Egg have worked as well in a studio theatre space, like the Citizens Circle Studio? Give a reason for your answer – think about what the play would gain and what it might lose.

Read the interview with Max Jones for an insight into the Design process.

Actor/Audience Relationship

Lots of different theatrical styles are used in Joe Egg, from domestic drama to stand up comedy to high farce and all of the characters speak directly to the audience at some point. Read the interview with Director Phillip Breen to see his comments about the style of the play.

What impact did it have on the audience when characters spoke directly to them?

How did it make YOU feel? How would you describe the relationship between the actors and the audience:

• when they acted as though the audience wasn’t there, i.e. as though there was a 'fourth wall’?
• when they spoke to the audience, in character?

Which moment of addressing the audience was most memorable for you and why? Why do you think this technique was used in the play? See the interview with Miles Jupp, who plays Bri for some interesting comments on this subject.
The Design Elements

Read the interview with the Designer Max Jones if you haven’t already done so and look at the photographs of the set model box. There are also extracts from the Designer’s ‘Mood Books’ which show his original inspiration and initial ideas.

If you saw the set without any actors on it, what kind of play would you think you were going to see? What information did the set give the audience about the kind of people who lived there and their lives?

The set was very realistic and detailed. Why do you think this was important for the play? Were there any parts of the set or furniture that struck you as particularly interesting in terms of how they were used?

The designer was interested in the idea of picture frames and ‘framing’ the action. How do you see this idea reflected in the set? Were pictures - and was the action - always contained in the frame? What was the effect when it wasn’t?

How was lighting used throughout the play to create mood and atmosphere? Can you talk about any lighting effects that made a particular impact on you, and say why?

Describe the costume worn by one or two of the characters. How do you think what they wear reflects their personality? Bear in mind the play is set in the Sixties and that has an effect on costume / hair and makeup styles.

Interpretation of Themes and Issues

Read the interview with Director Phillip Breen if you haven’t already done so.

What were some of the main themes or issues the play was exploring?

Choose one or two of these themes or issues and describe how the play explored them, in terms of the story/situation/characters/relationships. What ‘message’, if any, do you think the play was trying to give? How successful was it in doing this?

Joe Egg was considered very shocking when it premiered at the Citizens Theatre in 1967 and the Lord Chamberlain tried to censor much of the action and language. Were there any parts of the play/use of language that shocked you in any way? Why? Did that get in the way of your enjoyment of the play or engagement with the characters?

Characterisation

How do you think the actors might prepare for being in a play like this? Read the interview with Miles Jupp who played Bri for his points of view. Focus on one of the characters. What did the actor playing them do to show what kind of person their character was? Think about mannerism and use of gesture, the way they
spoke as well as what they actually said and all the other ways they showed their attitude towards other characters. These are all choices actors have to make when building a character.

Miles Jupp makes the point that an actor doesn’t have to like the character they’re playing but they do have to understand why that character does what they do. How does this relate to your own experience of portraying a character?

**Audience’s Reactions throughout the Performance**

What do you think was the most engaging part of the play for the audience?

What did the audience react most to and in what way did they react? What did they laugh at? Seem surprised by? Shocked by? Saddened by? Entertained by?

Do you think there were elements of the play that the audience felt uncomfortable with? Which bits and why? How do you think people felt at the end of the show? What were they talking about most afterwards? What made the biggest impact on you and how did you feel by the end?

**A few more questions to think about**

- What do you think is the ideal target audience for Joe Egg? Why?
- Why do you think the play is called ‘A Day in the Death of Joe Egg’?
- If you had to sum the play up in one sentence, what would that sentence be?

**A DAY IN THE DEATH OF JOE EGG**

For more information, see the Citizens Theatre website at: citz.co.uk/whatson/a_day_in_the_death_of_joe_egg

You’ll find a selection of production shots, a trailer, a Compendium of Facts about the original production at the Citizens in 1967, “Memories of the opening night”, by playwright Peter Nichols, a blog from the Citizens Theatre’s Artistic Director Dominic Hill, describing why he chose Joe Egg for the main stage in 2011 and a post show discussion between Dominic Hill, Phillip Breen and Peter Nichols.

Images by Pete Le May, Toad’s Caravan and Richard Lavery.