

**MALTHOUSE  
PROMPT**

# IT JUST STOPPED

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STEPHEN SEWELL

PROMPT PACK / EDUCATION RESOURCE

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# IT JUST STOPPED

**By Stephen Sewell**

## Education Notes

**A Co-production between Malthouse Theatre and Company B Belvoir**



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## ***A NOTE FROM MALTHOUSE EDUCATION***

Malthouse Education has prepared these Education Notes to assist students and teachers in their study of '**It Just Stopped**'. They are not a definitive view but rather a document that seeks to illuminate the play and extend the experience beyond the immediate performance.

We hope that students will actively engage in a discussion of the play in relation to its style, its story, its stagecraft, and how the themes and issues contained therein may be relevant to contemporary Australian society, contemporary Australian theatre and, indeed, their own lives.

Meg Upton and Margaret Steven  
Malthouse Education 2006.

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# It Just Stopped

By Stephen Sewell

Direction: Neil Armfield  
 Design: Stephen Curtis  
 Lighting Design: Paul Jackson  
 Composer: John Rodgers

## EDUCATION NOTES

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## SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION.....

### GLOBALISATION AND CONSUMERISM

Today's consumption is undermining the environmental resource base. It is exacerbating inequalities. And the dynamics of the consumption-poverty-inequality-environment nexus are accelerating. If the trends continue without change — not redistributing from high-income to low-income consumers, not shifting from polluting to cleaner goods and production technologies, not promoting goods that empower poor producers, not shifting priority from consumption for conspicuous display to meeting basic needs — today's problems of consumption and human development will worsen.

... The real issue is not consumption itself but its patterns and effects.... Inequalities in consumption are stark.

**Globally, the 20% of the world's people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures — the poorest 20% a minuscule 1.3%.**

**More specifically, the richest fifth:**

- Consume 45% of all meat and fish, the poorest fifth 5%
- Consume 58% of total energy, the poorest fifth less than 4%
- Have 74% of all telephone lines, the poorest fifth 1.5%
- Consume 84% of all paper, the poorest fifth 1.1%
- Own 87% of the world's vehicle fleet, the poorest fifth less than 1%

Runaway growth in consumption in the past 50 years is putting strains on the environment never before seen.

— *Human Development Report 1998 Overview, United Nations Development Programme*

Though most societies were efficient for the time in which they were formed, powerful nations disintegrated when too large a share of their labor was diverted to unnecessary tasks. Some societies, such as the European aristocratic structures, needlessly expended labor, resources, and capital to support militaristic elite bent on plundering neighbors and their own workers. Each of these societies became locked into a wasteful system of production and distribution. The United States is also locked into a wasteful expenditure of labor, resources, and industry.

— *J.W. Smith, The World's Wasted Wealth 2, (Institute for Economic Democracy, 1994), p.4.*

The ferocious pursuit of getting and spending has a long history. The feverish pursuit of fashion is just as ancient. ... But in the past the acquisitive part of society was a tiny one. Its indomitable pursuit of possessions satisfied more than personal greed and personal whim [and extravagances] ... It served important social and political functions too [such as the ability to] mark the divinity of a king, ... underline the exclusive status of the nobility, or the professional status of lawyers, doctors, and the educated elite. *To preserve those distinctions sumptuary laws might be required to reinforce the effects of poverty, to buttress the conservative effects of custom, to insist on the unavailability of a desired cloth, to prevent commercial cunning from bringing it within the reach of those who aspired to wear it.*

— Neil McKendrik, John Brewer, J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, (Hutchinson, 1983), p.2 (Emphasis added)

## The US and Australia

### Australia-United States Relations

Australia has long been a close friend and security ally of the United States. At no time in the history of our two countries have relations been stronger than they are today. The common values we share and our historical and cultural bonds underpin the enduring strength of our defence and security alliance. The United States is Australia's most important economic partner. Our trade and investment links will deepen under the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

### Defence and Security

At the heart of government relations between Australia and the United States is the ANZUS Treaty, signed in 1951. This treaty binds our two countries in mutual cooperation on military and security issues and contains a commitment that both Australia and the United States will act to meet common dangers.

Australia was one of the first countries to join the United States in the coalition to fight terrorism following the attacks on 11 September 2001. Australia invoked the ANZUS Treaty for the first time on 14 September 2001, and has since made military contributions to the US-led campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The alliance is the foundation of defence and security cooperation between Australia and the United States. This cooperation increases Australia's ability to protect itself and its interests by providing access to world-leading defence hardware and technologies and to vital intelligence capabilities. Interoperability with US forces and the ability to contribute to multinational coalitions are central to Australia's defence policies, acquisition and training.

Such cooperation supports joint efforts against terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Australia supports the continued commitment of the United States to the Asia-Pacific. The relationships the United States maintains with regional states, including Australia, are central to the stability of the

Asia-Pacific. Further information about the defence relationship is available on the [Department of Defence website](#).

## **Australia and the United States - Foreign Policy Brief**

- A strong and close relationship with the United States serves Australia's national interests and brings us significant benefits.
- Australia's longstanding partnership with the United States is founded on shared values and ideals. We both have deep democratic traditions and aspirations. We share elements of a common heritage and a record of cooperation and sacrifice.
- No other country can match the economic size and global reach of the United States in international affairs, nor will any do so in the near future. Australia's ability to influence and work with the United States is essential to our prosperity and security.
- Australia's alliance relationship with the United States has endured for over 50 years and remains vital and relevant to meeting the security challenges of terrorism and weapons proliferation that we face today.
- The alliance gives Australia privileged access to technology and joint training that maintains our defence capability and enhances our ability to protect ourselves. The alliance gives Australia intelligence that helps fight terrorism. And by providing one of the anchors for US engagement in our region, the alliance makes an important contribution to the stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific.
- The United States is Australia's single most important economic partner. It is one of our top merchandise trading partners, our largest services trading partner and the major source of foreign direct investment
- The Free Trade Agreement with the United States will deepen our economic integration with the world's most dynamic economy and increase Australia's wealth.
- US global leadership is vital to global security and prosperity. By its alliance relationship, Australia recognises that the United States should not be expected to act alone to meet common challenges. The alliance does not limit Australia's sovereignty - we each have our own national interests and priorities and pursue these vigorously

**Source: [www.dfat.gov.au](http://www.dfat.gov.au) – The official website of the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade**



## **INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN SEWELL, PLAYWRIGHT OF 'IT JUST STOPPED'**

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### ***Stephen where did the idea for the play 'It Just Stopped' come from?***

The easy ones first! I honestly don't know but I would say that the title came first – *It Just Stopped* – I thought it was a great title. As soon as I had the title I had the beginning. It may be worthwhile to explain how I write. I'm not an intellectual in that I'm not a person who studies a subject, develops themes and from those works out a structure, plots it out and then finally writes the dialogue. I'm not that type of writer. My writing begins really with writing the first line. I'll choose a name off the top of my head and then I'll write a line and then another and so on while it remains interesting, then I'll introduce a new character or a new idea. So, my plays really follow dialogue and character wherever they decide to take me. The experience of writing the play is one of *dreaming*. At the beginning of the writing of a play I don't know where it will end up. I just know it's going to end somewhere.

### ***Did you visualise a particular world?***

No, although I have been interested for a while in the relationship between the United States and Australia [Stephen's last play with Playbox/Malthouse was the award winning *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*] and one of the first ideas that occurred to me was to create an American world, an American theatrical world in what is revealed to be a thoroughly Australian situation.

### ***What has been the journey of the script from the initial draft to this point – the last few weeks of rehearsal? Has the play changed greatly?***

It's been a very interesting experience. What initially happened was that I wrote the script and I was very happy with it. It came through a long development, a type of *dramaturgical* theatre that I'm interested in making and being part of. I would call it *dream theatre* - it's not a naturalism and it's not even a realism. I think that in this country we have a great tradition of that kind of dream theatre; I don't think naturalism is so deeply rooted in the Australian psyche, though we often mistake what we write for a kind of naturalism or realism. You may know that I began my career in the Pram Factory in Melbourne and naturalism and realism really had nothing to do with the aesthetic we were developing at that stage.

*It Just Stopped* came out of my history of working in that way and it is a kind of dream play. Within the context of the play there are shifting realities – a dream within a dream within a dream. This gives the playwright and the creative team great licence to be very theatrical. I think naturalism is *anti-theatrical* in form. Once you are in naturalism you are stuck there and there is really nowhere to go, whereas, if you reject naturalism and realism then anything can happen on stage. As soon as anything can happen on stage then it has the potential to become theatrically very exciting. That is a style of theatre I have been exploring for some time.

This particular play begins in an American world, a world that is familiar to audience members from our readings of the American naturalists. A lot of people enjoyed

reading it because of that. The first act of the play is very much in that style –the witty bantering intellectual style of those American writers – even though the situation appears to be quite absurd and strange. But, in the second act it becomes much darker and moves much further away from those sources as the world of dreams is revealed to be the true nature of the world of the play. When you read back through the script you realise that the play has had a dream-like quality from the beginning. What was interesting was that many people I know and respect and whom I have worked with in the industry, liked the first act but did not like the second act. One of the issues in the first week of rehearsals was to ‘fix’ the second act. I didn’t actually think there was anything wrong with the second act but I decided to go with it. So, the dream-within-a-dream elements of the second act began to be ironed out and it was becoming a straight narrative. The overall model or style of the play was being transformed into one where you begin in a time and a place at one point, and then you finish some hours later in the same place - it’s changed a little but it is essentially the same. The idea was one of making it a more conventional play with a more conventional structure. With some effort I did that and I got rid of the elements of the play that I loved but I did it because I respected the opinions of the team I was working with. However, as it happened I had to go to Adelaide and I was away for a day or so and when I returned Neil [Armfield, the director] told me that while I was away they read the original Act Two and now decided that they really liked it. I thought that was fantastic in that after all the work everyone had done we had reached a point of understanding about what was actually in the play.

Since then I have worked with Neil and we have looked at the re-writes – some of which work really well – and have placed them into the original structure which is exciting. It is theatrically exciting and also frightening because it may not work for an audience. We’ve done a week of reading, thinking and discussing these points and it’s perfectly clear to us but will we be able to make it perfectly clear to an audience in ninety minutes on stage?

***Stephen, one aspect of the Theatre Studies course is to explore the role of a dramaturge. Have you worked with a dramaturge in relation to writing ‘It Just Stopped’?***

No I haven’t. My process is one of dramaturging my work with the director and cast in the rehearsal room and also through the workshop process. I used to chair the National Playwright’s Centre and Conference so I have a relationship with dramaturges and dramaturgy and I have a respect for some dramaturges but, especially with the work that I do, I would expect the dramaturge to know more than me in order to understand what I am doing and this is not really possible. I feel like an explorer and for somebody to tell me that I’m getting it wrong means that they’ve already been there and I don’t think anyone has been where I am going. I should say, however, that great directors, like Neil, tend to have a very good dramaturgical sense themselves. It has been quite wonderful working with Neil again.

***Can you see from your role in the rehearsal room that there will be any differences between the written script and the script in performance?***

No so far but we are really only at the beginning of the process. However, there may well be. There is a design that will have some impact. Stephen Curtis has created a very beautiful design which is almost locked in. I think that we are now at the point where the director takes over. In terms of direction, I think that Neil has some quite clear ideas about what he wants. For example the way he has cast the play is a big part of how he sees the final production. I don’t anticipate that there will be any big surprises for me in the course of the rehearsal but this is a process and Neil is about

to enter it at the point where his creativity comes to the fore and where his mind is working hard and I hope and anticipate that there will be some changes and directorial decisions that will feed into the final production. The most exciting thing for a writer is to see on opening night a work that is better than the text, not less than but more than the text that they wrote.

***Have you had a role in the rehearsal room?***

Yes, I have. My role is that of the writer, naturally, and what we have been doing so far is looking very closely at the text. In a rehearsal, even if it was Shakespeare, the director and the actors would read the script and talk about the script continually, trying to work out what the script is saying, what the writer intended, what the elements are. This is a process that is designed to bring everyone onto the same page and forge a production unit. There are many complex elements to these first forays into the text or into the play before we even get on our feet and start rehearsing. In this particular case the writer is alive and, in addition to the familiarising process, there is an opportunity to rewrite and rework the text. That has been my function in the rehearsal room.

***Stephen have you had any input into the design of the production?***

There are elements of the design that are written in the text. The particular one that everyone has embraced is the jellybean wall which is quite a spectacular feature of the design. But, apart from that no. I mean design is the province of the director and the designer. There is no real need for them to discuss it with the writer. Both Neil and Stephen [Curtis the designer] have kept me informed about where their thoughts are and what they are doing as a courtesy. I must say that I am very pleased about the jellybean wall!

***What do you see as being the role of playwrights in contemporary society?***

I think that playwrights are part of an increasingly rare and necessary breed of human beings who are independent thinkers. They're not just thinkers but are people who regard the life of the human spirit and the life of spiritual and moral values as being significant and important. They exist like artists of various fields outside the main structures of power. Most writers in the world today are paid writers and I'm thinking of journalists when I say that. It is very clear that the idea of the campaigning journalist, the take-no-prisoners journalist searching for the truth has been radically revised since Woodward and Bernstein exposed the then President of the United States, Nixon, for the criminal that he was. Journalists have become more functionaries of the media moguls and more mouthpieces of the media perhaps like they were in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries – propaganda merchants rather than independent thinkers. So, what I am saying is that in a time when power relations are becoming much stronger, when the control of thinking is becoming stronger and the ability of people to express themselves is becoming more and more eroded, then the necessity and value of playwrights and artists increases as voices of human need and human hopes outside of the structures of power that society is controlled by.

***So, is 'It Just Stopped' a political play?***

It is a political play but it's not a political play in the sense that a lot of my work is. I am known as a political playwright but the politics of this play are not to do with Liberal versus Labor – they are a deeper politics that are rarely talked about here.

What I mean by this is something like the following: the end of the Cold War brought about the destruction not only of the old Soviet system, but of the kinds of international and internal relations that had kept what used to be called "The West" going. Not only were international alliances and allegiances – indeed entire countries, such as Yugoslavia – no longer needed, and consequently thrown into chaos, but the dynamic balance of the old class relations – the relations that exist between the various classes that make up society - could be re-thought by the conquering nations. They no longer needed to make the concessions they once did to keep people onside, because the enemy (the Soviet Union) no longer represented a threat. This has precipitated a crisis in Liberal Democracy which is in the process of breaking up across the world. The assaults on what used to be regarded as normal liberties, such as the protection against arbitrary arrest and torture, have now been enshrined in laws across the entire democratic world, and restrictions on freedom of expression and action are rapidly increasing, and while these are commonly seen as the result of the war on terror, I really see them from the perspective of a return to a kind of unfettered laissez faire capitalism not seen since the Nineteenth Century. Indeed, if we have a future, I think that's what it will look like. The kind of place Dickens and Blake wrote about. When seen from this perspective, the issues facing us are obviously not going to be solved by voting for one party rather than another, but by a radical rejection of that kind of politics in favour of a politics of survival.

***Are you intending for the play to expose or explore other issues, issues of human concern for example?***

Absolutely. I'm sure once the audience sees the play they will see that it deals with some of the most substantial issues of human life and contemporary society, such as the role of art in constituting human society and meaning, and the search for immortality that guides so many of our actions.

***Would you like the audience to be thinking about anything in particular when they leave the theatre after having seen 'It Just Stopped'?***

I think I would like the audience to be thinking very clearly about how they are going to save their lives.

## **INTERVIEW WITH NEIL ARMFIELD, DIRECTOR OF 'IT JUST STOPPED'**

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***Neil, what initially attracted you to the role of directing 'It Just Stopped'?***

It came about because Stephen Sewell and I have a very long history of working together. The third play I ever directed professionally was Stephen's play, *Traitors*, which I staged in the downstairs theatre at Nimrod [Theatre Company, Sydney]. That opened in January 1980. Stephen and I then worked together very closely. He began to write for me while I was at Nimrod. We did a play in 1981 called *Welcome the Bright World* which was about the Nazis and Jews in contemporary Germany, a fantastic play. But the real breakthrough came a little while after that when Stephen wrote what I consider to be his masterpiece, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*. He wrote it for the Lighthouse Company run by Jim Sharman and I went there to direct it. It was a company of twelve actors that included John Wood who is in *It Just Stopped*, and Geoffrey Rush who was the lead. The play was developed over a period of two years by a resident company of actors and it was a great triumph, later produced by the Sydney Theatre Company. It has never been done in Melbourne. The production by the Sydney Theatre Company was less than successful and it damaged Stephen's reputation for a while.

Stephen then wrote a play called *Dreams in an Empty City* which was produced by Stephen Phillips for Melbourne Theatre Company. Again, a massive play that looked at the collapse of the Western financial system before it actually collapsed in 1987. There has always been this sense of the prophetic about Stephen Sewell's plays as well. *The Blind Giant is Dancing* was about the Australian Labor Party tearing itself apart. Stephen then wrote a play called *Hate* in 1988 for Company B which I directed. This was later performed at Playbox. Stephen and I then had a period of not working and he wrote some plays that were developed in Melbourne by Playbox. I then did a revival of *The Blind Giant is Dancing* that had Hugo Weaving in the lead role and Catherine McClements playing his wife. So, across the years we have worked very closely together and also worked with actors who have an affinity for or who sit inside Stephen's plays very well.

I first read *It Just Stopped* about two years ago. Jim Sharman wrote to me and said that he had read it and what a startling and funny play it was and I read it and thought it would be a great play with which to renew our association. I was keen to work with Catherine again, John Wood seemed so suited to the part of Bill, Rebecca Massey had been in *Cloud Street* [co-production with Playbox] and in much of the work I have done with Company B, and Marcus Graham was the final piece of the jigsaw. Casting is always very important but with a four-hander it really needs to be balanced. The right chemistry is so important. I had long admired Marcus but had never worked with him so it is really very exciting. All the elements have come together very nicely for this particular project.

***Would you talk about your process in the rehearsal room in relation to bringing the play to the stage?***

My approach with any play is probably very similar. I spend a week with the actors and becoming as familiar as possible with the play. It is, of course, a great benefit to have Stephen Sewell here with us. Even though we have been preparing for this production for about a year and a half, it's not really until you sit down with the actors working on the script that you know how it will work. We've regarded this first week

as a workshop on the play and we took one idea that had always seemed to me important. The play engages several realities. It is like a dream vision and you don't realise that it's a dream vision until quite late. It's a bit like a Kaufman movie in that you are never quite sure what the actual reality is, but there is a dream logic and a sense of recognition of the world that we live in. One of my early thoughts was that the reality of the play needed to be more simple and consistent. So we spent a good deal of last week trying to work out different versions of the ending which involved the play sticking to a single and consistent reality. These thoughts always fell flat and we ended up actually reverting to the architecture that Stephen originally had but, having greatly expanded and questioned the number of the moments in the play, I think we managed to make it richer for having gone away from it and then come back. The play works off a level of highly sophisticated comedy but is actually extremely subversive and is always undercutting that.

In terms of rehearsal process we spend the first week sitting around with scripts and bringing in rewrites from Stephen which we then mark and read. So we have green pages and white pages and pink pages and pages with the corners turned down so you remember where they fit and gradually we try to identify a definitive script. We're at that stage now. At the end of that first week I normally say, 'This is our script so let's stand up and move it'. The actors can move wherever they want and we try to just put the play on its feet. The next part of the process is the blocking. I go back to the beginning of the play and I begin to rehearse it in a space which is marked out to the dimensions of the stage with as much of the set and props that the actors will need to finally work with. It is a process of one foot in front of the other, gradually giving shape and meaning to these characters.

***You appear to have worked very closely and collaboratively with the playwright Stephen Sewell?***

Yes, it is mostly a very positive collaboration. There are moments of friction but it feels like we have both grown beyond that and there is a great deal of mutual respect. Stephen has an incredible ability for work, is prolific in his writing and has a great ability to laugh at his own jokes – he has a great sense of humour. He also has a real love and even a childlike awe for the power of the actor and that's good to work with.

***Do you think that the play explores any particular themes or ideas and what do you consider these to be?***

The play is trying to deal with the fact that the human race seems to be hell bent on a race to exhaust the planet of its resources, to widen the gap between the wealthy and those who have nothing, particularly in a global sense. Africa and South America in particular are being consigned to the dustbin as the world or developed world gallops ahead. It seems to me that in two hundred years time school students, if there are any, will sit down and say; 'How could people have been so stupid to have had so much power, so much intelligence and knowledge about what we were doing, how we were living a lifestyle that was so far beyond the means of the planet, but we simply went ahead and never really did anything? Why didn't governments say that this has got to change?' There is a hopeful moment in that Sweden has just announced that they are going to stop all oil usage by the year 2012. The country will just simply stop using oil. It may be that as the opportunities for doing anything to reverse what is happening in the world are running out, there will be a massive changing of gear and governments suddenly doing something about it. But it doesn't look that hopeful.

I think that is at the heart of the play - the idiocy of this culture that we live in. We seem to be in a kind of dream and we don't look at reality. We become obsessed with the details of our own existence and the toys and the tricks that keep us going day by day. The number of people you see obsessed with their new phones and the pictures their phones can take and what, in the end, will they be of, and how long will they last?

***How would you describe the style of this particular production if it were to have a theatrical style?***

We were talking about that this morning. I have often been the champion of my productions for what I call *cartoon realism*, particularly the Steve Martin plays I've done – *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, *Paul Livingston*. That is a particular type of comedy. It became clear today in rehearsal, and Stephen coined this word, that the play may be described as *hysterical realism*. There is an element of hysteria beating underneath this work which is somehow fundamental to it. Perhaps then *hysterical realism* would be one way to describe it. I think that the audience should feel for a while when they come that they are watching a David Williamson play; sharp, characters engaged in witty verbal sparring, both of them dealing with their own ennui. He is a reviewer for the New York Review of Books, she is a well paid producer of a famous talk back radio star. Gradually you realise that their teeth are made of sugar and it's like a dream when you bite and find your teeth are crumbling. There is a sense of dread underneath this initially witty world.

From my point of view we have to begin respecting the balance and the rhythm of the comedy and trying to make it as real a world as possible so that the reversals in it have maximum impact.

***Neil, have you had any input in relation to the design elements of the production?***

Yes, a director would normally work closely with a designer. The designer is Stephen Curtis. This is the fourth play of Stephen Sewell's that we have done together so there is a long history there. Stephen Curtis designed the original production of *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, *Dreams in an Empty City*, the revival of *The Blind Giant*, and he did *Hate*. Stephen Curtis has a great ability to sense the comic life in the work and to give a real sense of dignity to the space. I would describe him as a *dramaturgical designer* in that he can read the play and understand what is inside the play and we talked about a number of ideas in relation to the design.

One thought that Stephen had was to emphasise the parody of the soap opera, which is one of the aspects of the play. I said that I didn't think that was the right way to go, that it would be more interesting to create a very chic world and he agreed. So we are creating a design that is like those magazines that people read – style magazines such as *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, *Vogue* and *Harpers Bazaar*. These project you into a fantasy of sophisticated living and all of them are a way of stopping you looking at what is actually happening in the world which is what this play is about.

The wealthy couple we meet live on the 47<sup>th</sup> floor of an ultra modern apartment block and I said to Stephen that we need to create the chic lines, the minimalism and the desirable fantasy of that space. That is what he has created.

***So that it can crumble?***

So that we are seduced into the reality of thinking, 'Gee I love these characters because they live in the place that I would like to live in myself'. I always think that it is important for a designer to create a space in which the audience can play imaginatively. I think there is a considerable amount of wish fulfilment that goes on between the stage and the audience in terms of grabbing our attention and engaging our imagination.

***Do you think that the director is the one who creates the final lens through which the audience sees the work?***

Yes, I think that is the director's job. The director's role is to control the rhythm and to provide the point of view. For me, as an audience member, I always feel that I like to know where I am meant to be looking on stage at a given time, so you create the focus, which is another way of saying that the director creates the lens. The stage is a space of so high and so wide and the eye can get lost in that. We've all probably seen unfocused productions where the story isn't being told clearly because you aren't receiving the signs and moments of behaviours in a properly considered way. So it is the director's role to lead the audience's eye through the story.

***Neil, what do you see as being the role of theatre in the twenty-first century?***

I think one of the wonderful things about theatre is that it brings a group of people together in a way that is unlike any other social ritual because it is a group of people who don't necessarily know each other. It isn't like a family gathering, it is a group of people who, when the theatre event works well are engaged very actively with their imagination by a story being told to them by human beings. It is different to a film audience where you go into the dark, stay very much as yourself and it is you and a series of projected images. There is more at risk in theatre because you know it is happening live and uniquely that night in front of you and something is asked of you.

Stephen Sewell was saying in rehearsal the other day that we all have the capacity to try and act humanely and with a sense of the richest possibilities of our sense of consciousness, or we can act selfishly and against the interests of humanity. It seems to me that theatre has the potential to be a very civilising force and even when it is attended by people who agree with the message, if there is a message, I think that too is completely legitimate. Theatre can be something that reinforces to you that it is worth a fight and it is worth thinking about the things that you already believe and the theatre you see supports can strengthen that belief. For those who haven't thought about certain ideas, the theatre can open it up. It is like having a dream where something is planted in your consciousness that you hadn't considered before and it can be a key to seeing the world in a different way. When theatre is done well - and we need to work very hard to do it well - it can invade our consciousness and help us to see the world in a better way.



## **INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN CURTIS, DESIGNER FOR 'IT JUST STOPPED'**

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***What were your first impressions as a designer reading the text of It Just Stopped?***

My first impression was that it is incredibly funny. It is a very blackly comic piece and I wanted to make sure that everything to do with the design made that comedy come alive. I was also struck by how potentially physical the play could be; although the characters appear to be quite normal people, each one of them is really a kind of a clown, and the set has the potential to be a "playground" for these characters.

It was also very clear when I read the play that Stephen Sewell, the writer, and Neil Armfield, the director, would want the audience to identify aspects of themselves in the play. As a designer, I wanted the world of the play to be one that the audience would not necessarily know, but one that they would recognise, and to some extent feel comfortable with. I wanted a small part of everyone in the audience to want to move into that apartment!

***Some of the stage directions at the beginning of the play are quite specific. How central have those stage directions been to the design process?***

Some of the stage directions are very specific and Stephen is the kind of writer of whom you respect everything that he writes down. You need to consider everything in the stage directions and weigh up each ingredient before deciding to accept or reject it. There was a point where I added up all of the physical ingredients in the text and realised that there just wasn't enough wall space to include every element that Stephen described. That meant that for one of the scripted ingredients - a large reproduction impressionist painting - there really was nowhere in the set for it to go. Neil and I then had to think laterally about what else that particular ingredient could be.

I also knew that I wanted to add into the set some of my own ingredients, for example, the staircase leading to the mezzanine level. That is there to give the actors more variation in their playing opportunities. I had to look at the whole and make my own decisions about how to balance all those different ingredients.

One element that is all from Stephen's imagination is the jellybean wall, which is a sublime act of invention; it is his idea of what a pretentious, absurd interior designer might come up with. It was my thought to turn the jellybean wall into a lightbox and to make it a really big element, so that it sets the tone for the whole production.

***The set creates a very particular world doesn't it, that of affluent, minimalist, apartment style living....***

Yes, it is really a style of living that we have inherited from New York: the New York loft lifestyle. Now, in the city of Melbourne, there are numerous apartment developments that are trying to recreate that effect. It is all to do with extremely clean surfaces and highly stylised use of colour. There are also often some odd "quirky" touches that designers put into spaces like that, to try to make them feel a little bit more individual. But they all come out of a sausage factory really.

***The play takes place in one location, which for a contemporary play is reasonably unusual. How does that affect your work as a designer; does it make it easier or more difficult?***

Often as a designer I begin with changes between scenes and try to find a rhythm in terms of how we get from one scene to another within the set design; that can inform the shape of the whole production. When you are working with one location, you have got to get all the parts of that set physically working so that it will sustain every moment of the play. The next layer of challenge is to find how to create variation of mood within that space, or the different physical forms that that space can take.

This play is based on a sit-com style, and if you think about the American sit-coms, nothing ever changes in those rooms. Year after year after year, that painting is on that wall or that bicycle is there next to the door. The room in this design is a little bit like that too; you get the sense that everything is frozen in its place. For me it became more a challenge of getting the relationship of all the ingredients correct, so that they worked for the physical energy and action of the play.

***Do you have more freedom to include detail when a location remains the same?***

Not really. I wouldn't say that because it is a single set that there are any more or any less opportunities as a designer; they are just different kinds of opportunities. In a world like the one in which Beth and Frank live, there really is no detail, because people like them do not really have an authentic individuality. Part of what motivates them is the blandness and the anal retentive sophistication of their lives. There is nothing in their lives that really gives them meaning. For me, this production has been more about big gestures, like the jellybean wall and the window out onto the city skyline; expanding ingredients like those to a slightly pompous, even epic scale. There are virtually no personal details at all.

***Has there been any research at all in the creation of the design?***

Yes, I did research the New York lofts that I mentioned earlier. There are a number of really good photographic books on apartment living. One of the things that I picked up through that research was how often they use dark surfaces and how well those surfaces work to focus items of furniture, or in my case, to focus the people in the space. I developed my own version of this use of colour in the set, so that the other visual ingredients such as the white furniture, the jellybean wall and the cherry front door all stand out from that dark, dramatic surround.

***Could you comment on the style of the play, and particularly your design?***

The play is a black comedy, which begins like a sit-com and develops into high opera, high theatricality. But somehow within those three different styles of sit-com, high theatricality and black comedy that the play moves between, it fundamentally has to stay real; real enough that the actual issues within the play affect us as an audience and get us thinking about the kind of world that we are making for ourselves, and perhaps starting to take responsibility for that. If the play ever got too absurd, then the audience would just stop caring. My interest has been in establishing a "reality" that is able to stretch into absurdity when it needs to. It is

always tricky with Stephen Sewell's plays, (this is my third). He has a very distinct style of his own!

***Could you describe what that might be?***

Stephen is not afraid of the heightened, extremely dramatic - almost melodramatic - moment. His plays often move steadily towards an extreme, an extremity to which most contemporary writers are not prepared to go. It is dangerous territory to go that far.

***Do you think the set helps to create that function of grounding the play in a level of reality? Having looked at some photos of the set design, they could almost be images from a magazine of a real apartment. The set has a kind of naturalism about it; perhaps a heightened naturalism.***

It is never naturalistic. As a designer I always think that the bottom line is, it's on stage, it's theatrical. I've never really been very comfortable about trying to do "naturalism", where everything is absolutely real. On the other hand, I do want to create a space that is "real" enough that the audience can identify with it on some level.

***Are there any particular themes that you are personally wanting to highlight in your design?***

Beyond what I've already talked about, I think the design is about alerting the audience to qualities within the play, rather than underscoring particular themes. It is really a very simple theme that Stephen is working toward: prompting us each to ask "is there anything I can/will do to avert our slide into chaos?" To some degree, the design just needs to let the actors get on with expressing that. I see my role in this production as providing a space that gives a physical shape to the actors' performances and allows the movement between styles to happen as smoothly as possible. It is not a design that is presenting a statement to the audience; it is not a production where that is required.

***You talked earlier about the characters in It Just Stopped being "clown-like". To what extent does the costume design reflect this quality?***

I spend a lot of time on public transport looking at people and I am always enormously entertained by those funny little things that people do in real life that make them wonderful to look at. On the tram coming back from the city today, where I went to buy a suit for Catherine (playing Beth), there was this wonderful old woman with eyebrows painted half way up her forehead and eyeshadow way up to her eyebrows. She had this fabulous, craggy, wizened face with this weird makeup on, yet she was perfectly credible. She opened her mouth and beamed as she was talking to someone and she was like a clown sitting there on the tram. When I say the characters in the play are like clowns, it is really that they are absurd extensions of very, very human qualities.

In this production I have used colour quite distinctly. The two Aussies - Bill and Pearl - are linked with colour, and a gauche homeliness. There is a comic pairing of those two characters, you could say. I will give you an example of the way in which I would



work on this comic element with the actors: I did a fitting with Rebecca Massey yesterday, and we played around with the Fletcher Jones pleated skirt that she is wearing as Pearl. It is a very standard off-the-rack garment, but we played around with the length and where it would sit on her body until we found a combination that was in character for Pearl but was also pushing it a little bit towards the comic and the extreme. The idea is that the audience will see someone they know and smile inwardly at the ridiculousness of that sort of person, but at the same time we know that we are laughing at ourselves as well. It is really just a matter of pushing real qualities to a slightly comic degree. The cast that Neil has put together for this production are all brilliant comic actors, which has made my job a real pleasure.

***So the actors are actively involved in the costume design process?***

I have done costume design drawings and we are sticking quite faithfully to these, but I'd be really shooting myself in the foot if I didn't draw on the sensibilities of the actors themselves. It is really important for them to feel right about what they are wearing and that means much more than having them feel physically comfortable. It is about the actors having costumes that they can work off in the projection of their characters; the costumes actually assist them in what they are doing.

***Could you talk about your collaboration with the other artists in the creative team?***

Neil and I have obviously worked together a lot before. We have a shorthand approach where I know how to leave the process a bit loose, to give Neil room to experiment within the production, while at the same time delicately pushing things towards a conclusion. That way there is flexibility in the rehearsal room, while all of the people who are needing answers to questions, such as the costume department and the set builders, are getting those answers in time for the production to open. It requires a bit of juggling act, to keep the production on track. From time to time Neil and I will have a bit of a session where we just go over everything again. Last night we talked about the end of the play and started to rethink what the feeling around that should be. In these kinds of conversations we might range quite widely in terms of what the options might be, and slowly through that discussion, a sense of settling on a particular option will arrive. It is much more a process of evolution than either Neil or me saying "This is what it should be". Neil works with the actors in this way too.

I've never worked with Paul Jackson, the lighting designer, before so I'm looking forward to our first collaboration on this. I am working from Sydney, and Paul is based in Melbourne, so we haven't had a lot of time to get together yet, but we're having a meeting this afternoon to talk about the end of the play. Normally I like to involve the lighting designer in the set design at an earlier stage than I was able to do with Paul on this production. Lighting will be very important, particularly in terms of shifting between styles. It will assist the audience to feel comfortable in a sit-com laugh-a-minute mode, and it can also take them into quite the dark, apocalyptic state towards the end of the play.

I haven't really collaborated with the composer, John Rodgers, because our areas don't particularly overlap. One of the crucial things about the set and costume design though, is that it is often the first concrete insight into the play that people see and so it helps to give them an idea of what the production is going to be like. As a designer I work a long time ahead of the rehearsal process, often months ahead, so the set model and costume drawings are usually the first ingredients to lift the play off the page. They may be something that people like the sound designer or the actors can look at and say "Oh right, that's the kind of show this is".

***IN CONVERSATION WITH CATHERINE McCLEMENTS AND REBECCA MASSEY, who play the characters of Beth and Pearl in 'It Just Stopped'***

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***What was your first response when you read the script of 'It Just Stopped'?***

Catherine:

Well I thought it was very funny. At first I thought I was in one play and then as I read further I realised I was in another. I think this is one of the great things about *It Just Stopped*. Not just because you are in America and suddenly a couple of Australians drop in but because it appears that you are in a naturalistic, sit-com play which is witty with some very funny lines, but in the end you are in a very surreal and absurd play. The way the play morphs from one to the other is something I really enjoyed even though I didn't really know how I got there.

Rebecca:

I was really grabbed by the beginning and I could hear it clearly and it was funny. But when the play starts turning I became a bit confused and unsure about what was happening, not in a bad way, just in a way that has taken the rehearsal time to unravel – what is Stephen trying to do and why is he doing it? We've been talking about Chinese boxes, a box inside a box inside a box. On a read I found it hard to find, but that was part of the attraction.

Catherine:

That's the great theatricality of the play.

Rebecca:

Yes, it's possible in the theatre to make it much clearer and you start bringing out what is real and what isn't, which is the question for this play.

***In terms of the development of your character, do you have a particular process?***

Catherine:

I think you have to work with the other actors around you, particularly for this play. We aren't all the same person but we are all aspects of one mind. It's the sort of play where you wake up and it was all a dream. Franklin's [played by Marcus Graeme] mind is a big part of this play and in a way, Beth works in counterpoint to that and sometimes as part of his mind. So you start to develop your character in relation to that; how Beth is pushing Franklin in a certain way. One of the big things in rehearsals is how much anxiety lies below the surface. These two characters are highly anxious New Yorkers who have barricaded themselves into this flat which they imagine is living in the highest sort of luxury but is in fact a prison that they've constructed around themselves. They have an incredible anxiety about other human beings and about the world and how you release and suppress those anxieties becomes part of how the characters develop.

Rebecca:

I think a lot is in the name of the character. Pearl is a very 1940s and 1950s name, a kind of caricature of an Australian woman of that time, like people's great Aunts. But she seems to be existing like that now and I instantly feel that she is older than I am so in terms of developing this character, my process is different from other plays. In

every play the process is trying to connect yourself to what that character is so I am looking at connecting myself to what that fifty or sixty year old woman who lives in another century, might feel. John Woods, who plays Pearl's husband Bill, is 'ancient', I mean older and Pearl is not a younger wife. I feel they are the same age so trying to understand that is part of my process of character development. I am wearing a wig and I think that will be important. The thing about Pearl is that she is responsive and much of the process is about watching what is happening on stage and responding to that. It isn't active creation, it is response. This is the difference between her and Beth.

***Did you conduct any particular research in relation to the character of Beth?***

Catherine:

Well there is the American accent and watching shows like Seinfeld really do inform you; that Jewish New York humour informs the character of Beth. That is the sort of thing you draw on. You don't want to copy it but you want to understand the formula of it because it's informed Stephen Sewell's writing, particularly early on the play.

***Do films such as Mike Moore's 'Bowling for Columbine' and 'Fahrenheit 9/11' resonate in this instance?***

Catherine:

That's what we've been talking about in rehearsals quite a bit that sort of underlying anxiety of an American mind. Marcus, who has spent a bit of time in America, has been able to pinpoint the incredible anxiety and paranoia that underlies the American psyche, and those big brash personalities. They are inwardly terrified.

Rebecca:

But they've been fed it as well on the television. It's in the government's interests.

Meg:

My son's reaction to Mike Moore's documentaries was how similar our own society has become and how our own current affair shows are generating the same kind of fear factor – the quick grab line, the dramatic tone.

Rebecca:

Even when you know that it is a particular media line, I think cumulatively, it must seep in.

Catherine:

And in this play what the two characters of Beth and Franklin have constructed for themselves is not based on getting ahead in the world but is based on a fundamental anxiety about society and not feeling safe. That these human beings in their cosy homes don't feel safe and when anything little happens it scratches that itch and the play escalates from there.

***Does the depiction of American and Australian characters provide a representation of each society? Do they blend together? Is that what the play is about?***

Catherine:

I don't think that is necessarily what the play is about. When you read the play you feel so pleased that the Australian's get to ask the American's to be their slaves. We have such joy in reversing the power. It is a play about 'American's think this and Australian's think that' but overall it is playing with a mental state of people and the



Australian's provide a different way of looking at yourself. They are all archetypal characters.

Rebecca:

At the end of the day everyone is facing the same carnage, we are all on the boat made of flotsam saying, 'What do we do?' as people are dying all around. So we all go down with the ship.

Catherine:

Like a practical view of what is going on as opposed to a romantic view of what is going on.

***The play begins in a seemingly naturalistic style and it goes to some quite surprising places. Would you agree?***

Rebecca:

Yes, very much which is the Chinese box image, you aren't sure which universe you are in. The thing I am fascinated with is that everyone has different perspectives and they are all flawed but you can agree with portions of them all. Bill, the cardboard king, has a very practical attitude to art but sort of understands it in a way that you can respect. Equally Franklin has an esoteric, intellectual, wanky view of art but equally there is really amazing things that he says. Because all the characters are so flawed you can really go to surprising places, not just in terms of the environment, but as an audience who you find yourself aligning with, something I think Stephen has done very well.

***What do you think that the play is essentially saying then?***

Catherine:

Well there is a madness in the world at the moment, that the end of the world is really happening right now. Yet, whether it's because we are just human beings or whether we are just unable to face reality, we are able to continue on as if its not. We can come up with all sorts of excuses as to why this is happening and why that is happening and it's never that the world is ending. Because no one is able to sort of face facts, call a spade a spade, we construct these worlds because no one is going to start doing anything about it. We are all out for ourselves, there's no such thing as society, we are grabbing what we can when we can and then the world will end. The play is about that strange gap between reality and...

Rebecca:

We are in denial.

Catherine:

Yes, denial.

***Is there any hope?***

Catherine:

I think the hope comes out of the mother's speech. She says that a human being is not an individual it's a group and that if one person dies another will take its place and that our struggle for survival is what it is about as well. It's not just that we can't face the end of the world but that we struggle to survive as a race.

Rebecca:

The mother has the life force, that there is life coursing through everything and that nobody owns it. Whereas much of the play seems to be about who owns what and offering to buy things and people and that the wife owns the husband a little because they live in the house that she bought and who cares if the world is going to die! We'll be safe. But the mother, Pearl, says that if the world is dead it will be a terrible, terrible thing and that a certain life force will have gone from the Earth and it will be a dark and empty place.

Catherine:

Yes, I find that speech really beautiful. It's not necessarily hope but it is a way of looking at things. A reminder.

Rebecca:

A different way of looking at the world than Stephen has. He must have both ways or else he wouldn't have written it.

Catherine:

He must find that if we are able to bridge the gap in some way then something will come out of it.

***'It Just Stopped' is contained both within time and within place, what is it like to work in such a tight contained space, both visually and actual time?***

Catherine:

I always find that really good to work with in a play because that's when really creative things come out. It has parameters. The lights don't go down and the set is changed and suddenly there are wicker chairs and a samovar. That's what you have and you need to use your creative juices to eek it out and find things. I find the sense of time is not necessarily contained. It speeds up and it slows down and that is what we have been playing with in rehearsal, certainly at the end. It seems that the end of the world arrives and we have jumped fifty years while in that one room. I really enjoy one set and one costume.

Rebecca:

You start and you go to the end and you don't need to keep going off stage. Although I do hang around a little bit backstage so I have a different experience to you. That's the difference between our two characters. It's a little bit like a pop-up book.

Catherine:

You might be surprised by what is going to happen, you might find that you stay on stage for the whole time.

***So there might be different directorial choices made in regard to that?***

Rebecca:

Yes. And it feels that our characters are drawn quite differently from Beth and Franklin, the text is much thicker.

***What is the performance experience like for you as actors?***

Catherine:

When it's going well it's like you have a double consciousness. You are the character and you are taken in a very wonderful loose way along the journey. It can change but you are on a path. At the same time you are aware that you are in a

theatre and that you an actor so it is like when you were a kid and you were in a rockpool and are running across the rocks. You have this double awareness of running fast but you know you have to jump on that one and then that one, looking ahead and the having the thrill of that and getting to end.

Rebecca:  
And not falling off!

Catherine:  
You are in the moment and in the future as well. It happens only occasionally but those moments are what real performance is about.

Rebecca:  
It's such a thrill. You know you aren't going to fall off.

Catherine:  
Rehearsals are about building that pathway so that you don't fall off. It's malleable. It changes and it's not rigid but it gives you the pathway.

Rebecca:  
That doesn't really happen unless the audience and the play are existing in the same rhythm. Then it's a poly-rhythm; different versions of the same experience.

***What do you see as the role of theatre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?***

Rebecca:  
A social experience that a group has together.

Catherine:  
Like when you get told a story. I really enjoy that aspect of it. When I tell my daughter a story and I get to the end, it's the most dynamic experience. Sometimes I go the video shop and look at all that is on offer and think, 'How many more stories do we have to tell!?'

Rebecca:  
But being told in a social way is different than from something that exists as an object.  
Yes, and it's much more confronting because it is a live thing. Franklin says in the play that 'We can't be frightened of going down the stairs. We've got season tickets to the theatre'. Sometimes you may not be in the mood to experience theatre, you might even feel trapped in a theatre, but in the end it is very powerful.

## Questions for Analysis and Discussion

### THE CONTEXT AND THE WORLD OF THE PLAY:

Stephen Sewell says he begins the play in an American world, '...a world that is familiar to audience members...'

- What do you find particularly American about this play?
- Was the world familiar to you? Why?

Director, Neil Armfield, says, 'The play engages several realities...you are never quite sure what the actual reality is, but there is a dream logic and sense of recognition of the world that we live in'

- What do you think he means here?
- What are the different realities? Did you feel you were in a dream? Why?

Stephen Sewell says, 'The politics of this play are not to do with Liberal versus Labor – they are deeper'.

- What aspects of the play make it a political play?
- What are the deeper politics that the playwright is referring to?

*It Just Stopped* is a new and very contemporary Australian play. This is its first production. From your reading of the script and having seen the production:

- Describe the social, historical and political context in which this play sits
- Are you aware of any other plays that explore similar issues and ideas?

### THE SCRIPT:

Playwright, Stephen Sewell, says, 'My plays really follow dialogue and character'.

- Having read the script and scene the production of *It Just Stopped*, to what extent does the play rely on dialogue and character?

Compare the script to the production.

- Would you say that the design has had an impact on how the script has been realised?
- What other differences are there between the script and the production?

Director, Neil Armfield, believes that 'Casting is always important but with a four hander it really needs to be balanced'

- Consider the casting choices for the play
- Did you imagine the characters differently?
- Do you agree that casting is important? What impact does it have?

### DRAMATURGY:

Stephen Sewell describes the development of the script as 'dramaturgical theatre'.

- From your reading of his interview what do you understand to have been the dramaturgical process?

### DIRECTION:

Director, Neil Armfield, describes his directing process in some detail.

- What evidence do you see of directorial choices in the production?
- What particular choices struck you as being powerful/absurd/comic?

Neil Armfield says, 'It is the director's role to lead the audience's eye through the story',

- What does he mean by this?
- Do you agree that it is the director's role to do this?
- How else might you be 'led' through the story?

STYLE:

Neil Armfield describes the style of *It Just Stopped* as cartoon realism, and Stephen Sewell refers to it as hysterical realism.

- What is your understanding of these terms?
- What aspects of the play are cartoon-like?
- What aspects of the play could be considered 'hysterical realism'?

Both the director and the playwright talk about the play as being comic yet subversive

- What aspects of the play are comic? Why?
- Why do you think the writer and director subvert the comedy?

Stephen Sewell describes his style of writing as 'dream theatre':

- What do you think he means by this?
- What elements of the play did you find were dream-like?  
[Consider how the production elements contributed].

The playwright says, 'Naturalism is anti-theatrical in form...if you reject naturalism then anything can happen on stage'.

- Do you agree with Stephen Sewell's comments about naturalism and theatre?
- Discuss the elements of naturalism that may exist in the play
- Discuss how the play rejects naturalism in order to become more theatrical.

Designer Stephen Curtis says that the play moves the three different styles of sitcom, black comedy and high theatricality.

- How would you define each of these styles?
- Which particular parts of the play reflect each of them?

Stephen Curtis believes that playwright Stephen Sewell has "a very distinct style of his own", where his plays move steadily towards an extremity "to which most contemporary writers are not prepared to go".

- What do you think he means by this?
- What is this "extreme" in *It Just Stopped*?

THEMES AND IDEAS EXPLORED IN THE PLAY:

Director, Neil Armfield, says that 'The play is trying to deal with the fact that the human race seems to be hell bent on a race to exhaust the planet of its resources, to widen the gap between the wealthy and those who have nothing'

- How does the play explore these ideas?
- Does it draw any conclusions or present any answers?

Actor, Catherine McClements, says of the play, 'There is a madness in the world at the moment, that the end of the world is really happening right now'.

- In what ways does the play explore this 'madness'?

The writer says, 'I would like the audience to be thinking very clearly about how they [the audience] are going to save their lives':

- What do you think he means by this?
- Do we need to save our lives and in what ways does the play act as a warning to this effect?

Stephen Sewell, in conversation with the director, said that '...human beings have the capacity to try and act humanely and with a sense of the richest possibilities of our sense of consciousness...'

- Is there hope in the play?
- Where is it evoked for you? In particular characters? In particular actions?

#### ACTING AND PERFORMANCE :

Rebecca Massey, who plays Pearl, says of her character, 'I think a lot is in the name of the character. Pearl is a very 1940s and 1950s name, a kind of caricature of an Australian woman of the time'

- Discuss how the character of Pearl may be seen as 'Australian'.
- What expressive skills and stagecraft elements did Rebecca use in order to create her character?

Catherine McClements speaks particularly about her character being American and references the Jewish New York humour.

- Discuss how the characters of Beth and Franklin were portrayed as 'American'.
- What expressive skills and stagecraft elements assisted in creating these characters?

Catherine McClements says of working within one set with one costume, 'I always find that really good to work with...it has parameters'

- How did you react to the setting of the play in one particular place?
- How did the characters grow and change within the limitations of that one place?

Rebecca Massey refers to Pearl and Bill's characters as 'pop-up book':

- What do you think she means by this?

#### DESIGN AND STAGECRAFT :

Director, Neil Armfield, describes the set as being, '...a chic world...a design that is like those style magazines people read...the minimal and desirable fantasy'.

- Do you agree?
- How did you respond to the set design and the world it created?

Designer, Stephen Curtis says that his set design is about "big gestures", with "virtually no personal details at all".

- How well do you think the set design reflects Frank and Beth's personalities/lifestyles?

Stephen Curtis suggests that the importance of the set design is "to give shape to the actors' performances".

- In what ways does the set give shape to the actors' performances?
- How does it allow smooth transitions between scenes?

The designer says that colour is used "quite distinctly" in this production".

- How is colour used to effect in the set? the costumes? the lighting?

Stephen Curtis describes the characters in the play as being like clowns, with "absurd extensions of very human qualities".

- How are these "absurd extensions" expressed in the costumes of each of the characters?

The designer suggests that their costumes should "assist the actors in what they are doing".

- What do you think he means by this?
- In what ways does each of the actors' costumes assist them in the projection of their characters?

## SOUND AND LIGHTING

[Note: the sound and lighting designers were unavailable for interviews]

What sounds did you hear in the production? In what ways did the sound create:

- Mood
- Time and place
- An underscore?

How does music and sound function in the overall production?

How did the sound and music contribute to creating the different realities of the play

- The chic sophisticated world of the apartment?
- The underlying threat of the end of the world?

Lighting Designer, Paul Jackson, has created some very particular lighting states.

- How did the lighting design help create the world of the play?
- Were you drawn to any particular lighting states or changes?

Set and costume designer, Stephen Curtis, believes the lighting in the play to be very important in assisting the piece to "shift between styles".

- How does the lighting assist this process?
- What sort of lighting states are used to enhance the different styles?

# Activities

## **DESIGN:**

'It Just Stopped' is designed in a very contemporary and quite naturalistic style:

- Your brief as a designer is to re-design the set where the year is 2080
- Create a series of drawings of your new design
- Construct a set model
- Make a list of the required properties

## **PERFORMANCE :**

- *Prepare a character profile on each of the characters in the play – Beth, Franklin, Pearl and Bill*
- *Select one character and present a short speech which features that character*
- *Write up an analysis of your choices in creating the character – voice, physicalisation, costume, gesture*
- *OR select a scene from the play and recontextualise it justifying your choices in a short report*

## **RESEARCH :**

*Research one or all of the following:*

- *Globalisation and its effect on the world*
- *Consumerism*
- *The state of the environment*
- *Fear and democracy*
- *Prepare a report and present it to the class*



# *Resources:*

## **Websites:**

[www.libertyforum.com](http://www.libertyforum.com)

### **The Project for the New American Century**

(Right wing American think tank supported by the likes of Donald Rumsfeld and Francis Fukoyama)

[www.newamericancentury.org](http://www.newamericancentury.org)

### **It's the end of the world as we know it ... Again**

(compendium of eschatalogical material)

[www.geocities.com/athens/oracle/9941](http://www.geocities.com/athens/oracle/9941)

### **The Hon John Howard's Address to the Australian American Association**

[www.australian-american.asn.au/article.php?sid=10](http://www.australian-american.asn.au/article.php?sid=10)

[www.armageddononline.org](http://www.armageddononline.org)

### **Australasian Journal of American Studies**

(Specifically the article located at:

[www.anzasa.arts.usyd.edu.au/a.j.a.s/Articles/1\\_04/Mosler.pdf](http://www.anzasa.arts.usyd.edu.au/a.j.a.s/Articles/1_04/Mosler.pdf)

### **Australian American Association**

[www.australian-american.asn.au](http://www.australian-american.asn.au)

### **Personal Responsibility – a brief summary**

[www.self-gov.org/freeman/8907hff.html](http://www.self-gov.org/freeman/8907hff.html)

[www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)

[www.markdery.com](http://www.markdery.com) – especially the article on McKenzie Wark

## **Books:**

Brave New World – Aldous Huxley

Animal Farm – George Orwell

Highrise – J.G. Ballard

American Psycho – Bret Easton Ellis

The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink – Mark Dery

## **Films:**

The Island – Michael Bay

THX 1138 – George Lucas

Team America – Trey Parker

Blade Runner – Ridley Scott

Lord of the Flies – Peter Brook

Delicatessen – Marc Caro & Jean-Pierre Jeunet

Fahrenheit 451 – Francois Traffaut

Dark City – Alex Proyas

Bowling for Columbine – Mike Moore

Fahrenheit 9/11 – Mike Moore