

# THE SICK ROOM



BY STEPHEN SEWELL

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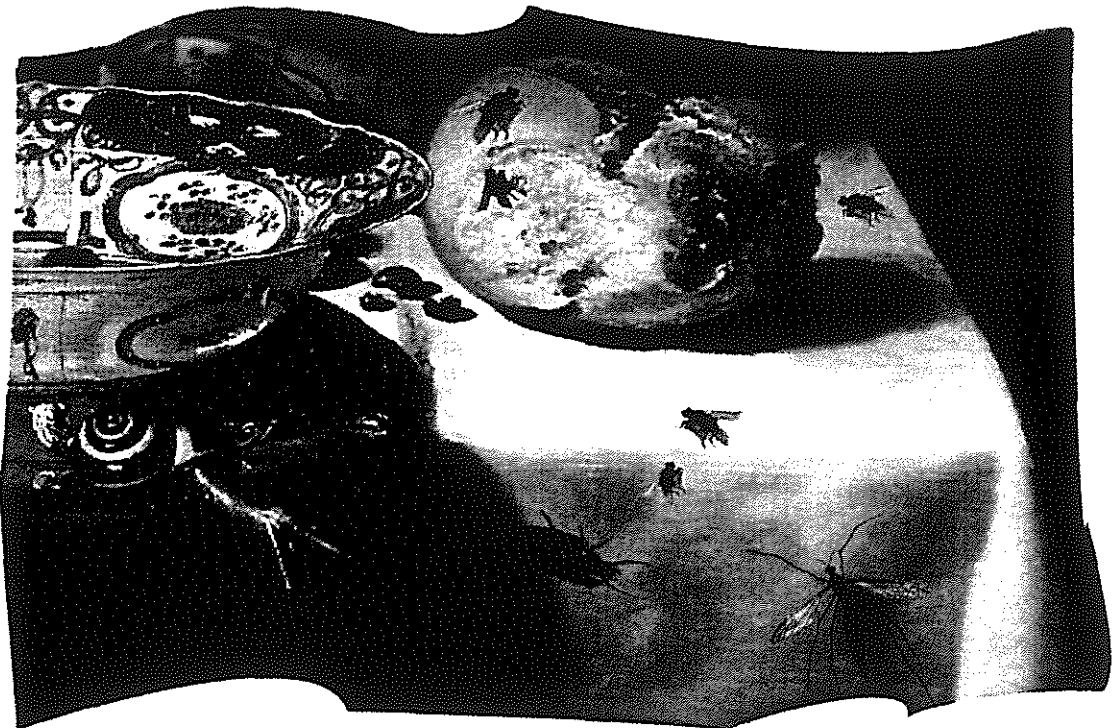
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BACKGROUND NOTES

THE SICK ROOM

by  
Stephen Sewell



*eat well*  *live well*



DIABETES  
AUSTRALIA  
Victoria



VicHealth

# *The Sick Room:* interview with playwright, Stephen Sewell

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*What was the starting point for writing *The Sick Room*?*

Probably the sense of unease that I felt within the Australian community. The evidence for that was the rise of Pauline Hanson's *One Nation* party; the election of the Howard Liberal Government; and a withdrawal from what seemed to be really powerful and important imperatives like reconciliation. I'm one of those people who think that reconciliation is probably the major issue that Australia has to undertake. So I wanted to look at what I saw as the spiritual sickness within Australia, and that's where the play started.

*So, having had these initial ideas, what kind of process have you been through to reach the draft that will be performed?*

The way I normally work – and the way a lot of writers work – is that I get the idea, I research it, begin formulating my ideas and then begin writing. So that the play was written almost entirely outside the rehearsal room.

Some time later, Playbox became interested in doing it and we began the next part of the process which is where actors and theatre practitioners get the text. They look at it, read it, talk about it, and try to move it to see what the dramatic possibilities and the dramatic problems of the play are.

The third step on that road is to enter the rehearsal room, where you're just trying to put play on – still making some changes. For instance even now, today, [when] we're about a week away from opening, we're still making text changes.

*OK. There are key members of this family – particularly DAVID – who appear to be quite morally and emotionally bankrupt. Do you feel that money has brought this out in these people or do you think that it's something innate in their characters and money has just enabled them to wreak the havoc that they do?*

Rather than “money”, I'd say “power”. I think if you have power, you can get money, you can get whatever you want. However, having money doesn't necessarily give you power. These people are plugged into networks of power which basically allow them to do and to get whatever they need – except the one thing that they really want which is to save their daughter. That's the dramatic problem they face. They can get everything [in life] but what they actually want.

*Do you actually think the fact that their daughter is dying compels a change in some of the characters? Or are some of them just too far gone?!*

I think it provokes crisis. I think there's a change of some sort that each of the characters undergoes but it's not necessarily [a change for the] better! Crisis is like that – I speak from personal experience!

**The Sick Room* is more than the journey of a young girl and her family dealing with terminal cancer. Could you talk about how you've used sickness to explore other agendas?*

Susan Sonntag wrote a very powerful and important essay called *Sickness as Metaphor* in which she argued against the use of sickness as a metaphor. This [was written] at the beginning of the AIDS crisis. I think the point she was making is: “disease is disease”, you know, a bug is a bug. Bugs aren’t moral agents. That said, I have used the idea of sickness and disease in this play. But, with [me I think] the emphasis is on the “*dis*” of the disease – *dis*-ease – a lack of balance. I guess what I’m saying is that the characters in this play all have a feeling of unhappiness and unbalance. The twisted relationships that the audience experiences in the play are twisted as a result of the power that these people exhibit. For example, DAVID, who was a senior public servant, is a professional liar. That was just part of his job. He recognised it as part of his job and he did it. How, though, can a professional liar conduct an open and honest relationship with his children? Maybe [it’s possible] but maybe, when the kids put certain kinds of propositions to [fathers like him], it’s inevitable that he’s going to avoid answering them.

So I suppose what I’m saying is that the power and the corruption of the power that permeates these people’s public lives, permeates their private lives as well. And I’ve made a claim outside the world of the play which is usually said as “the fish rots from the head down”. It means that, if the leadership itself is morally corrupt and culpable, then everyone underneath them is going to be corrupted in some similar way.

*Have you been involved in the rehearsal process? If so, in what way?*

My responsibility as a writer is to try to ensure that the text is as well-developed and as honed as it can be. So, that’s been my main job during rehearsal. And that [job] can have aspects to it that may not be immediately obvious. For example, it may be – and this hasn’t happened on this particular occasion, but it’s certainly happened to me in the past – that an actor has been chosen [for a role] for a particular reason. They may have particular kinds of skills but not other kinds of skills that the character may need. So rather than just letting [the actor] carry on and risk the character failing a little bit, the writer alters the character in such a way that the production is [best] served. Ultimately I think everyone’s attention really is [focussed] on opening night and on putting together a show in front of an audience that the audience will like.

*Could you comment on the style of the play?*

*The Sick Room*, is a conventional play. It has a form that’s pretty straightforward. It aims at psychological verisimilitude. It’s something that most people would recognise as a play and enjoy at that kind of level.

*While you were writing **The Sick Room**, did you have any concept in your head of what the set might be like?*

No. I think it’s hopeless for a writer to be worrying about the set. And I also think – from experience – that the first thing any designer does when they get hold of the script is put a red line through all the writer’s set descriptions!

*Was the painting **The Sick Room** any source of inspiration for you at all?*

Absolutely, it was an inspiration. But it was an inspiration in temperament and atmosphere rather than a literal thing.

*Do you see playwrights in Australia at the moment, including yourself, as having a particular role in society?*

No. No, I think the playwrights ..... I think theatre, really, has been totally marginalised and playwrights, too, have been marginalised. And to tell you the truth, I think playwrights (by and large within theatre) are being driven out of the process. Coming from Sydney, I would have to say that most of the writers I know who were working in theatre are no longer working in theatre; they're now working in television and film.

*That's a really horrible situation.*

It's disgusting. I hate it.

*Do you see any way around that?*

Yes, I do. I think the Australia Council has to abandon absolutely its notions of corporate sponsorship. Corporate sponsors don't want people like me writing plays about how horrible they are.

*If there is always that underlying agenda, it's not really giving the writer any artistic freedom if they have to be aware of these other concerns.*

That's completely true. For instance, one of the most startling things that I ever saw in my life was when Max Gillies did a Chekhov play at the South Australian theatre company called *Smoking is Bad for Your Health*. Benson & Hedges, one of the corporate sponsors of the STCSA, forced him to change the title of a Chekhov play!

*What do you hope the audience will be thinking about as they leave the theatre after seeing **The Sick Room**?*

"How can I become a better person?"

## *The Sick Room:* interview with director, Kate Cherry

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*The first question is: what was your initial response to reading *The Sick Room*?*

Well I thought it was one of the most interesting plays I'd come across in a long time. It had interesting dramatic action; conflict; and a family that intrigued [me]. It was also the metaphor for the political statements that I'm interested in making.

*So have you been involved in the development of the script?*

Yes. I found the first draft (which Stephen had originally written for Belvoir Street Theatre) and I said to Aubrey (Mellor, the Playbox Artistic Director) that I really wanted us to do it. Stephen hadn't really touched it since he handed in the first draft because nobody responded to him.

We gathered a workshop of the actors who were actually going to perform it and we did a week's workshop. I met with Stephen a couple of months before that and gave him some notes. He and I had a dramaturgical talk when we first discussed doing the play and then we did this workshop with the actors for a week. A lot came out of that. A lot of suggested cuts; some changes; some clarifying of the actors' journeys.

So we workshopped it for a week. Stephen's really quick. He takes [the play] away that night and responds to whatever's been said. He also did that for the first two weeks of rehearsal.

*So, going into the workshop you basically still had a first draft?*

Yes, but it was in very good shape. I wasn't at all worried about it.

*OK. Can you describe the process of working with Stephen as a writer?*

I talk about where I think the dramatic action isn't effective. I try to understand exactly why he's put each moment in the play and why it matters to him: whether it's central to the theme; whether the dramatic action is clear; whether I understand what Stephen's intentions and themes are – basically, why he's written the play. [I also need to know] what he needs to say to the audience; what he wants the audience to go away with; and how he understands each of his characters. We've had endless conversations about all of those kinds of things. And then he's come back [to rehearsal] and seen run-throughs and talked to me; and given me his responses to the run-throughs. So, he's contributed quite a lot to our shaping and understanding of the piece.

*How do you approach the play in rehearsal? Has there been a particular way that you've approached it?*

I tend to approach all new plays in the same way. First of all I try to understand the dramatic action – where the dramatic action isn't clear. I talk about that with the writer and the actors. [I also talk with them] about making choices and I try to help them build their roles. I always think it's really important that the actors understand the through-line. So, we were kind of doing two things at once, really. The actors were getting a sense of the script while Stephen was learning from them about what did and didn't work. They were then

learning from him about why things should work. That [took place during] the week of the workshop and the first week of rehearsal.

I guess what I want is for the actors to have an intellectual understanding of the script. They need an understanding of what the shape [of the play] is; what its intentions are; why their characters are in the play and how their characters tell the story. And I want to make sure that we have all made the same choices about what story we're telling – being very specific about what the beats mean and how the story shifts. Once we have that sculptured overview, I like to try to allow the actors to find the emotional truth. I want them always to be seeking the emotional truth.

*Can you comment on the style of the production?*

No, because I don't believe in that word. I know that a lot of directors talk about style but for me it's irrelevant what the ..... It seems a very arbitrary word to me. I try to find the world of the play and then understand what the world of the play requires of the actors. [For example], how the actors will bring the emotional truth [of the play] alive, whether it's naturalistic, realistic or heightened realism.

The actors are also informed by the kind of world that the designer creates, I think. So I try to give the actors a lot of information through what's presented in the set.

I don't ever spend time thinking about the style. I think you arrive at form by understanding content. I'm constantly looking at the bumping up of form and content. But if I do arrive at a style, that would be the way. I don't make arbitrary decisions about what the style is going to be; it takes a long time to get there. You can only think about those things once you understand the world of the play.

*OK. What do you think the main themes of the play are?*

I think the main themes of the play are that Australia is a country which decided at some point that it was going to keep secrets. Men keep secrets from women; women keep secrets from men; we keep secrets about our national security; about how we live as a nation – and there is a cost to keeping secrets. And I also think that the play asks: "if all we value is materialism, then what does it mean to be in a family". How can you maintain whatever the ideal is of a nuclear family if money is more important than anything?

*What do you hope the audience will take away with them after seeing **The Sick Room**?*

I hope what will happen is that the story will make them ask questions. I don't want to say this is how they should be thinking. But I just hope that the story will inspire people to question things. The story's got to have its own life. How the audience receives it will be how the audience receives it.

*So when you say the story has to have its own life, [you mean that] it can't simply just be a puppet for the writer's political platform.*

It can't be a puppet for a larger political agenda. What needs to happen is that the political agenda emerges from the storytelling. The last thing I want to do is to tell people how they should be thinking or what they should thinking. I just want to inspire them to think.

*What role did you play in the development of the design?*



Well, Richard and I met over four months ago and we talked about the theme; we discussed the world [of the play]. Again, with the set, I can't go forward until I understand the world. We talked about the fact that there were elements to check. I mean I read *The Sick Room* and I thought it was very Ibsen; when Richard read it, he thought it was very Chekhov. There are elements of each, plus there's the episodic nature of the play – which is Shakespeare. So we had to find a way to contain all three things; a world that would contain all three ideas of the play.

Richard and I work together in an organic way. He's such an experienced and skilled designer that I'm guided by him in the ultimate choices that we make. But we spend a lot of time trying to arrive at what we need to say about the play. [For example] we think about how we need the actors to move [on stage]. Do we want [the audience] to discover them on stage or do we want to see them entering? Is it a world where the audience knows where people are coming from or do they just suddenly appear?

[We also discussed] what sort of lake it should be? What do we want the lake to look like? We talked about all those kinds of questions endlessly.

And, of course, we took into account the painting by Munch – which is where the play's title came from. That's where we began and, in a way, where we finished – with that painting.

*Is there any specific preparation that you ask of the actors once the rehearsal process has begun? Were there questions that you asked of them?*

Oh, endlessly. [We're] endlessly asking questions and talking about exploring possibilities [It's all about] whatever the actors need to do to take the next step I'm asking them to take. They'll decide. You know, if there are seven actors in the room, there are probably at least seven different processes going on. I don't dictate what the process should be, I just have expectations of where we should be at certain points. However the actor gets there is their choice. I don't care about what the exploration is, or how something is explored, as long as I get the end product. I do care that it is explored but I'm not going to dictate how to conduct the exploration.

We also talked about the fact that the play is slightly Brechtian. The energy has to be slightly higher sometimes than how the scene is actually written. Often scenes start half-way through, so how do you play that? You can't come in on the energy of somebody who's beginning a scene. Sometimes scenes are intercutting, so how do you play that? You don't want the end of a scene to seem like the end of a scene. It's got to seem like you're passing the baton on. [We talked about] all those kinds of things.

## *The Sick Room:* interview with designer, Richard Roberts

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*What was your first response to the text of **The Sick Room**, as a designer.*

I admire Stephen's work a great deal because it goes beyond naturalism. He's got almost a unique style in that it comes from naturalism but goes into some other kind of heightened world which enables him to express his political views as well as his more general views about being human. And, personally, I find those things very interesting.

*When I read the play I felt it had a distinct mood. How will you represent this in your set?*

The first thing Stephen notes in the play is that it's set in the Southern Highlands of NSW – well he says in the Southern Alps, actually. And I was thinking: Oh, I wonder why that is, why is it there rather than Lorne, for instance?

We then tried to nail [down] what sort of house it was. The play talks about hallways and living rooms and a study and a bedroom upstairs, so it establishes that it's a two-storey house. When you start working on a play [you find] there are lots of clues that the writer gives you. It's a kind of detective job trying to work out [the environment] from the little bits of information that you are given. [Sometimes] that information can be contained within people's dialogue. [For instance] the housekeeper in one scene says "Oh, that shutter's banging". So you put that away in your head and you think: It's a house with shutters. There are lots of things like that. There are hallways; there's a yard that [the characters] talk about; there's a man-made lake that has been created in the garden. But when you put all of those things together, it doesn't actually add up.

Sometimes it feels like a modern house because at the very end of the play the girl who's dying talks about the view and says, "Isn't it a beautiful view", and her father says, "Yes, your grandfather had it built that way". So, clearly the house has been built by the grandfather. However, there are other moments in the play where they say things that make you think it's a very old house. So I think it's deliberately confusing. And actually, if you set out to find the naturalistic house in which this play is set, I think you're on a quest leading nowhere.

In fact, Kate and I and Matt Scott (the lighting designer) drove up to Mount Buffalo one day thinking we might be able to see the sort of landscape that Stephen's talking about in the play. It was a very useful exercise but what it really revealed was that it is a landscape within Stephen's head. It isn't a real place and it isn't a real house. It's a house that's a metaphor for something. It's a house that changes depending on what the scene requires.

In the end – to get back to what you were saying before – it comes back to a mood. You can identify the quality of this house – whether it's old or new, – however [the important thing is] what does it evoke? And it's that quality of coldness, death; and the feeling of closing, of shutting out the real world. The [design] discussions are less about "is the door open there" and "what sort of door would it be?" It's not about that at all. [The design] is more about the feeling of the environment that the actors will be standing in.

I think what we have to realise is that there's an intent in each scene that isn't reliant on naturalistic, consistent detail. In the end what we created is this black box with very Victorian furniture that could be in a living room or could be in a bedroom or could be in a study – it's wherever you want it to be. But it's the right feel of furniture for the mood of the play.

*How did you arrive at the colour scheme for your design?*

There's black and red, and a very dark-coloured polished timber.

I was looking at the [costume] rack the other day in wardrobe. It's always quite interesting at the end of the process of putting the clothes together – particularly where there are a lot of bought things – to have all the clothes packed on the rack. You can't actually see what each object is. All you can see is bits of colour. However, if I look at the rack towards the end of the fourth week [of rehearsal] and it's chaotic and there are too many colours, I always worry (unless, of course, I deliberately wanted to create a sense of chaos). But I was pleased to see in this case that it was almost all shades of black and grey. There was very little colour at all. There's quite a lot of blue, a lot of black and there's the odd little injection of very intense acid green. But it's quite controlled.

*When I looked at the set model the thing which struck me about it was that you've created a space where the audience is compelled to watch the actors. Was that deliberate?*

Oh, definitely. When you first start working on a production, you've not only got the text to deal with but [you have to realise that] the text exists within a context. The context is the theatre that you're in; the budget that you've been given; and the director that you're working with. Every director has a unique vision of what they're reading. And every theatre has its own difficulties or advantages; has its own particular qualities. The particular quality of this theatre is that its scale is so large that actors can sometimes be diminished in it.

In the end, audiences go to the theatre to see a wonderful performance, and design – good design – is about supporting that, I think.

*What can you, as a designer, indicate to the audience about different characters through, for example, the choice of their clothing or the choice of accessories? Could you speak in a little bit more detail about the choices you made in relation to the characters in **The Sick Room**?*

Well, for example: Rhys McConnochie, who plays the character of DAVID, the grandfather, who's in the wheelchair. Now, very early on – and often with contemporary plays – the initial discussion with the director may go along the lines of “where do you think that person shops?” That's always useful because it cuts things down. If you think that person only shops on the second floor of Georges, then you know fairly specifically what that person wears. In Rhys's case – or in the case of his character DAVID – we thought that he shopped at Henry Bucks, and he probably had an account there that he'd had for years. They would probably know his shoe size, and all he has to do is ring up and ask for another pair to be sent out.

Anyway we had a fitting with Rhys and he was happy with everything but he said to me he didn't think the shoes were right. I had chosen a pair of [lace-up] shoes and I thought it was important that his shoes were well worn but very looked after. The character is an ex diplomat. He probably had handmade shoes and they'd be very classic and polished-looking – you know, used but in good nick. The character is a paraplegic but I had thought – and this is kind of way that you extrapolate these things – I had thought that the housekeeper would help him put his shoes on every morning. He doesn't actually do them up [himself] anymore but he's too proud to wear slip-ons. Well, Rhys had a different view of that. He said he thought they should be slip-on shoes – really good ones – because he would be too proud to have someone do his laces up.

However, [different actors] have different approaches [towards their costumes], and a designer has to be sensitive enough to gauge that.

The hardest thing for me would be if an actor came to me and said “I really think I should be in red in this scene”. I’ve just been telling you about this [costume] rack that’s got this very controlled colour [scheme] and a red [costume] is really going to stuff it up. I’ve got red in the upholstery of the chairs and if one actor walks on [stage] in the same colour as the chairs, that actually says something you don’t want to be said. It’s not intentional at all. Why is one actor wearing the same colour as the furniture? As it is, the one person who does have the colour of the furniture on is DAVID in his jumper. And that’s quite deliberate because it’s his house, and I’m trying to connect him to those things. So you know, actors don’t necessarily have that broader view of things, [but] nor do they need to.

*What about KATE’s costume?*

She’s in white, in just a very thin, pure cotton. It’s a very plain nightie that I drew with sleeves on it. But I added a little note [to the drawing] saying that it may be sleeveless. She’s supposed to be practically at the end of terminal cancer and we were aware of the fact that Asher (Keddie) was coming from a long, hot Melbourne summer [with] a fabulous tan and looking as healthy as can be. So there was a possibility that we might have to cover a bit of that. As it’s turned out, we’ve gone for sleeveless because we feel that it looks more vulnerable and more fragile.

*How would you describe the set? It seems quite dark and heavy.*

Well one of the things that Stephen said when he first saw the model – and I was thrilled when he said it, actually – he said “It looks like a mausoleum.” So, it’s quite good in a way, it’s kind of like a tomb.

[Another thing he said referred to a scene] towards the end of the play, when they’re looking out at the lake. There’s a great sense of stillness amongst this family and this young girl who’s either just about to – or has just died – in the bed. Stephen says this is the scene that looks most like the painting *The Sick Room* by nineteenth century expressionist painter, Edward Munch. His most famous painting is *The Scream*. I went away and looked him up and [found that] he actually did a whole series of paintings of people dying in beds. The one that’s actually closest, I think, to what Stephen’s talking about is called *Death in the Sick Room*. It [depicts] the actual moment of someone dying and there’s a series of distraught people in the room. He painted this bare room with just a bed and these dark figures. It’s the nineteenth century so there are corseted women with full-length dresses to the ground but always in very dark [colours] – almost black. So you only see the silhouette of the person, you don’t see any of the detail. You just look at the face. That’s the quality of [his paintings].

So we realised that was why we’ve effectively got a chamber on stage. It’s like a sealed box except the audience can look in[to it] and the upstage edge of it is completely sealed off by perspex or glass (I hope). So it’s like this hermetically sealed chamber – almost like there’s oxygen pumped into it.

[The characters] are going through this horror. This young girl dying is a very natural thing that happens in this very controlled world – and it’s upsetting that world. Whereas outside (upstage through that glass wall) is this steel lake and the dead trees floating in the lake. That is the natural world out there.

*So there’s an echo of that illness [in the landscape] as well.*

Yes, by making this lake, DAVID has killed the trees. In other words he's had complete control over his life. He's managed to control all his emotions; he's controlled everything including the view out his window. He's a complete control freak. And then into this world comes something that he has no control over and that literally turns his life upside down.

*Can you describe a little bit more your collaboration with Kate, the director, and with Stephen, the playwright?*

Well, not so much with Stephen but certainly with Kate. This is the second play that Kate and I have worked on together. I find her an extremely satisfying director to work with because she has incredible commitment to the piece, which is fabulous. She's also very interested in exploring, in getting underneath the surface of what a play says, which is what I find most interesting about what I'm doing. If designing wasn't about that for me, then I think I'd probably find another job. The most interesting thing above all for me is to try to walk in at the beginning of the experience with one set of views and one attitude towards the play and, at the end of the process, come out having changed.

And I think that process is inevitable because any experience like this – if it's a challenging one – challenges your original views. It might not be in a profound way necessarily but I certainly think of the process of designing as being one of growth. I don't think you ever stop developing as a designer.

I hold the view that someone writing a novel, writing a play, painting a painting or making a great piece of music (or just an ordinary piece of music!) is trying to make sense of their own life and, in some way, express it clearly to another person in order to find a way of connecting with them in what is essentially a world where we are alone. I believe that's what any kind of artistic endeavour is fundamentally about. In other words, [it's about] making connections between people.

In the case of a play, [the writer] can make connections with a great many people if they get it right. [If an audience] walks into the theatre and has been part of a production that actually communicates to the thousands of people, then that's a great achievement. The two people who start [the process] off are the director and the designer. If these two people are not making any attempt to communicate with each other, then they have very little chance of doing it with an audience.

*Can you describe your working process with Matt Scott, the lighting designer?*

It's incredibly important that there's a dialogue [between the designer and the lighting designer] and that they have a sympathetic eye. And I certainly feel that with Matt. He is very committed to helping me. It's not a question of him serving me and making my set look good; it's not that at all. It's that he and I are on the same wavelength, and you need to be. Luckily this is the third show that he and I have done together and we're doing another one later in the year in Queensland. It takes that long to get to know another person. You can't just do it in one show. The best relationships in terms of the key roles of director, designer, lighting designer usually [occur] when you've worked with someone over a number of productions and you start getting to know in more depth what that person is on about.

*Have you been involved in the rehearsal process at all? Have you been to the rehearsals?*

Oh yes. I went in early on when Kate was just starting to use the space and she said, "Come down and see what you think about this scene". She's been given a big area to work in so we've talked about where [a particular] piece of furniture might be placed. That's what rehearsals are for: to test those things and see

whether they work. In some cases, they don't. The [current] arrangement of the furniture is quite different from the way we planned it.

*And what was the problem that you experienced?*

[The character of] KATE is in her sickbed and, in a sense, she was sidelined a bit. The director wanted to bring her more into the heart of the play again. So that meant literally moving her from the OP side\* (where her bed had been) to centre stage for the second half of the play. There are three locations in the second act: one is the bedroom of the parents; one is Kate's room and the other is the office. [Originally] the office was centre stage but there are actually only two little scenes in the office, [albeit] they're very important. But there it sat waiting for its moment for the whole of the second act whereas, really, Kate should have been there [instead]. Now, in a sense, the play swirls around her in the second act.

*I would like you to talk a little bit more about solving the problem of the interiors and the fact that it is an interior play. Have you altered any of the scenes?*

We tried to work out a floor plan of the house – we did – and that even defeated us a bit. We ended up with the weirdest looking house! So that was clearly not the right way to go about it. Instead if, for example, Stephen had written a [scene in a] hallway at night, we tried to think what that might mean. What happens in a hallway? It's a place of shadows, usually. There's always a sense in a hallway of other things happening very near by you in other rooms. It's a place where you can overhear conversations. It's a place that you can go to make a sneaky phone call if you're quickly trying to get on to somebody without anybody else knowing. The moment we started thinking about [it in those terms] we realised we didn't have to have a hallway. Maybe it [was more] to do with the quality of light and that's where I started to talk to the lighting designer.

Likewise, [the scene in] the study. What is the study? What happens in the study? Why has [Stephen set the scene] in there? Why is it in the study and not in the living room? [The answer was] because it's set in the room that belongs to DAVID. It has all of his things in it. The living room is a more communal kind of space. There is [also a scene] in the dining room. What is it about the dining room? What do they do when they're actually eating soup? It [gives the scene] a kind of formality. They're actually going to sit down at a dining room table and have a full three-course meal while the daughter's dying upstairs. They're still carrying on this structure in their lives. So, I suppose we started thinking on a more broad level about the type of room, rather than the details.

The other thing is that it's set almost entirely inside (except for about three scenes outside) so the set has got a big ceiling all over it. [This gives] a sense of the actors being contained within something. Then there is a strip of stage in the front of all that which is not under the ceiling. This is where they play the outdoor scenes.

The major element that we haven't really discussed is the large gauze curtains – scenic gauze, black gauze. They operate so that sometimes the audience can see through them and sometimes it can't. I think the very first words in the play are "dimly-lit we see a man hunched over in anguish". [From there] the audience starts to see a girl in a bed, very sick. I thought that it seemed to imply that the play begins in darkness and then the audience starts picking out very specific things like a man's face. Now the best way to do that is with a gauze. If it's black gauze and there's no light on it, the actor can actually get to [a particular] spot without being seen and take up his position. The lights will go down and we can bring up a very tiny light on him. The gauze gives it a very misty quality.

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\* OP side refers to the "opposite prompt" or right-hand side of the stage from the actor's point of view