

A DAY IN THE DEATH OF JOE EGG

PETER NICHOLS



You will be expected to explore the play from the perspective of a:

- **Performer**
- **Designer**
- **Director**

This resource is designed to help you focus on these three areas.



This is such an exciting piece of theatre – enjoy!

NOTE:

The medical term “spastic” came into use to describe cerebral palsy. The Spastics Society, a UK charity for people with cerebral palsy, was founded in 1951. Even though the term is no longer applied to people with cerebral palsy, it is a term prevalent throughout the play and so it will be referenced in this resource.

INTRODUCTION

A Day in the Death of Joe Egg is a frank and remarkable play based on the author’s experience of having a disabled child, A Day in the Death of Joe Egg is about two parents caring for their 10-year-old girl Josephine.

Josephine has cerebral palsy and, since birth, has not been able to move or speak, and experiences frequent debilitating fits. Her father Bri, a weary schoolteacher, relies on desperate black humour to deal with the situation, while her mother Sheila still nurses hopes of a miraculous recovery.

In the first act the couple play out, for the audience's benefit, the various scenes of condolence visited upon them by doctors and vicars, in comic routines that seem sadly well-rehearsed. The second act introduces another couple and Bri's mother, creating an awkward sitting-room comedy that confronts the secret angers and fantasies of a family struggling to cope. The play's treatment of taboos surrounding disability provokes both laughter and shock in the same moment, as the couple's persistent jokes fail to disguise the strain placed on their marriage.

KEY PRODUCTIONS:

- First staged in 1967 at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow
- Transferred to London's West End theatres in 1968 and opened on Broadway in the same year
- Film adaptation 1972
- Revived on Broadway 1985
- West End revival 2001 – New Ambassadors Theatre with Clive Owen as Bri. This production transferred to the Comedy Theatre (now the Harold Pinter Theatre) in 2001 with Eddie Izzard as Bri and then on Broadway in 2003
- Television version 2002 with Eddie Izzard playing Bri
- Citizens theatre staged it again in 2011 with Miriam Margolyes
- 2013 – UK production with Ralph Little as Bri
- 2013 – off-off-Broadway production

CULTURAL & SOCIAL:

- Rejected by many theatres in London's West End including the Royal Court and Hampstead. Sending it to the Citizens was a last resort for Nichols.
- Initial stages of development incorporated a four-piece band on stage to enhance the vaudeville elements
- It was agreed the play could be staged on the condition that a warning about its controversial content was issued on all promotional material.
- The subject matter was deemed taboo – the presence of a child with severe learning difficulties.
- Almost banned by the Lord Chamberlain, the play was a tremendous hit
- New conventions e.g. Sheila and Brian talking directly to the audience.

Joe Egg was instrumental in establishing the Citizens as a forward thinking and exciting theatre that was not afraid to push boundaries and that could well rival the theatres of London.

The play was written in the 1960s, which gives students a great opportunity to explore the social, historic and cultural context as the way Joe is referred to by other characters in the play demonstrate a huge contrast between the world in the 1960s and the world we live in today.



Very few marriages are perfect and this one is no different. Sheila and Bri share a sense of humour and often use this as a coping strategy, which brings the element of comedy to the play that is very touching. There is an element of realism in the play and the Family Dynamics within it are based on Nichols' own experiences of bringing up a handicapped child.

BACKGROUND

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

1967

1967 the continued presence of American troops increased further and a total of 475,000 were serving in Vietnam and the peace rallies were multiplying as the number of protesters against the war increased. The Boxer Muhammad Ali was stripped of his boxing world championship for refusing to be inducted into the US Army. In the Middle East Israel also went to war with Syria, Egypt and Jordan in the six day war and when it was over Israel controlled and occupied a lot more territory than before the war. In Britain a new type of model became a fashion sensation by the name of Twiggy and mini skirts continued to get shorter and even more popular. Also during this year new Discotheques and singles bars appeared across cities around the world and the Beatles continued to reign supreme with the release of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album. This year was also coined the 'summer of love' when young teenagers explored their sexuality, experimented with smoking pot and grooved to the music of bands such as The Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane and The Byrds. The movie industry moved with the times and produced movies that would appeal to this younger audience including *The Graduate*, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Cool Hand Luke*. TV shows included *The Fugitive* and *The Monkees* and colour television sets became popular as the price comes down and more programmes are made in colour.

BRITAIN

Famous and historic events from 1967

- Abortion Bill Passed
- Barclays opens Britain's 1st cashpoint
- Beatles release '*All You Need is Love*'
- The Foot and Mouth epidemic in Britain is the worst this century
- Breathalyser Introduced
- Celtic win the European Cup
- Donald Campbell killed trying to break own water speed record
- First Episode of The Prisoner
- Hither Green Rail Disaster
- QE2 Launched
- Radio 1 goes on air
- Stockport Air Disaster
- World's First Live Satellite Broadcast

Relevance - If staging in the same period as original:

Actor	Director	Designer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an understanding of the world - a sense of the culture - a sense of the social attitudes and importance of these to character - a sense of historical relevance - where does a character fit within this? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an understanding of the world - understand the social framework - appreciation of historical elements - cultural relevance to character, situation and plot - reactions to the play within the context of the period 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an understanding of the world - understanding cultural references - historical implications to design - fashions of the period - styles and décor - visual references

THE ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

'Play runs into trouble with censor'

'Citizens' play brings taboo out into the open'

Before it even opened, Joe Egg got into trouble with the censor and caused much concern. After much deliberation it was agreed that the play could go ahead on condition that a warning about its controversial content was issued on all promotional material and newspapers preceding its opening. It read:

The Citizens feel obliged to warn the public that this play deals with the case of a chronically retarded child and that not only the subject but the extraordinary way it is treated may possibly give offence. However such is the honesty of this play, and so grounded in it in first-hand experience that we believe it entirely vindicates its production in our theatre.'

Of course the play went on to be a great success and established The Citizens Theatre as an important theatre for new and innovative work.

Reviews

Mr. Nichols has not written a tragedy but a very clever, vehement, voluble, witty protest, which is not the same thing.

Christopher Small, The Herald

Some people may be initially offended by the idea of a retarded spastic child being the basis for a funny play. Once such prejudices have been overcome everyone should agree that Peter Nichols' 'A Day in the Death of Joe Egg' given its world premiere at the Citizens' last night is one of the most original, perceptive and brilliant plays by any modern dramatist... The play is directed by Michael Blakemore, whose depth of understanding, vivid imagination and flair for naturalistic acting assures that the production could not be bettered.

Paul Foster, Evening Times

*“To think,” said someone behind me “that you can laugh and not feel guilty.”
But that is what is so marvellous about Peter Nichols’ new play...: you can
and do laugh, and the laughter turns to awfulness of the thing into something
nearly normal, like almost any other everyday problem.*

Cordelia Oliver, The Manchester Guardian

FURTHER READING

The Citizens Theatre archive material on the original production:

<http://bit.ly/2bZZBKO>

An article from The Herald (2011) including an interview with Peter Nichols:

<http://bit.ly/2bYcg1s>

THE ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

Caring for a child with severe learning difficulties can be challenging. Bri and Sheila cope with their situation through a series of role plays and creating characters for Joe. This was a different time. Today's society is a little more sympathetic towards understanding people with special needs but we can see from the play that Bri and Sheila's experiences were different. Pam's speech goes some way to illustrating society's attitude towards disability when she talks about things that are 'N.P.A. – Non-Physically Attractive.' But what is Joe's condition and how does it manifest itself?

CEREBRAL PALSY

Cerebral palsy is the general term for a number of neurological conditions that affect movement and co-ordination. Neurological conditions are caused by problems in the brain and nervous system.

Specifically, cerebral palsy is caused by a problem in the parts of the brain responsible for controlling muscles. The condition can occur if the brain develops abnormally or is damaged before, during or shortly after birth.

SPASTIC CEREBRAL PALSY

Present in around 75-88% of people with cerebral palsy, spasticity means the muscle tone is tight and stiff causing a decreased range of movement. As the muscle tone is so tight, spasticity can be very painful with muscles often going into spasm. It can affect many different areas of the body.

SYMPTOMS OF CEREBRAL PALSY

The symptoms of cerebral palsy normally become apparent during the first three years of a child's life.

The main symptoms are:

- muscle stiffness or floppiness (hypotonia)
- muscle weakness
- random and uncontrolled body movements
- balance and co-ordination problems

These symptoms can affect different areas of the body and vary in severity from person to person. Some people only have minor problems, whereas others are severely disabled.

Many people with cerebral palsy also have a number of associated problems, including:

- repeated fits or seizures
- drooling problems and swallowing difficulties (dysphagia)

Some people with the condition may have communication and learning difficulties, although intelligence is often unaffected.

RELEVANCE:

- An understanding of the condition is extremely important when playing or directing an actor to play Joe. It is important to respect the condition and how it effects someone physically and verbally.

- It is also important to build an understanding of how the other characters react towards Joe.
 - * Bri and Sheila are her parents. They live with and care for her;
 - * Grace is her Grandmother and is used to her;
 - * Freddie and Pam are 'friends' of the family but are meeting her for the first time.

- Although almost fifty years later the issues raised in the play because of Joe's disability are still seen as taboo by some. How do you think a modern audience would react to Joe?

PLOT SUMMARY

Act One:

Bri, an amateur painter and a discontented and unsuccessful teacher in a comprehensive school, and his wife Sheila, a homemaker and part-time amateur actor, live in the southwestern suburbs of London. They are the parents of one child, a seriously physically impaired and mentally disabled girl, Josephine, or Joe Egg, now ten years old. In a brief opening scene, before the lights come up on the set, Bri, an exasperated schoolteacher, tells off his pupils for their unruly behaviour. Then he leaves, and the lights reveal the setting for the rest of the play, the living room of Bri and Sheila's house. This room is pleasant in an unpretentious way and would be unremarkable except for two personal touches: The walls are decorated with two of Bri's paintings, both of cowboy subjects, and among the other articles of furniture is evidence of Sheila's devotion to all living things—a bird in a cage, a tank with fish, and potted plants. A further sign of this devotion occurs in the first words Sheila speaks, as she shoos two cats out to the kitchen. The implied kitchen is reached through a workable doorway to one side, while a second workable doorway leads to a front hall with both the front door to the house and stairs going up.

Shortly before Christmas, Bri comes home from his day of teaching, cynical and frustrated with his occupation and, perhaps, his marriage and family. Bri and Sheila's conversation reveals that Sheila, although she probably suffered more initially, has adjusted to being the parent of Joe Egg better than Bri has, but at the cost of having no time for Bri and of deluding herself with signs of improvement in Joe. Joe arrives in a wheelchair, having been brought home from her Spastics' Nursery on the bus. Joe has no control over her legs and arms and has to be propped wherever she is put; in her chair she sits with the upper part of her body leaning forward on the tray. All she can say is "Aaah." Bri and Sheila take good care of her physically, and this care is clearly habitual with both of them; also habitual is the way they cope psychologically with this difficult situation—by making rather harsh jokes and by play-acting with Joe cast in various roles.

Later they reminisce about their wedding, the birth of Joe, and their gradual realisation that Joe was not a 'normal' child. Their reminiscence takes the form of more play-acting, involving satirical sketches of incompetent doctors and a clergyman. In all these brief scenes Sheila plays herself, and Bri plays the other men. Sheila regards the illness of her child as being in some ways a punishment for her own premarital promiscuity and her being pregnant at the time of her wedding. Bri and Sheila both exit, and the act ends with a short scene in which Joe, suddenly able-bodied, skips, sings a rhyme about Mrs Difficulty, and invites the audience to enjoy the interval and to return for the second act.

ACT TWO:

In the second act, in the evening of the same day, Sheila returns from her play rehearsal, bringing along her friend and sponsor (and an old school-fellow of Bri's), the rich-by-inheritance Freddie Underwood, and his wife Pamela. Freddie, plagued with guilt feelings about his wealth, has become a meddling socialist do-gooder; after meeting Bri, who has spent the evening painting another cowboy picture, and meeting Joe, Freddie advises Bri and Sheila to put Joe away in an institution. His fascist wife Pam, devoted to PLU (people like us) and repelled by anyone NPA (not physically attractive), in an aside to the audience recommends euthanasia. Both Freddie and Pam urge Bri and Sheila to "put her away," but in different senses. Bri's mother Grace also comes in, with a cardigan she is knitting for Joe. She, like Sheila, has patience and hope for Joe, but she and Sheila do not get along. Grace blames Sheila for all the problems of her son and granddaughter.

Joe has an epileptic fit, clearly a frequent occurrence. Freddie and Pam go to the chemist's shop for some medicine, but, while Sheila is rushing about and Grace is too self-absorbed to notice, Bri tries to kill Joe by exposing her to the cold. He first attempts to leave her outdoors in the back garden, but does not have the heart to do it, so he leaves her in the back seat of his car. After the others have reassembled, Bri brings Joe in, saying that he thinks "it's all over." Joe is, indeed, very cold, but they all rush out with her to a hospital.

The final brief scene takes place the next morning. Joe has recovered, and Bri, Sheila, and Joe

are back home again. Sheila, ever sanguine, is planning to go on with business as usual; she even speaks of leaving Joe in a residential hospital for a few weeks so that Bri and she can take a vacation. Bri, however, has packed a suitcase: He leaves, abandoning Sheila and Joe. Sheila remains, making plans and talking to her pets.

CHARACTERS

BRIAN (BRI)

Bri is a thirty-three-year-old schoolteacher in Bristol, England. Bri is an adept comedian, jokester and mimic who has found that humour is the only escape from or cure for the reality of living with a spastic child. He loves his wife, Sheila, and their daughter, Joe, but feels that circumstances (an unexpected pregnancy and ensuing medical malpractice) have thrown him into an untenable situation. He is moody, emotionally spontaneous, and deeply jealous of Joe for usurping Sheila's attention. An aspiring painter who has lost the creative drive and taken solace in drinking, he dislikes and is ineffective in his job as a schoolteacher. To him, God is a manic-depressive rugby player. Bri is very cynical and will not tolerate false hopes about Joe's condition. Although he propels the elaborate farce that he and Sheila enact to fulfill their life with Joe, he cannot understand why Joe must live, and finally he acts on his impulse to commit euthanasia.



SHEILA

Sheila, Bri's thirty-five-year-old wife. Sheila is an industrious and warm-hearted woman who loves living things. Besides looking after Bri and Joe, she cares for a menagerie of pets and houseplants. A decade of hard work and frustrated motherhood have left her weary and somewhat humourless. She thinks carefully about human behaviour and believes in psychology and the power of the subconscious. She harbours deep guilt about Joe's condition and feels that her earlier promiscuity and the fear of motherhood it gave her caused her to

inhibit Joe's birth and thus damage the child. Although Sheila has no patience for Bri's self-pity, she plays along with his humour and farcical approach to their shared tragedy. In her heart, however, she resents his cynicism and clings to her faith, dreaming that she will someday see her daughter miraculously become a full human being.



JOSEPHINE (JOE)

Josephine (Joe), a ten-year-old spastic girl. Joe is a pretty child who looks physically normal but has cerebral palsy. She is epileptic, multiplegic, and almost totally incapable of expression or activity. Her limbs are stiff, and she must be propped up; she is susceptible to illness and seizures; and her feeding, medication, and bodily functions require constant care and attention. At best, she looks about vacantly and moans feebly. She spends her days at a school for spastics.



FREDDIE UNDERWOOD

Freddie Underwood, Bri's college friend, now an affluent industrialist, a socialist, and a director of amateur theatre. Freddie is hearty and hale and seems older than his thirty-three years. Likable and good-spirited, he is eager to help Sheila and Bri. Freddie is a cautious rationalist who clings to law and order, however, and he considers Bri's and Sheila's play-acting with Joe to be an unhealthy and destructive response to the child's condition. He argues theoretically with Bri against euthanasia.



PAMELA UNDERWOOD

Pamela Underwood, Freddie's wife. Pamela is a postured and fashionable woman who is obsessed with propriety and appearances. She detests anything "N.P.A." (not physically attractive) and therefore feels no compassion, merely disgust, for Joe, to whom she refers as the "weirdie." Pamela is irritable and impatient and cannot fathom Freddie's desire to help Bri and Sheila. A basically self-centred woman, she devotes all of her attention, with great pride, to her husband and their three beautiful children.



GRACE

Grace, Bri's mother, a sixty-five-year-old widow. Grace is a fastidious suburbanite who appreciates her routine and the small diversions that fill her life. She chatters freely and cheerfully but, like her son, is subject to moods of gloom and self-pity. She is proud of the sacrifices she made for her husband and son, and she considers Sheila to be inadequate as a wife for Bri and mother for Joe.



DISABILITY AND SOCIETY

KEY THEMES

There are several key themes that can be found within the play. Some of these are universal but others relate specifically to this text.

This is possibly the most obvious element that comes from the play given that the central character is a disabled child. Joe's level of disability is high and her total dependency on her parents is a main feature of the drama. In the script, her wheelchair is placed centre stage giving her the prime position for the action. She faces forward towards the audience so that we are never allowed to forget her and, once we've seen her, she is impossible to forget. We watch how the other characters behave towards her and how their behaviour and attitudes are influenced by her.

We look at her and we wonder – how would it feel to be her; what would it be like to be responsible for her? The questions are not glibly resolved.

Clare Brennan, Review, Liverpool Playhouse, 2013.

Nichols also gives each character an individual voice regarding their attitudes towards disability. The direct address technique used allows each character to voice their opinion openly to the audience. None so clearly as Pam who thinks that the only answer is euthanasia.

Joe becomes a metaphor for society and the disabled. Bri and Sheila cope with humour. It's their responsibility and so they try and get on with life; Grace seems to have no opinion at all and gets on with things, accepting the situation. Freddie wants to solve the issues by hitting things head on with suggestions that might help the household but not address the central problem, and Pam wants to get rid of the central problem altogether. Despite the varied responses of the three external characters, they all want Joe to be 'put away'.

It's difficult to see that attitudes to extreme disability have improved much since Peter Nichols first wrote his ground-breaking black comedy inspired by the experience of bringing up his own brain-damaged daughter in the 1960s. Despite the intervening decades we are still coming to terms with the issue – no matter how much we might have been moved at the triumphant spectacle of the Paralympics last summer.

Jonathan Brown, Review, Liverpool Playhouse, 2013

COPING IN ADVERSE SITUATIONS

Brian and Sheila have separate ways of coping. Sheila tells us that she only joins in the joking to please Bri. She tells us that after we have seen the two play out their story at the end of Act One. This has theatrical impact as we believe the couple to be engaging in a shared experience. Here we learn that Sheila does this to help Bri cope. It is Brian's humour that, not only gets him through the day, but provides much of the comedy for the audience.

Bri has **humour**, Sheila has **hope**.

Sheila's aptitude for hope is vast and Nichols presents her sympathetically—as if he himself shares and advocates her hope. She is kind to all living things: her plants and pets, her friends, various charitable causes (such as unwed mothers), her husband (although she is less attentive than she should be to him), and, above all, her unfortunate daughter Joe. Nichols suggests, however, that there may be something a little unhealthy about Sheila's kindness; she seems almost to prefer that the objects of her kindness have a pathetic and maimed quality so that she can feel sorry for them and take care of them more.

Bri is Sheila's foil, especially with regard to her hope. He goes along with Sheila's folly, as he perceives it, but it has been several years since he has been able to even partially share it. He does not hate Joe, but he regards her as a hopeless case. Much of the dialogue in the first act, even though it is mostly comic in tone and seems at first to only provide exposition but then it reveals not this profound difference in attitude between the characters but also the fact that both Bri and Sheila are aware of it, and each knows that the other knows.

GUILT

There is a tremendous amount of guilt felt by characters in the play. Sheila's belief that she causes Joe to be born this way due to her sexual promiscuity is the explicit reflection of guilt. She has struggled with the guilt this has caused and her response is reflective of the attitudes of society at the time. Her guilt coupled with her maternal instinct join to produce a fierce sense of protection for Joe. This, added to her hope, makes the situation a farcical one for Brian.

Pam brushes off any guilt she may feel at being repulsed by anyone that is NPA. She knows it is not right to express these concerns publically but her monologue is a clear indication of her strength of feeling. Freddie's guilt at having inherited money prompts him to donate to many charities in attempt to feel better about his financial situation. He wants to do good and the way he can attempt to do this is by offering money and a British positive attitude.

Bri's guilt shows itself often as he battles his feelings towards Joe. His feelings are mixed. He resents that Joe has ruined his marriage and the life they might have known. His action throughout swing from complete care for his daughter through to attempting to kill her by leaving her out in the cold. His behaviour seems irrational but maybe, to him, it's the only answer. A way out for him, for his wife and for his daughter.

RESPONSIBILITY

The theme of responsibility is another explicit element of the play. Joe's dependency on Bri and Sheila has been relentless and is never ending. The couple have shown great commitment in looking after their daughter. This is echoed by Grace's sense of responsibility to her own child, Bri. The bond they have with her is strong. Even in the fantasy character they have created for her, they share a common understanding of what she might like or dislike. They communicate with her, giving her a voice and interpreting the 'Aaaahs' that Joe vocalises. We learn very soon of Joe's reliance on medication to control her convulsions and the concern that Sheila voices if the medicine is not available. We learn that Joe has to be cared for fully including changing her nappy when wet. Bri and Sheila have no choice, they have to take responsibility for Joe. There is no question that she should not feel any discomfort or distress. It is this complete care for her that sets up the shock at Bri's lack of responsibility in his actions at the end of the play.

The theatrical implications are also clear. Joe has to be carried, moved, placed and positioned

in the space. Apart from the fantasy skipping sequence at the end of Act One and the convulsive and spasmodic movement that she demonstrates throughout, all other movement is dictated to by the other characters. They position her wheelchair and they position her when they carry her into the living room. The strong image of Sheila carrying Joe in following Pam's monologue to the audience is powerful. Pam has just spoken of how the severely disabled should be 'put to sleep' and Sheila enters on cue carrying Joe in her arms. The responsibility is very clear.

JOE AS AN ALLEGORY

This is an interesting concept but worth considering in terms of theatre. Some people think that Nichols gives us a number of hints that Joe herself might be taken allegorically. Which means the character can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning.

She might, for example, represent:

- **England** - Freddie speaks of "the whole country giggling its way to disaster"
- **Christianity** - there are numerous allusions to Christmas, and in act 2 an offstage children's chorus is heard singing "Once in Royal David's City," after which Bri and Sheila sing "Away in a Manger"
- The **academic world** - Bri is hopelessly cynical about his and Freddie's education and about his own teaching.

The state of the country at the time of writing, religion and education could be seen as broken, damaged or deficient. Joe is 'broken' in many ways. She is trapped, cannot express herself effectively and cannot develop from her situation. Bri and Sheila have lost faith in many aspects of society through their experience of being Joe's parents. Bri in particular has become cynical.

Nichols offers two responses to these institutions: either stay with them and keep hoping, or get out while you still can. We've seen how Sheila clings to hope whereas as Bri, by his actions at the end of the play, opts for the latter and 'gets out' of his situation.

This is a fascinating theory when we think of different styles of theatre. Joe as an allegory could inspire interesting exploration of the text through non-naturalistic styles of practical work.

THEATRICAL STYLES:

Many different theatrical styles are used in Joe Egg. Nichols constructs the play drawing from many influences. These being:

BRECHTIAN DIRECT ADDRESS:

All characters speak directly to us in character. The difference between a pure Brecht direct address and the ones in Joe Egg is that in the speeches directly comment on the action. The actors stay in character and, although they break the fourth wall, they stay in role. Nichols allows them to speak openly to the audience, exposing private thoughts and fears. Bri and Sheila use the direct address to provide us with useful exposition. Not only we do learn vital information about Joe, we are able to absorb so much background which helps us understand why the Bri and Sheila behave as they do.

- What effect does the direct address speeches have on the audience?
- What different skills must the actor bring to rehearsal and performance?
- How does talking to an audience change the vocal and physical patterns for the actor?
- What is required of an audience when a character speaks directly at them?
- Do our feelings towards characters change after we hear them speak directly to us?
- What design opportunities are there for a play with such a convention?

DOMESTIC DRAMA:

The 'kitchen sink drama' that was emerging during this post-war period allowed a slice of life to be presented on stage. If we take away the direct address speeches in Joe Egg what we see is very much a domestic drama. We are watching a family coping with a disabled child and the pressures that brings. We could feel uncomfortable watching this private display but the direct addresses make it permissible for us to watch.

- How does an audience feel when watching the family, especially in the more provide moment e.g. Joe's fit?
- How does the drama of Act Two feel after the humour of Act One?

- What feelings are evoked by watching Bri and Sheila's situation on stage?
- The drama is very real and natural in contrast to the direct address sections. What are the implications for the designers of Joe Egg?
- How does a director ensure the drama sections are effective?

STAND UP COMEDY:

This is clearly a convention to help the audience learn about the family through humour and comedy. The 'vegetable' episode should not be funny in content but the caricaturing of the doctor diffuses the seriousness of the situation and we glean the information through laughter. When Eddie Izzard played Bri he was allowed a certain amount of freedom to interact with the audience. His career as a stand-up comedian made him a perfect casting for Bri and he was able to utilise his skills to ensure that the audience entered into a 'dialogue' with him as Bri.

- What skills do the actors have to consider when exploring these sections of the play?
- How should they be played? How would you direct them?
- If you were casting the play – who would be your Brian?

HIGH FARCE:

In Act Two we have moments of high farce. The action becomes larger than life and the behaviour of the characters becomes almost farcical as they interact with each other.

- What effect do these sections have on an audience?
- The actors in Joe Egg have to be versatile – what would you do in auditions to ensure you were casting the right actors for your production?
- Imagine you are the director addressing your cast of Joe Egg on the first day of rehearsal. How would you introduce the play to them?

There are also undertones of **Music Hall** and **Vaudeville** which were convention the audiences would have recognised. Interwoven in the styles above, the Music Hall feel is important and probably why in the initial development, a small band was incorporated at the side of the stage.

To explore this style further, take a look at:

The Entertainer (1957)	John Osborne
A Taste of Honey (1958)	Sheelagh Delaney
Oh, What a Lovely War! (1963)	Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop

Plays of the period that explored social issues incorporating music hall and direct address techniques.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL:

Nicholson based this play on his own experiences of parenting a disabled child. He has written about the challenges of caring for such a child with expertise. It is documented that Sheila is based on his wife, Thelma and Joe is based on his daughter, Abigail.

(An edited extract from Diaries 1969 - 1977 by Peter Nichols, published by Nick Hern Books.)

July 17th 1969: 'Poor Abo (Abigail), our parcel of damaged goods, lives on, despite repeated promises. The doctor who delivered her has never spoken to us from that day to this. The Euthanasia Bill which I supported, was defeated in the Lords and the Times rejoiced. Our next-door neighbour, Doctor Alan Norton - in his book New Dimensions in Medicine - agrees. In person he told me it would do no more harm than good to alter the vague conditions in which doctors are able to help the dying out of their misery.

All right, I argued, but it's in places like Hortham (Abigail's residential hospital) that one looks for courage and mercy from the outside world.

What's easier than to sweep those poor idiots under the carpet and forget them?

By sustaining such lives, society is relieved of the guilt of their deaths...

May 11th 1971: Notice in the Times column of Births, Marriages and Deaths.

**Nichols, Abigail, eldest daughter of Peter and Thelma, at Hortham Hospital, Bristol.
Funeral Friday, Canford cemetery: Family flowers only. Donations, if required, to the
hospital.'**



STAGING THE PLAY

As with any play, there will be several ways it could be staged. Things to consider:

Location:	London 1960s
Setting:	Living room – ‘pleasant and comfortable’
Social Implication:	Middle class family
Number of characters:	Six
Themes:	(See above)
Style:	Naturalistic with non-naturalistic direct address episodes
Time of year:	Nearly Christmas

STAGE CONFIGURATION:

- Proscenium Arch - traditional box-set – living room
- In-the-round - to represent that Bri, Sheila and Joe are trapped by their circumstances
- Traverse - to heighten the interaction with the audience during the direct address sections
- Thrust - to push the action right into the audience, they will be closer to Joe

The theme and content could inspire other interpretations, for example:

- **Symbolic e.g.**

I will set the play in a hospital ward. It will look like a living-room but all furniture and props will have a hospital feel. Costumes will be medical uniforms e.g. Bri will be in surgeon’s scrubs, Pam in a ward sister’s uniform, Grace will be dressed as an orderly...

- **Expressionistic e.g.**

My set will be bare. Furniture will be made from tubular metal and made to look like Joe's wheelchair. There will be an outsize wheelchair at the back of the stage which will remind the audience at all times of the family's disability both real and metaphorical.

- **Minimalistic e.g.**

My set will be minimalist and only have the furniture I need. I will be presenting some the dialogue in a physical theatre style and I want to be able to use an open space.

Comments from **Max Jones**

Designer

A Day in the Death of Joe Egg

The Citizens Theatre, Glasgow, 2011

'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 eras. This is a play that spends a lot more time looking in than it does looking out.'

'I wasn't alive in the sixties and although it wasn't that long ago, this 'contemporary' play is now a period piece. I tried to create a 'visual world' in which I could immerse myself when starting to work on the designs. This took 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' - a 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.'

Es Devlin discusses the design of Joe Egg for the London (2001) and Broadway (2003) productions of Joe Egg

<http://bit.ly/2bYdTMX>

In this article you can also find:

- An introduction to the Broadway production
- An interview with Laurence Boswell, Director
- More information on the author
- Activities – *DISCOVERING YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE*



UNIT 4 – AT A GLANCE.

This is taken for the specification:

Look at each section.

How you could apply what you know about *A day in the Death of Joe Egg*?

What areas do you need further study?

Section A: 55 marks

A question exploring how the text can be performed in the theatre. Learners will be expected to approach the text as theatre performers, directors and designers.

Learners should consider:

- interpretation of character (e.g. through motivation and interaction)
- vocal and physical performing skills including interaction
- different types of stage
- character positioning and movement/proxemics
- design elements including:
 - o sound
 - o lighting
 - o set and props
 - o costume, hair and make-up
- how live theatre, seen as part of the course, influences their decision making and understanding of how drama and theatre is developed and performed.

Section B: 40 marks

- An essay question on how the text can be adapted for a contemporary audience. Learners should consider:
 - the social, historical and cultural context of the text
 - the influence of contemporary theatre practice
 - how live theatre, seen as part of the course, influences their decision making and understanding of how drama and theatre is developed and performed
 - how the text approaches its theme.

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