

**THE PIG IRON PEOPLE SCHOOLS DAY PERFORMANCE**

**IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

Date:	Wednesday, 26 <sup>th</sup> November 2008
Venue:	Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House
Pre-performance forum	10.30 am
Lunch Break	11.15 am
Performance commences:	12.15 pm
Performance concludes:	2.45 pm

Post performance Q+A concludes 3.00pm (approx)

We respectfully ask that you discuss theatre etiquette with your students prior to coming to the performance.

**Running Late?**

Please contact Sydney Theatre Company's main switch on 9250 1700 and a message will be passed to Toni Murphy.

**Booking and General Education Queries**

Please contact Toni Murphy, Education Coordinator, on 02 9250 1795 or [tmurphy@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:tmurphy@sydneytheatre.com.au)

**WARNING:**

**Low and Medium level coarse language, sexual references and adult themes**



Sydney Theatre Company and UBS present



# The Pig Iron People

by John Doyle  
Directed by Ian Lawson

## Teacher's Resource Kit

Written and compiled by Elizabeth Surbey

### Acknowledgements

Sydney Theatre Company would like to thank the following for their invaluable material for these Teachers' Notes: Laura Scrivano (publications STC) as well as Currency Press (author of the month interview) and Actor, Glenn Hazeldine.

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## Sydney Theatre Company

Sydney Theatre Company (STC) produces theatre of the highest standard that consistently illuminates, entertains and challenges. It is committed to the engagement between the imagination of its artists and its audiences, to the development of the art form of theatre, and to excellence in all its endeavours.

STC has been a major force in Australian drama since its establishment in 1978. It was created by the New South Wales Government, following the demise of the Old Tote Theatre Company. The original intention was to better utilise the Drama Theatre of the Sydney Opera House and the new Company comprised a small central administration staff, technical staff, workshop and rehearsal facilities. Richard Wherrett was appointed Artistic Director from 1979 to 1990.

The Wharf opened on 13 December, 1984 by Premier Neville Wran, which allowed all departments of the Company to be housed under one roof for the first time. The venue was to become the envy of the theatre world. From 1985, the Company could perform in two locations throughout the year, the Drama Theatre and The Wharf. From 1990 to 1999, Wayne Harrison served as Artistic Director. A third regular venue, Sydney Theatre, administered and operated by STC, opened in 2004.

The predominant financial commitment to STC is made by its audience. Of this audience, the Company's subscribers make a crucial commitment. The Company is also assisted annually by grants from the Federal Government through the Australia Council and the New South Wales Government through the Ministry for the Arts. STC also actively seeks sponsorship and donations from the corporate sector and from private individuals.

Under the leadership Artistic Directors Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton, STC's annual subscription season features up to 12 plays including: recent or new Australian works, interpretations of theatrical classics and contemporary foreign works. In addition STC regularly co-produces and tours productions throughout Australia, playing annually to audiences in excess of 300,000. STC actively fosters relationships and collaborations with international artists and companies. In 2006 STC began a new journey of artistic development with the inception of The Actors Company, the STC ensemble.

**To access detailed information on Sydney Theatre Company, its history and productions please contact our Archivist Judith Seeff at [jseeff@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:jseeff@sydneytheatre.com.au)**

## Sydney Theatre Company Education

Sydney Theatre Company is committed to education by programming original **productions** and **workshops** that enthuse and engage the next generation of theatre-goers. Within the education programme Sydney Theatre Company produces its own season of plays as well as collaborates with leading theatre-for-young-people companies across Australia.

Often a young person's first experience of theatre is facilitated by teachers. STC ensures access to all of its mainstage productions through the **schoolsdays** programme as well as produces and tours theatre specifically crafted to resonate with young people.

STC works to support educators in their Drama and English-teaching practices. Every year dynamic **workshops** are held by leading theatre practitioners to support curriculum content, detailed resources are provided for all productions and an extensive work-experience programme is available to students from across the state.

The annual Sydney Morning Herald and Sydney Theatre Company **Young Playwright's Award** continues to develop and encourage young writers. The winning students receive a cash prize and a two-day workshop with a professional director, dramaturg and cast – an invaluable opportunity and experience.

Sydney Theatre Company has an extensive **on-line resource** for teachers and students. Visit [www.sydneystheatre.com.au/education](http://www.sydneystheatre.com.au/education).

We encourage teachers to subscribe to regular e-news to keep informed as well as access **heavily discounted** tickets and special offers.

**For further information on STC Education programme, please contact the Education Manager Helen Hristofski at [hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au)**

## Production Credits

### ***Creative Team***

Director **Craig Ilott**

Designer **Stephen Curtis**

Lighting Designer **Peter Neufeld**

Composer and Sound Designer **Steve Francis**

### ***Cast***

Nick

April

Jack

Jeannette

Claude

Rosie

Kurt

Glenn Hazeldine

Caroline Craig

Danny Adcock

Judi Farr

Bruce Venables

Jacki Weaver

Max Cullen

## Summary

In the tradition of Patrick White's suburban satires, John Doyle, one of our great contemporary commentators, has written his first play.

Set on a quiet suburban street with not quite enough parking for the residents, *The Pig Iron People* examines two generations and the way the politics of their time (and the politics of their car parking) have shaped them.

Nick, a young man wanting to reinvent himself and find his voice as a writer, moves in to Liberal Street. It is 1996, the day of John Howard's first election victory. Looking for solitude, he ends up falling in love with April, a young actress, and striking up a bumpy but finally genuine relationship with his nosy, cantankerous old neighbours.

These are the Pig Iron People of the title, the generation who grew up under Menzies. Without realising it, he and April will be growing up under Honest John.

Characterised by Doyle's tangential humour which illuminates the hearts of his characters, *The Pig Iron People* is a timely satire infused with profound tolerance for the foibles of humanity.

**“...very funny and moving... thought-provoking and poignant”**

*The Australian*

**“enthralling... Funny, provocative, unashamedly theatrical”**

*The Sydney Morning Herald*

**“quirky, funny and genuinely moving”**

*The Daily Telegraph*

## Writers' Note

By John Doyle

### **A starting point. The car.**

I've always enjoyed observing men's relationships with cars. For many men the car is an extension of Self. Obviously. For me the high watermark of car design is the 1961 2.4 Jaguar Mark 11. My older brother had one for a time. And it spent long stretches in the backyard because it wasn't terribly reliable. I loved to sit reading in the quiet warmth of the back seat on cool sunny days.

His 1959 MGA was equally unreliable and far less comfortable. As was his 1962 push button automatic Valiant. His Zephyr 6 was wonderfully reliable and much more excitingly finned than either his '63 Holden Special, his Volkswagen, his Hillman Imp or his big burgundy Mercedes that came at a bargain price because it had been in a number of serious prangs. Uncle Ray bought new a Holden Special every second year, Uncle Jack had a '65 Holden Premier with the 179 engine and Dad had a tan '63 Valiant with the big slanted Six. In those days there was plenty of parking.

But Inner City parking is a minefield. The ideal is to get a park outside your house and in line with the front door so that, especially in summer when the door is open for ventilation, you can casually wander from the lounge room to the hall and catch an affectionate affirming glimpse of the car in The Spot. The absolute ideal is to somehow gain proprietary rights over The Spot. Placing rubbish bins can work. Better with a timber plank connecting them. Getting a disability car park sign is dead set genius. I have seen generally genial and pleasant neighbours come to blows over parking.

What seems to annoy is when a blow-in parks in The Spot. What is worse is when a blow-in leaves the car there for days. Feuds can erupt instantaneously if new people move in with three cars, especially if one is a Toyota Landcruiser or a Ford 250. It can be equally problematic if a neighbour buys a caravan. Or a boat. I remember in Rozelle, a horse float causing a brooding anger and a barely suppressed hostility in my street for several months. As did a small box trailer which mysteriously disappeared one night to be found dumped several streets away.

This is my first play. In some ways I have stolen from life. For a time my whole neighbourhood was privy to intimate conversations from a bedroom across the street from ours. The ferocious bitterness spilled out into the night as a constant stream of sadness. I have watched from the inside, plays being built.

It was one of the great privileges of my life to be part of the original cast of John O'Donoghue's *Essington Lewis - I Am Work*. Aarne Neeme was the director/dramaturg and we had the luxury of a five weeks rehearsal. We did two seasons in Newcastle before, a couple of years later, bringing the play to Sydney and later to Adelaide. I was with the Essington company for three productions and 125 performances – I remained committed and stimulated from start to finish. It is a rare joy for an actor to work on a new Australian play. To



witness the way John's mind worked and the manner in which Aarne corralled the work theatrically in concert with the contributions from the cast was an extraordinary experience.

I love theatre. Theatre is collaborative. But there must be a chemistry formed. The actors I was fortunate enough to work with in the Newcastle years are among my best friends. We've manned the trenches together. Generally speaking, as an actor you become intimate with a group of people very quickly and then you go your separate ways, but more often than not, the intimacy can be quickly rekindled upon seeing them again, even if only fleetingly, twenty years later.

I love actors. We have great actors. Among those who have survived the many depressions that have beset theatre over the recent decades are some of the most skilled to walk the Earth. I am fortunate to have them in my cast.

I love language. I've always been convinced that 'good English' is that which doesn't draw attention to itself, which is to say that language is like clothing – to be well dressed is to wear what is appropriate for the occasion – jeans and T-shirt for the football, a tuxedo for the Ball. Having said that I am always drawn to characters who have a limited linguistic wardrobe and whose confidence in parading themselves is inversely proportional to the degree of limitation.

I love intergenerational issues, especially where political views are brought into focus and how leaders, strong or weak, invariably set the tone for our nation. I can remember clearly the disappointment in our house when R.G.Menzies retired and the cynical bemusement when E.G.Whitlam consciously cultivated Ming's eyebrows as part of the famous 'It's Time' campaign. Bob Hawke acknowledged the influence of Menzies when he reinstated the Prime Ministers Eleven cricket match against touring teams; a tradition understandably embraced by John Howard and will, no doubt, be part of Kevin Rudd's PR landscape.

I have so many people to acknowledge, from Deanna, the girl who has shared her life with me for most of our lives, to Br. Josephus Garrity RIP, who took the trouble of borrowing Mary Joseph's Grundig tape recorder to record my radio plays when I was eleven, Br. Joachim Hope RIP for giving me a love for the theatre, Aarne Neeme who trained me to walk in the shoes of a jobbing actor for a time and who generously shared his boundless insights into text, and Greig Pickhaver, who led me to the apex of Mount Imagination and bellowed 'What do you see, Roy?' I thank the generous and painstaking Craig Ilott for his sensitive direction, Polly Rowe for her due diligence and Robyn Nevin, for green lighting the exhilarating terror that is having a play performed.

*(From Program notes)*

## The Director – Craig Ilott

Craig graduated from NIDA in 1991.

Directing credits include: *Sunday in The Park With George* (NIDA), *Three's Company* (Glen St), *The Present* (La Mama) *Fiddler On The Roof* (Darwin Theatre Company), *The Suitors*, (*Easily Distracted*, *Old Fitz*).

For his own company, Albedo Theatre, Craig has directed, *The Decameron* (Old Fitz) which was nominated for Sun Herald Best Independent Production 2002, *Dealer's Choice* (Old Fitz ) which went on to win Sun Herald Best Independent Production 2004, and *Edmond* in a co-production with B Sharp Belvoir, nominated for Best Independent Production at the 2005 Sydney Theatre Awards.

Craig was resident director on *Makropoulos Secret* for Opera Australia, and was in 2005, assistant to director Neil Armfield on the feature film *Candy* starring Geoffrey Rush and Heath Ledger.

Craig went on to direct Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* for Company B in 2008.

## The Writer – John Doyle

John Doyle started life as a jobbing actor in 1980 appearing in productions with the Hunter Valley Theatre, the Sydney Theatre Company and the State Theatre of South Australia before creating the character of Roy Slaven for ABC radio triple J in 1985. Roy has appeared with HG Nelson continuously on *This Sporting Life* on radio since 1986, including appearances on television with *Club Buggery*, *The Channel Nine Show*, *Win Roy and HG's Money*. *The Dream*, *The Monday Dump*, *The Ice Dream*, *The Cream*, *The Dream in Athens* and *Memphis Trousers*.

John has been honoured by the Australian Writers Guild for comedy on eight occasions and for both his mini-series, *Changi* and *Marking Time*. *Club Buggery* won a Logie for Most Outstanding Comedy; *The Dream* a Logie for most Popular Comedy and *Changi*, the Logie for Most Outstanding Drama. *Marking Time* received a 2004 Logie nomination for Most Outstanding Miniseries/Telemovie, a 2004 AFI Award for Best Screenplay in television and the 2004 NSW Premier's Literary Award for Script Writing. John also received a 2004 Logie Nomination for *the Cream* for most popular sports program and a 2005 Logie Nomination for Most Popular Sports Program for *The Dream In Athens*.

In 2006 John joined Dr Tim Flannery for the documentary *two Men In A Tinnie* which explored the degradation of the Murray Darling River System. *Two Men In A Tinnie* won the 2006 SPAA Award for best Documentary. John has recently joined again with Dr Tim Flannery for a second documentary series, *Two In The Top End*.



Currency Press: Author of the Month:  
October 2008 - John Doyle

**My first theatre experience was...** in my first year of High School a new Principal arrived—Brother Josephus Garrity and he had us for one period of English a week and he loved plays. He had us write plays and two of mine he recorded on a tape recorder. In the same year my brother started going out with a girl who was an amateur actress with the local theatre group and I went along and saw her in *The Boyfriend*. As a result of these two events I have had an interest in plays and performance ever since.

**If I was a character in a play I'd be...** sadly, a bit of a combination of Halvard Solness from Ibsen's *Master Builder* and George from Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, I suspect.

**I love theatre because...** when it's on song, it's a melody like no other.

**I hate theatre when...** it's boring.

**My best moment working in the theatre was...** being part of the Hunter Valley Theatre Company and work-shopping John O'Donoghue's play *Essington Lewis: I Am Work* with Aarne Neeme as director/dramaturg.

**The worst thing to happen to me in the theatre was...** probably when we were performing Alex Buzo's play *Big River* in Newcastle. On one occasion a group of Korean sailors wandered onto the stage at the beginning of the second act in the mistaken belief that The Playhouse was a brothel. Or, with the same company giving a Sunday matinee crowd of four the option of 'returning for another performance when the bus strike is over ... Or we could do the show now.' They opted to see the show now. Two of the four in the house were the director's pre-teenage daughters.

**I write plays because...** Well, one play at this stage. Because I wanted to join in the discourse about how history is recorded, but also to use actors and acting as the bedrock upon which to build the work—I wanted to write roles actors would kill for.

**The most important thing I've ever done was...** go back to University as a mature age student and do four years of Drama.

**The best line that never made it into one of my plays is...** SHE: Okay. So why is the stadium so empty? It's 'the greatest game of all.'

HE *thinks for a moment*.

HE: I'd like to think the empty seats are bought seats. Bought by the League. To house the souls of deceased players.

**My latest play was inspired by...** being privy to loud conversations from the bedroom of a house across the street.

**The role of theatre in 21st-century Australia is...** I'm not sure. But it must energise writers, energise performers and most importantly, energise an audience. Immediacy

is its strength.

**When I hand over a script to a director I'm...** The only time I have done it I was very pleased to do so, to have another hand on the tiller.

**My last big laugh was about...** It is often my habit to write my girl a song. Sometimes a new one each day. Very early in the morning. Over the years I have begun to specialise in exceptionally annoying melody and lyrics. Yesterday I came up with a cracker—short, repetitive, to the point and with a melody that could pierce steel. Sadly, today I have forgotten it. And while she can remember it [so she reckons], she will not remind me of it. Such was its power.

**My last big whinge was about...** the inability of the Federal Government to force the states to accept a central and neutral Water Authority to restore the health of the Darling- Murray River systems.

**The best productions I've ever seen were...** *In the Belly of the Beast* – Chicago Theatre Company. *I Am My Own Wife* – imported by the STC. *The Madness of King George II* – National Theatre.

**My greatest theatre hero/heroine is...** Falstaff. Had the great pleasure of being in a production with Don Barker playing the role. He was extraordinary. And Laura Wingfield from *The Glass Menagerie*—I saw Kerry Walker do it years ago—she was superb.

**My next big project is...** uncertain. I am buried in a film about role models.

**And very personal: When I heard that a species of Kangaroo Paw had been named 'Rampaging Roy Slaven' I thought...** What a great idea. It was presented to me on my fortieth birthday by its creator, Angus Stewart, and together we have donated our proceeds from its sale to Aspect—or the early intervention program for Autistic children. I've been trialing it in the back yard for years—it's the greatest paw in existence—impossible to kill no matter how stern or cruel the care.

(This article is re-printed with permission from Currency Press)  
<http://www.currency.com.au/author-of-month-John-Doyle.aspx>

## Context of the Play / Historical reference points

### The Forgotten People

by Sir Robert Menzies, 22 May, 1942

Quite recently, a bishop wrote a letter to a great daily newspaper. His theme was the importance of doing justice to the workers. His belief, apparently, was that the workers are those who work with their hands. He sought to divide the people of Australia into classes. He was obviously suffering from what has for years seemed to me to be our greatest political disease - the disease of thinking that the community is divided into the rich and relatively idle, and the laborious poor, and that every social and political controversy can be resolved into the question: What side are you on?

Now, the last thing that I want to do is to commence or take part in a false war of this kind. In a country like Australia the class war must always be a false war. But if we are to talk of classes, then the time has come to say something of the forgotten class - the middle class - those people who are constantly in danger of being ground between the upper and the nether millstones of the false class war; the middle class who, properly regarded, represent the backbone of this country.

We do not have classes here as in England, and therefore the terms do not mean the same; so I must define what I mean when I use the expression "middle class". Let me first define it by exclusion. I exclude at one end of the scale the rich and powerful: those who control great funds and enterprises, and are as a rule able to protect themselves - though it must be said that in a political sense they have as a rule shown neither comprehension nor competence. But I exclude them because in most material difficulties, the rich can look after themselves.

I exclude at the other end of the scale the mass of unskilled people, almost invariably well-organised, and with their wages and conditions protected by popular law. What I am excluding them from is my definition of middle class. We cannot exclude them from the problem of social progress, for one of the prime objects of modern social and political policy is to give to them a proper measure of security, and provide the conditions which will enable them to acquire skill and knowledge and individuality. These exclusions being made, I include the intervening range - the kind of people I myself represent in Parliament - salary earners, shopkeepers, skilled artisans, professional men and women, farmers, and so on. These are, in the political and economic sense, the middle class. They are for the most part unorganised and unselfconscious. They are envied by those whose social benefits are largely obtained by taxing them. They are not rich enough to have individual power. They are taken for granted by each political party in turn. They are not sufficiently lacking in individualism to be organised for what in these days we call "pressure politics". And yet, as I have said, they are the backbone of the nation...

The middle class, more than any other, provides the intelligent ambition which is the motive power of human progress. The idea entertained by many people that, in a well-constituted world, we shall all live on the State in the quintessence of madness, for what is the State but us? We collectively must provide what we individually receive. The great vice of democracy - a vice which is exacting a bitter retribution from it at this moment - is that for a generation we have been busy getting ourselves on to the list of beneficiaries and removing ourselves from the list of contributors, as if somewhere there was somebody else's wealth and somebody else's effort on which we could thrive.

To discourage ambition, to envy success, to hate achieved superiority, to distrust independent thought, to sneer at and impute false motives to public service - these are the maladies of modern democracy, and of Australian democracy in particular. Yet ambition, effort, thinking, and readiness to serve are not only the design and objectives of self-government but are the essential conditions of its success. If this is not so, then we had better put back the clock, and search for a benevolent autocracy once more. Where do we find these great elements most commonly? Among the defensive and comfortable rich, among the unthinking and unskilled mass, or among what I have called the "middle class"?

One of the great blots on our modern living is the cult of false values, a repeated application of the test of money, notoriety, applause. A world in which a comedian or a beautiful half-wit on the screen can be paid fabulous sums, whilst scientific researchers and discoverers can suffer neglect and starvation, is a world which needs to have its sense of values violently set right.

Now, have we realized and recognized these things, or is most of our policy designed to discourage or penalize thrift, to encourage dependence on the State, to bring about a dull equality on the fantastic idea that all men are equal in mind and needs and deserts: to level down by taking the mountains out of the landscape, to weigh men according to their political organisations and power - as votes and not as human beings? These are formidable questions, and we cannot escape from answering them if there is really to be a new order for the world....

If the new world is to be a world of men, we must be not pallid and bloodless ghosts, but a community of people whose motto shall be, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield". Individual enterprise must drive us forward. That does not mean that we are to return to the old and selfish notions of laissez-faire. The functions of the State will be much more than merely keeping the ring within which the competitors will fight. Our social and industrial obligations will be increased. There will be more law, not less; more control, not less. But what really happens to us will depend on how many people we have who are of the great and sober and dynamic middleclass - the strivers, the planners, the ambitious ones. We shall destroy them at our peril.

"A world in which a comedian or a beautiful half-wit on the screen can be paid fabulous sums, whilst scientific researchers and discoverers can suffer neglect and starvation, is a world which needs to have its sense of values violently set right."

Sir Robert Menzies

## The Howard Years

"... [Howard's] prime ministership now reminds me of Sir Robert Menzies' in its final years. Because of a certain stubbornness and inability to respond to the winds of change on racial questions, such as apartheid and the White Australia Policy, Menzies quite suddenly began to look like a man from a bygone era. The same is happening to John Howard... As neo-liberals might put it, it may not be too long before it is generally recognised that Howard, like Menzies 40 years ago, has passed his use-by date.

Robert Manne, October 2006

"There is a saying in Australian politics – Paul Keating said it first – that when you change the government, you change the country"

Mark Davis, *The Land of Plenty*

“Sir Robert Menzies is John Howard’s hero. Yet Mr Howard is not a clone of Sir Robert. In fact, their political styles are different. John Howard is more like a Labor politician than any other leader of Australia’s political conservatives, all the way back to 1901. Mr Howard is very much like the tribal political leaders who have traditionally prevailed in the ALP. Qualified supporters get government funded positions; qualified opponents do not...Robert Menzies was politically skilled but not to the same extent as John Howard. Most successful leaders have a degree of luck. Yet the Menzies Government had more good fortune than most – due to Bert Evatt’s demented decision to initiate the Labor Split in the mid 1950s and due to the weak leadership of Arthur Calwell. In 1996 John Howard defeated Paul Keating’s successful Labor government at a time of relative economic prosperity and went on to demolish Mark Latham in 2004 – Labor scoring only 46 per cent and 47 per cent of the total vote in 1996 and 2004 respectively.”

Gerard Henderson,

## John Howard: 10 Years On

“There is an Australian dream that is collective. It goes to the roots of what it means to be Australian, since it’s imprinted in Australia’s history, the collective acts of its people, their attitudes, their gestures, what and how they eat, how they spend their leisure time, and the way such things reflect upon and derive from who they are. This ethos and its accompanying mythologies, which are distinctively Australian, are half-known, half-understood by all Australians, those recently arrived and of generations’ standing. At their heart is the belief that young national like Australia offer the opportunity to transcend the inequalities of the old world. Egalitarianism and the idea of the ‘fair go’ are at the centre of the Australian social contract and are deeply embedded in the self-understanding of Australians...They are a banner to the world, the things that Australia is best known for. The Australian dream wasn’t simply lost, engulfed by the tide of globalisation and market forces. It was a dream, rather, that was actively dismantled.”

Mark Davis, *The Land of Plenty*

## PIG IRON BOB

**Sir Robert Gordon Menzies**, (20 December 1894 - 15 May 1978), Australian politician, was the twelfth person to serve as Prime Minister of Australia. His second term saw him become Australia's longest serving Prime Minister, a record which still stands. He had a rapid rise to power as Prime Minister at the 1940 election which his party narrowly won. A year later, his government was brought down by MPs crossing the floor. He spent eight years in opposition, during which he founded the Liberal Party. He was re-elected Prime Minister at the 1949 election, and he then dominated Australian politics until his retirement in 1966. Menzies was renowned as a brilliant speaker, both on the floor of Parliament and on the hustings; his speech "*The forgotten people*" is an example of his oratorical skills.

In 1928, Menzies gave up his law practice to enter state parliament as a member of the Victorian Legislative Council representing the Nationalist Party of Australia. His candidacy was nearly defeated when a group of ex-servicemen attacked him in the press for not having enlisted, but he survived this crisis. The following year he shifted to the Legislative Assembly, and was a minister in the conservative Victorian government from 1932 to 1934, and became Deputy Premier of Victoria in 1932.

Menzies entered federal politics in 1934, representing the United Australia Party (UAP) in the upper-class Melbourne electorate of Kooyong. He was immediately appointed

Attorney-General and Minister for Industry in the Joseph Lyons government, and soon became deputy leader of the UAP. He was seen as Lyons's natural successor and was accused of wanting to push Lyons out, a charge he denied. In 1938 he was given the pejorative nickname "**Pig Iron Bob**", the result of his industrial battle with waterside workers who refused to load scrap iron being sold to Imperial Japan. In 1939, however, he resigned from the Cabinet in protest at what he saw as the government's inaction. Shortly afterwards, on 7 April 1939, Lyons died.

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## Form, Style Overview

### Music Hall

Music hall is a form of popular entertainment that originated in England around 1850. The songs sung in music halls often became very popular in their own right and could be romantic, comic, sentimental or patriotic in their lyrics. Music hall was imported from England to Australia around the 1860s and was mostly housed in beer halls. Acts could include chorus girls, animal acts, recitations, magic, and song and dance.

By the mid 1880s, larger halls, devoted entirely to music hall entertainment appeared in both Sydney and Melbourne. One of the largest, the Alhambra Music Hall was able to seat 900 and remained popular well into the 20th Century, ending its days as a 'picture show'. Many traditional musical halls became variety theatres towards the end of the 19th Century paving the way for Harry Rickards to establish a national vaudeville circuit, called the Tivoli circuit. Rickards leased the Garrick Theatre in Sydney and renamed it the Tivoli. He then leased the Melbourne Opera House and theatres in Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth allowing his performers to tour the country and gain national attention. By the time of his death in 1911 it was claimed that he was probably 'the largest single-handed music hall manager and proprietor in the world'. After Rickards' death the circuit was taken over by a succession of managers including Harry Musgrove, J.C. Williamsons and David N. Martin.

The Tivoli circuit continued to be the major outlet for variety theatre for over 70 years, remaining popular into the 1950s. The circuit, like most variety theatre and music hall, suffered a major decline with the introduction of television in Australia in 1956. Entertainment and variety acts could now be seen on TV, so people didn't have to venture outside their home for an evening of comedy and song. The effect was catastrophic for most variety theatres and the Tivoli circuit staged its last show in 1966.

*(From Program notes)*



## WHO? - Character Summaries

### Nick, 30's

Our main character. Nick has had a breakdown and left teaching after his wife 'left' him. He was in care and now takes a rental property in Liberal St. He has taken a job in advertising – writing slogans for ads. He wants to be a writer.

Nick:	This is Liberal street. And the day I arrived was the day John Howard became our twenty fifth Prime Minister. March the eleventh, 1996. I was still fragile. Mrs. Howard's name is Jeanette. And oddly enough the bloke watering the lawn at number 6 – his name is John Howard and his wife is Jeanette. John and Jeanette Howard of Liberal street. Unlike the new PM, he calls himself jack. All of what follows is as true to truth as memory can allow. I'm Nick. Nick the writer. To pay the rent I'm doing a bit of freelance work with Mather, Keely and Snow. I work from here. Midsummer Madness in Winter is mine. I wrote that for the Electronic Sales and Rentals winter sale. It was an idea they thought was ahead of its time. It's Midsummer Madness! In Winter! It did well, the campaign. Anyway ... this is a journey of life to the page. And back again.
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### April Flower, 30's

April is an actress. Having become one without real training and maintaining a part in a TV soap before her character was killed off. She thinks of herself as more a musical performer – or is that music hall! She has a boyfriend, an American producer and she intends following him back to the states, after an audition.

### Claude, late 60's

Claude has a passion for his car, the valiant. He lives with his partner, Rosie. He has spent his life as a truckie. They had three girls they don't see much of any more. He courted Rosie from when she was only 14. He left a wife to be with her.

### Rosie, 60's

Rosie is a simple woman. Her Claudie is all she has. She drinks a bit and she loves her man.

### Jack, mid 60's

Jack spent his life as a seaman cook with the navy. Mostly to be away from the girl he married because in one brief encounter she fell pregnant. They tolerate each other. They live in what was her family home growing up. They had a son who stays away.

Jeanette:	Poof
Jack:	Shut up
Jeanette:	Poof
Jack:	Shut up
Jeanette:	Poof

### Jeanette, 60

Jeanette married Jack because she was pregnant; she has resented him and their shotgun wedding all their married life. She tolerates him as divorce just isn't an option for someone from her era.

### **Kurt, (German) 60's**

Kurt is a strange neighbour, living behind an impervious fence covered in razor wire and broken glass. He plays loud music and has a loud German shepherd “fang”.

These script excerpts were taken directly from 'The Pig Iron People' by John Doyle, March, 2007.

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## **An interview with actor Glenn Hazeldine**

by Elizabeth Surby

### **ES There are plenty of funny lines in the play - but I wouldn't call it a comedy - would you? Do you have a favourite line?**

**GH** I'm really not sure what makes a 'strict' comedy these days. I do know, however, that John Doyle is an incredibly funny man and writes brilliantly funny things. And to be honest, *The Pig Iron People* (TPIP) is so much more hilarious than I expected. I knew in rehearsals that it had some amusing moments but nothing prepared any of us for the reaction of our first preview audience. They heard and saw things that I'm sure John had intuited because he put them there, but the response was overwhelmingly positive in terms of the comedy in the play. It was a wonderful surprise.

A counterpoint to the humour in TPIP is the vividly etched depiction of the characters and the crazy world of their street. John Doyle has tapped into a wonderfully insightful exploration of the lives of this motley collection of dysfunctional people sharing Liberal Street in 1996. The more we get to know them the deeper we understand their behaviours and relationships to one another. They are all based on actual people who lived on the same street as John back in the eighties, so there has been a lot of rich and fertile material for us to delve into. The stories in the play are, in a sense, real. It's all quite moving.

I can't think of a particular favourite line but I really love the writing in the monologues. The language and the stories are grand, insightful and very, very poignant.

### **ES Has Nick come a long way to arrive in Liberal Street...– Do you think that's why he might learn to care about his neighbours?**

**GH** Definitely. For some time he has lived at the rock-bottom of his life. His wife died eight years prior to his arrival on Liberal Street and since her death he has lost his job, his home and his sanity. He has endured severe depression and drug addiction. Before the play opens as he has been on quite a roller-coaster ride. He is raw and exposed. Afraid and numb. Defensive and lonely. (It's often helpful to make these kinds of decisions about your character... it gives you some grit and muscle to play with and creates a greater journey.) So, very soon April begins to fill a void in his life and his healing begins. While

you may not leave the theatre with a picture of a fully re-formed character, there is hope.

**ES Does he really see potential in his relationship to April - how important is it to him?**

**GH** I think so. He is smitten from their first meeting. Star-struck! But he has also been savaged by the circumstances of his recent life and been rendered emotionally 'frozen'. Yet despite an uphill battle, he is able to rise from the ashes and follow April towards recovery. With April he learns to trust, and he becomes stable again. Nick indicates the promise he has with April when he says, "You are my Again. Again allows history to happen."

**ES Discuss his relationships with the other characters...**

**GH** He initially regards TPIP with detached fascination, eavesdropping on their strange lives. Then gradually he becomes part of the mesh of the street. As he is exposed to the private truths of each neighbour his prejudices are defeated by a swelling empathy. As he recovers from his trauma he develops an acceptance and respect for each of them. Concurrently, with April, Nick learns to trust and to love again. He lowers his defenses. He blossoms. It's all very romantic, isn't it!

**ES Can you comment on what it is like having an outside relationship with the audience (to whom you narrate) and a continuing relationship of many time shifts across the stage? Evidently Nick chooses to select stage time according to the story he will write? Or is the play at different times 'owned' by all the other characters.**

**GH** It's a tricky relationship. It's rarely easy for me to accept blank narration when I attend the theatre. I am immediately suspicious. "What has the Playwright failed to dramatise?" I think. But it's important for John Doyle to create a pathway for the audience to uncover a deeper understanding of his characters. There is definitely a dramatic shift as Nick, along with the audience, moves from prejudice to empathy; TPIP initially appear to be caricatures but soon become more wholly realised, 'flesh and blood' characters. It's important that I swiftly establish a rapport with the 'punters'. It needs to be clear very soon after the lights come up that there is a direct line of communication between Nick and the audience so that their brief exposure to that crazy street is as rich and rewarding as possible. If they buy into Nick's assemblage of events then they'll better accept the story.

**ES Whose story is it?**

**GH.** Nick is the narrator. He invites the audience to share a 'snapshot' of his life on Liberal Street in 1996. He selects moments of significance from that time

and guides the audience along in order to tell his story of recovery. At times the scenes are deliberately placed and at others he is caught off-guard by them. Either way, the events are seen from his subjective perspective. So fundamentally, it is his story. But within this structure we are exposed to the circumstances of his neighbours; their camaraderie, love, joy, loss, pain and longing. And their eccentricities. We are eventually given an insight into their lives that greatly contrasts with our initial impressions of them. (Perhaps with the exception of the 'enigmatic' Kurt.) In this sense, it's an ensemble piece.

**ES Why is this time important to these people?**

**GH** Many people have drawn a link between the Conservatism of the Howard era and the seemingly endless leadership of Robert Menzies. It is argued that Mr Howard 'turned back the clock'. The PIP grew up in the thirties and formed their world views in the fifties, under Menzies. In the play, Doyle says (through Nick), 'I feel that mood is dormant, waiting to be rekindled. I sense it. I fear it.' For the PIP, it is something to embrace... to celebrate. 'The madness is over!' cries Kurt. With the election of Howard, their 'voice' has been rehabilitated. For April and Nick, this new era of Australian politics is a circumstance to rail against. They see it as a divisive, backward step and must find a way to survive this onslaught of conservatism with their lives, and their careers in the Arts, in tact. How's that for a dramatic premise!

**ES What does the play have the potential to say to a young audience? What do you hope they will take away?**

**GH** For me, it is a hopeful story of recovery. A story of the healing power of love. And of the profound shifts that occur when bigotry and prejudice are defeated by understanding, compassion and empathy. I hope that a younger audience finds a love and appreciation for the theatre... that they find as purpose in it. That it is a place to see and hear their stories and the stories of their people. That's why I go.

Elizabeth Surbey November 2008

## Questions Before and After the Play

### SO, WHY ARE WE GOING TO SEE A PLAY?

Most of all, it is important your students understand WHY they are going to see a play. Yes, it's for entertainment and if Drama students, a required part of the curriculum, but think about what you want this live experience to achieve.

If students are going to be using this experience as part of a responding activity then have them make a checklist in class of what particular things they need to look out for. Personally I would suggest not taking this into the theatre with them, but completing within a short time after the performance is over. Remind them it is important to enjoy their theatre experience and that it isn't 'just another task', but by giving these parameters to students, in particular students who are less articulate or focused, will be able to get more out of their theatre experience.

### RESPONDING TO LIVE THEATRE

Here are some questions you may want to consider when you are thinking about a play in production. Use drama terminology when jotting down ideas.

- What is the title of the play and what expectations does this set up?
- Who wrote it? When was it written? Was it written for a particular purpose? What were the circumstances under which it was written (for example, in response to an incident or event, for a commission, in collaboration with a youth theatre company)?
- What is the theme? Does the play have a particular message or several messages?
- What is the plot (in as few words as possible)?
- How did the venue and performance space affect the staging?
- What was the set like and how did that support the play and the performances?
- How did lighting/sound/media the production? Were there any special effects?
- Were all the actors believable in their roles? Could you see and hear them? Did you feel any connection with them? Did any stand out?
- What style would you say this play belongs to?
- What aspects of the style could you identify?
- What form or structure did the play follow?
- Was there a clear pattern to the tension?
- What contributed to the mood of the production? How was this managed and changed throughout?

## Finding Points of Meaning

In small groups or as an entire class take the time to sequence key/major events and moments from the play. Have students think about what effected change in the play's plot and how that made the action move forward.

### **The Nature of Farce...**

'*The Narcissist*' is based on Moliere's '*Le Misanthrope*'. This analysis has been taken from the following site: <http://www.theatrehistory.com/french/misanthrope001.html>

"*The Misanthrope, Alceste*, impersonated by the author himself, was a character wholly new to the stage, and, unlike the central figure in other plays from the same pen, is intended to enjoy at least our respect, and even a certain measure of sympathy. He is no vulgar hater of mankind, no churlish or brutal cynic. High and noble in nature, he is alienated from the world by its want of heart, its insincerities, its more or less veiled falsehood, its hypocrisies of complaisance, and its thousand petty foibles. He regards it as nothing less than a crime that men should exchange civilities simply as a matter of form, should breathe a syllable against those whom they call their friends, or should gloss over their opinion of execrable verses when the author asks for it. His practice is at least equal to his theory; contempt for the harmless hypocrisies of every day life, however, does not prevent him from becoming the slave of a woman in whom they are fully represented, the sprightly, accomplished, heartless coquette Célimène. He is conscious of his folly even as he gives way to it the most, and it is upon the conflict in his case between head and heart, terminating in the predominance of the former, that the interest of the play chiefly depends."

This analysis might be a bit 'wordy' for some students however you could have them to read through individually and see where they can make links to the play.

## WHY? Discovering themes and issues.

The following are some suggested themes and issues that are related to the performance of 'The Pig Iron People'.

- GOVERNMENT
- POLITICS
- TRUTH
- DECEPTION
- NEIGHBOURS
- THE URBAN FAMILY
- LOVE & RELATIONSHIPS
- PERSONAL HISTORY
- CAREER
- SEXUALITY
- COMMUNICATION
- FRIENDSHIP / MATESHIP

The themes in the play can be explored in a number of ways.

### **Moulding Statues...**

Have students select a theme/issue from the above list and then have them break down the word, thinking of the emotions, feelings or situations related to the word. For example; from CAREER can come POWER, DOMINANCE, OPPRESSION etc.

Students then can create frozen statues of these words and have the rest of the class can reflect on how they use expression and body position to reflect their chosen word. The next step from this could be to work on the idea of juxtaposition and create the 'opposites' of each other. Have one side of the class create POWER and then have the other side join into the frozen tableaux to create the opposite, (for example WEAKNESS or FEAR) and then have them look at the use of level and dynamics that they use.

### **Mind Map...**

Have students create a mind map on one particular theme. Ask them to look at the word as laterally as possible, and create as many more ideas as they can from that singular word.

### **Find examples...**

Have students look for everyday examples of the above themes. Where are these ideas and issues common in our everyday lives? What's their idea?

Divide the above list of themes and issues amongst students, so that each pair has one theme. In pairs discuss and brainstorm the given theme in more detail focusing on the definition and meaning, and specific examples of the issue and behaviour as evidenced through the play.

Together write an internal monologue exploring one character's thoughts, feelings, fears and hopes in relation to the given issue/ idea.

### **Other possible tasks...**

Students could participate in a number of possible tasks after viewing 'The Pig Iron People'. For example:

- Debate the topic of Pig Iron People or a people of a particular time and it's evidence in today's society
- Create 'Nick' and all the other characters and do some hot seating in role
- Do a profile of one/each of the characters in five years time. How have they changed? Have they changed at all? Have they grown? And so on...
- Devise a missing scene and perform/script it
- Focusing on the Elements of Drama, students could participate in some activities revolving around the use of these elements and then try to make links to the use of them in the play. There is a myriad of useful games/exercises in the 'Dramawise' text by Haseman and O'Toole, published by Heinemann.

Some great activities can also be found online at:

<http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/secondary/creativearts/assets/drama/pdf/dramaelements.pdf>

**Reference:** Louis Nowra, "Just act normal" in *Spectrum* in *The Sydney Morning Herald* Weekend edition, 8-9 February 2003 – "English playwrights rail against the world, Americans search for happiness. But Australian plays are more about preserving harmony than probing the problems beneath." pp. 4–5 "

Discuss Nowra's perspective on Australian Drama here with specific reference to *The Pig Iron People*. How has John Doyle presented his contemporary Australian play?

## Reviewing

A guideline for reviewing productions, possibly for a log book in Drama or as a journal entry in English.

If you attend a play, film, concert, opera, musical, school production etc. - write about it critically.

1. Did you enjoy it? Why?
2. What was good or effective? What was bad or didn't communicate with you?
3. How is a good production, and this one in particular, achieved?
4. Did the rest of the audience enjoy it?
5. Was the plot communicated clearly?
6. Was the acting good? (What is good acting?)
7. Set and costumes: Credible? Bad or good? Too much or too little? If the set and costumes play too much of a part in the drama, this is considered an imposing or negative thing.
8. Was the play convincing, dull, funny, hilarious, dark, mediocre? Why? Why not?
9. Was the script/play credible?

## Writing a Review – The Nuts and Bolts...

The following information and activities are drawn from *Centre Stage* (2004 rev. ed).  
By Mathew Clausen, Heinemann (pp. 104-1108)

The subheadings and questions are intended to be used as a guide for students in the post-viewing phase, to support their synthesis of knowledge and appreciation.

After watching a performance, you will have quite a strong sense of whether or not it was effective. This is usually reinforced through your feelings of whether or not you were engaged, moved, excited or disinterested in the performance. The following categories and questions may assist students in writing a review.

### INTRODUCTION

Include the name of the play you are reviewing, the name of the playwright, the theatre where the performance was held and the date of the performance; if you choose, you may also indicate your overall impression of the play.

### PLOT

This is the actual action that happens on stage. Try to reduce the whole story into a brief paragraph that includes all the main events.

### DISCUSS THEMES AND ISSUES

Outline the themes and issues that you feel were important in the play. The themes and issues carry the message of the play and are important in helping the audience gain meaning from the performance. You should also discuss your impression of the directorial concept in your review. Comment on the director's interpretation of the play, and how the choice of dramatic form and performance style helps to communicate the play's themes and issues.



### ANALYSE CHARACTER OBJECTIVE AND MOTIVATION

Describe and analyse the characters. (Two is sufficient). To find the character's objective, ask yourself the question: What does the character want to achieve by the end of the play? To find the character's motivation, ask yourself the question: Why does the character want to achieve their goal?

### EVALUATE THE PERFORMER

(Give examples wherever possible – Choose two performers to evaluate).

How well did the actors use body language to express their character?

Were their movements and gestures appropriate for their character?

How well did they use their voice to express character and deliver lines?

How focused did they seem during their performance?

How convincing did the performer seem in their portrayal of their character?

### COMMENT ON THE USE OF THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION

Discuss how effective you think the use of sound; lighting, set and costume were in the performance. Were the costumes suitable for the characters? How did the choice of colours and designs suit the overall look of the performance? How?

Was the set an effective use of space? Was the set easy for the actors to manoeuvre around? In terms of colour and layout, did its design enhance the performance?

How did the elements of production support the directorial concept?

Did the signs and symbols used within the production enhance meaning?

Was special lighting used at any time for a particular effect?

Did the use of live or recorded sound enhance or detract from the performance?

How did lighting and sound establish location and create atmosphere?

### CONCLUSION

Sum up the overall success of the play.

# The Pig Iron People

Mark Hopkins, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 3, 2008

***The Pig Iron People* is no disappointment, making for enthralling theatre.**

John Doyle has an impressive record in writing comedy and drama for radio and television, so expectations for his debut as a playwright might reasonably be high.

*The Pig Iron People* is no disappointment, making for enthralling theatre, neither taking itself too seriously nor missing the opportunity to proclaim a passionately held view of recent Australian history.

Set in 1996 in an inner-city residential street, Nick (Glenn Hazeldine) resides temporarily in a half-way house on his road to recovery from institutional care after a nervous breakdown. An aspiring writer, Nick finds inspiration in an "out of work soapie actress", April Flower (Caroline Craig), but as a fragile romance is punctuated by intrusive neighbours, so his writing begins to focus on the intruders.

From Nick's perspective these "Pig Iron People" had their salad days when living under the conforming dullness of Bob Menzies and now in their 60s are embracing with an empty bitterness the chance to lock Australia into the John Howard era.

Through this generational clash of sensibility, Doyle the satirist excels in mocking hostile political and social conservatism, while Doyle the dramatist shines in his articulation of people painfully oppressed by their own intolerance of weakness.

Most striking amid the broad strokes of comedic exaggeration is Doyle's compassion, his non-judgmental characterisation of flawed humanity.

Astute direction (Craig Ilott) and an exceptionally engaging cast contribute. Living in "Liberal Street" are Jack (Danny Adcock) and Janette Howard (Judi Farr), Claude (Bruce Venables) and his wife, Rosie (Jacki Weaver) and Kurt (Max Cullen). This cast could make re-enacting inane television commercials entertaining, and they do. They also imbue both heightened domestic vitriol and set-piece monologues with such psychological and emotional immediacy that any sense of theatrical contrivance is avoided.

Ilott and cast have the mechanics of satire (even in song) well drilled, yet the humanity is fresh to the point of raw.

Hazeldine and Craig reveal with equal finesse their generation's struggle to risk vulnerability and express imagination in an Australia once again being refashioned to lock in the votes of Menzies' "great and sober" middle class.

Stephen Curtis's design further subverts didacticism by emphasising the text's self-proclaimed storytelling subjectivity. Shifts between two and three dimensional portrayal of setting, even characters, reinforce that. *The Pig Iron People* is Nick's story, and the fluid repositioning of furniture keeps everyone, including the storyteller, on their toes. Funny, provocative, unashamedly theatrical and given such an engrossing production, *The Pig Iron People* will have wide appeal.

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/entertainment/arts/arts-reviews/the-pig-iron-people/2008/11/03/1225560715912.html>

## Doyle Strikes Gold in his Debut Dig

John McCallum, *The Australian*, November 03, 2008

*Caroline Craig plays a young actor in  
John Doyle's debut play The Pig Iron People*



This very funny and moving show starts out as a simple story of an innocent abroad in a crazy world but ends up being something much more complex, thought-provoking and poignant. It includes a romantic love story, but that is resolved as the play moves on to plumb other depths of experience.

It has some wickedly outrageous scenes involving a collection of marvellous characters as bizarre as any we've met since Patrick White and Dorothy Hewett, but then their human stories start pushing up like flowers through a concrete footpath. And it has a lovely theatrical self-consciousness as the characters step out of role and sing pop songs, some going back to the days of the old music halls. Above all, it evokes very powerfully a sense of the history of struggle in this country and the generations that didn't quite manage to hand on the baton.

Nick (Glenn Hazeldine) is a young man recovering from an abruptly ended marriage who, in 1996, on the eve of the first John Howard election victory, moves into an inner-city working-class suburb. There he meets the pig iron people, the outcasts of the Menzies generation, born in the 1930s, who tried to make a life for themselves during the post-war boom, which seemed to pass them by.

He falls in love with a young actor, April (Caroline Craig), and that is very nice, but then the people in the neighbouring houses begin to dominate his attention and he suddenly wants to hear their stories and to write about them.

The neighbours include a warring old couple full of bitterness and mutual resentment (Danny Adcock and Judi Farr), an apparently happy couple whose simple passion for each other has helped them survive a hard life (Jacki Weaver and Bruce Venables), and a nasty old right-wing recluse (Max Cullen).

A great cast takes us on a journey in which the savagery of their characters' grotesque behaviour is overwhelmed, by the end, by the realisation that, if you let them into your life, everyone has a moving story to tell, even when they are trying to bash you up or shoot you.

There is a terrific set by Stephen Curtis, using projection to create, on an otherwise blank wall, a row of inner-city terrace houses that keeps fading for interiors and then reappearing like memories, and in front of it the street outside where private lives are made public.

This production, directed by Craig Ilott, is comic and profound at the same time, and certainly a triumphant debut by John Doyle, old hand that he otherwise is, as a writer for the stage.

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,24590123-5013577,00.html>

## ***THEATRE REVIEW: The Pig Iron People***

By **Gareth Beal** for Arts Hub



Monday, November 10, 2008

APRIL: My friend says it's all about religion and eroticism.

NICK: Cricket?

APRIL: Mm. [...] The way he sees it, the red ball symbolises the Devil. And the three stumps the Holy Trinity. The man with the bat is God's Prince, protecting his Church. *NICK considers this.*

NICK: Yeah? So polishing the ball is the Devil's work? [...] Well, there are twelve in the team – that's nicely biblical. But you can only use eleven – the twelfth man is the Judas figure, I suppose. But why does Judas bring out the drinks and generally help out?

I don't normally quote from scripts in my reviews, but then I don't normally get handed one as part of my promotional literature (good thinking, STC)...! And written by John Doyle ('Rampaging Roy Slaven' of *Roy and HG* fame), *The Pig Iron People* certainly includes more than its fair share of quotable moments.

Satires can be disastrous, but this one manages to be both intelligently funny, thoughtfully serious and very moving throughout. It's no mean feat to keep so many balls in the air, and while Doyle arguably drops a few of them through the second act, his playwriting debut is an undeniable success.

Nick (Glenn Hazeldine) is depressed. He's lost his wife, his job, even his mind for a while, and it's 1996 on the eve of John Howard's election to office (the play's title is a reference to another long-serving conservative prime minister, Sir Robert 'Pig Iron Bob' Menzies). I remember I was quite depressed myself.

Now an aspiring writer, Nick's just moved into a halfway house on – wait for it: 'Liberal Street'.

And if you think the coincidences end there, his eccentric neighbours include an ex-navy cook, John 'swears-like-a-sailor, Jack' Howard and his bitter, long-suffering wife Janette (Danny Adcock and Judi Farr).

Next door to them lives Claude, retired truck driver, a good-natured man-mountain with an almost unhealthy fixation on his 1961 Valiant, and his perpetually nightie-clad, aging 'teenage bride' Rosie (Bruce Venables and Jackie Weaver). And finally there's Kurt: a 60ish, Gestapo-esque hermit played by the inimitable Max Cullen...

Still, it's not all bad news for Nick, as his halfway house used to be owned by a famous music hall star, Sarah Sedgeman. This intrigues the beautiful April (Caroline Craig), who played Sedgeman in her high school revue and doesn't believe in coincidence.

Maybe she should, because the fact that she is also a one-time soapie star, killed off in a car crash, could be the most unfortunate one of all.

No one actor particularly stood out, but that's hardly a surprise given the quality of this cast. To say that each and every one of them is magnificent probably still manages to be an understatement. If there was a special set of superlatives reserved for situations like these, believe me, I'd be using them.

The same equally applies to the crew, from Craig Ilott's imaginative direction through to its lighting and sound and set design (it's not every day that a Valiant rolls onstage to begin a scene!). Given it's the Sydney Opera House, one tends to have high expectations, but I'll be setting my bar just a little bit higher from now on.

Reading this review, or others floating around at the moment, you may think that *The Pig Iron People* pokes fun at conservatives. I shan't try to deny this but for me at least, it went a very long way towards humanising them as well.

For all their faults – and partly because of them – these characters are immensely likable. Doyle's play isn't meant to polarise audiences on the contrary, it should make Australians on both sides of the political fence stop and think about their neighbours.

And laugh. You've got to laugh, folks.

<http://www.artshub.com.au/au/news.asp?sc=&sld=175104&sType=review>

## The Pig Iron People | STC

Written by Jack Teiwes

Saturday, 01 November 2008



Left - Cast. Cover - Glenn Hazeldine & Max Cullen. Photo - Brett Boardman

Being a play set at the dawn of John Howard's tenure and whose title directly evokes the era of our other long-running Liberal PM Bob Menzies, it is evident that one's response to this material may vary – not only according to politics, but also class and especially by generation.

Although better known to the general public in his persona as Rampaging Roy Slaven, **John Doyle** has long been a figure on the entertainment scene, working under his own name as an actor, a radio host, and as a writer, having penned two notable television miniseries in the past decade, *Changi* and *Marking Time*. It would be fair to say that **Doyle** is something of an Australian icon, and this, his first stage play *The Pig Iron People*, is a piece of work that both beguiles and bemuses.

A multilayered script, the story concerns *Nick*, a former teacher and aspiring writer who has lost his marriage and, for a while, his mind, before coming to live in a rented inner-city house in the working-class Sydney neighbourhood of Liberal Street, moving in on the eve of John Howard's 1996 election to office. He is initially shocked by the outrageous personalities of his three sets of blue-collar neighbours, but in the same evening meets the actress *April* at a party, and is smitten. What follows is a sweet, tentative (but fairly straightforward) love story interwoven with *Nick's* interactions with his eccentric neighbours who increasingly fascinate him and prove a source of inspiration for his writing. As the play moves along we learn through *Nick* about the personal backstories of each character, eventually gaining insight into why they are as they are.

On this level, *The Pig Iron People* works well, presenting a collection of well-drawn characters who can encompass both considerable humour and tragedy as each personal history unfolds. There's not much plot to speak of and it may be a little soapy for some tastes, but that seems to matter very little as these various vignettes and encounters all work quite effectively as human drama.

Not to mention the fact that the play is also, perhaps unsurprisingly, very funny. Hilarious, at times. **Doyle** has crafted some genuinely memorable characters (facilitated in no small part by the terrific cast) who generate both hilarity and sorrow, and although they certainly appear to be larger than life they also have an

undeniable ring of truth to them.

So from the perspective of humour, drama, character and narrative (such as it is), the play is an engaging, entertaining and at times moving work. Where the piece is more problematic, however, is in its apparent thematic and political aims.

As an older member of Generation Y, I'll be the first to admit that my experience of some of the politics which this play touches on is vicarious, and that I am doubtlessly not the target demographic at which this show is aimed. Advertised as a being about how two generations have been formed by the politics of their respective eras, the play in fact is mostly attempting to compare (if not even conflate) the national mood of the conservative Menzies era with that of the forthcoming Howard years. Expressed through *Nick* we are given a bleak premonition of the decade to come and how he fears it will repeat the culturally and morally stifling climate that produced this neighbourhood.

While this is an interesting and possibly quite valid perception of our social history, the problem is that the message just doesn't transmit in a convincing fashion. The characters in the neighbourhood are relatively disparate, and beyond being working class and conservative have very little in common, and their outrageousness as personalities seems to trample any sense that they appear to have been intended to represent Menzies' ethos of aspiring to Queen & Country middle-class respectability. Which is not to say that there were never real people who behaved like this and voted for Menzies, merely that if **Doyle's** goal was to portray them as representative of a particular social climate then this intent has been severely diluted. Perhaps the playwright fell a bit too in love with his characters, or felt it was important to avoid using them as mouthpieces for the politics of Menzies' time.

If so, he evidently felt no such compunction when it came to the Howard years, as the far more open scenes that discuss his forthcoming reign are far from subtle. Although, granted, **Doyle** is preaching to the choir, it is preaching nevertheless, and for all the lack of clarity in dealing with the Menzies half of his sociopolitical equation, he goes just as far in the other direction with Howard.

Works set in past decades that make play with the audience's appreciation of future events perhaps require a bit more distance in time to seem incisive rather than smugly knowing, which is the path **Doyle** seems to be treading here. Laced with retroactively prescient comments (some of which *are* very witty) that become increasingly heavy-handed, one can't help but wonder if the same script will seem more resonant once we have more distance from the Howard era. Either that, or perhaps instead it is simply a base requirement to have actually lived through both eras in order to fully appreciate this piece.

There is, however, one scene that really steps into didactic territory, depicting *Kurt* the crazy, ultra right-wing German neighbour launching on a tirade about how

Howard will be the strong leader this country needs, that change is in the wind and all the multiculturalists, artists, welfare bludgers, gays, aborigines etc. all better watch out because the people have spoken. It seems unlikely that **Doyle** was operating out of complete ignorance of the principle of *Reductio ad Hitlerum*, so perhaps he thought the comedic aspect of the play might shield this rather ham-fisted moment from serious criticism, but no such luck. Although one may well wish to compare many of Howard's political views with aspects of fascism and even find it a fairly attractive perspective, to portray a thinly-veiled Nazi spewing out a monologue about what a great prime minister John Howard is going to make has all the subtlety of a crate of sledgehammers, and risks seriously undermining the credibility of the surrounding text. Also naming the most consistently unpleasant (yet perversely amusing) character in the show *John "Jack" Howard* doesn't exactly smack of finesse either.

But even if one turns a blind eye to these missteps, ultimately the main problem is that the final play just doesn't seem to bear out these intergenerational ideas very strongly. Had it merely been used as a subtext or major theme this might have seemed more natural, but as it is the play largely falls short of its stated purpose. Were it not for the title, advertising and a couple of specific scenes, one could easily view the sociopolitical angle in this piece as indeed being a background element at best, leaving the impression at times that **Doyle** is reaching.

As already said, however, the drama of the play is very effective, and while **Doyle** certainly deserves the credit for this, his script is given a considerable boost from the excellent cast, who are all marvellous. **Glenn Hazeldine** is endearing as the fourth-wall breaking lead *Nick*, as is **Caroline Craig** as *April*, **Max Cullen** is great value as always in the aforementioned role of *Kurt*, and **Bruce Venables** is perfect as the jovial but troubled former truckie *Claude*. **Judi Farr** delivers one of her patented downplayed performances as the embittered, tragic *Janette*, and while **Jackie Weaver** is as ever so distinctive as to seem typecast she remains something of a national treasure. Inarguably, though, the scene-stealer throughout the play was **Danny Adcock** as *Jack*, the abusive, self-important, domineering busybody of the neighbourhood who flies into a literally screaming rage at the slightest provocation. Although perhaps technically a bit of a caricature, the role has an oddly believable quality despite its extremity, and in **Adcock's** hands is so unrelentingly hilarious that it's a genuine surprise that he is still capable of transferring this into considerable pathos by the play's end.

***The Pig Iron People*** is a play that is likely to get some interesting and varied reactions out of its audience. It is a play of considerable charm, humanity and a great deal of humour, and yet one which is clearly grasping for some wider ideas that seem unfortunately a little beyond its reach.

<http://www.australianstage.com.au/reviews/sydney/the-pig-iron-people--stc-2025.html>



## The Pig Iron People

**John Doyle's ear for Aussie idioms enlivens this affectionate comedy about the Menzies generation. By Nick Dent**

**Sydney Theatre Company**



Living in the inner west has its dangers: barking dogs, nosy neighbours, the constant land wars over parking spaces. There's also the danger of having your turns of phrase pilfered by playwrights. John Doyle's narrator in *The Pig Iron People*, Nick (Glenn Hazeldine), is a former teacher and copywriter who moves into Liberal Street after a breakdown. His neighbours are all salt-of-the-earth battlers in their 60s, and their richly banal banter inspires Nick to start writing a play. For Doyle, whose ear for Aussie vernacular has made his alter ego Roy Slaven so much fun to listen to over the years, this amounts to a confession of theft.

Nick's neighbours include a retired navy cook and his wife (Danny Adcock and Judi Farr) whose contempt for each other spills out of their Victorian terrace day and night. By contrast, their neighbour is a retired truckie (Bruce Venables) who lovingly tends his 1961 Holden Valiant, but is equally affectionate with his wife (Jacki Weaver). There's also a secretive German (Max Cullen) whose opinions prove as off the leash as his noisy Alsatian.

The action takes place in the early days of the Howard government in 1996 and we're meant to take the Liberal Street crowd as a snapshot of the coalition's constituency - fearful, repressed, philistine, but oddly lovable people who had their political opinions formed in the 1950s under 'Pig Iron' Bob Menzies. It's only Cullen, as the

German Kurt, who seems like a cheap swipe at Howard voters. "The people have spoken, this is what we voted for," he rants to Nick, who has voted for the Greens. "And if you don't see it like me you are out of step." As if we needed one of the 'Allo 'Allo Nazis to explain the deep vein of conservatism in Australia in the 1990s.

Nick's muse is April (Caroline Craig), a struggling former soap star he meets at a neighbourhood party, who becomes his housemate; they bond over a love of the theatre and the fact that a famous music hall star, Sarah Sedgeman, once lived in their house. But it's their crotchety neighbours who steal the limelight. Jacki Weaver's laconic Rosie is a delight, and Danny Adcock as the bitter naval man Jack is a stunning creation. Deluded, petty and vicious, his mantra - "Shits me to death!" - will surely become the catchphrase of the summer.

While Doyle seems both amused and appalled by these folk who put Howard in power and kept him there, he does not deny them inner lives. As their backstories unfold, their larrikin speech is revealed as a kind of linguistic armour. Pig iron people may be hard as nails and rough as guts, but they bleed and suffer like the rest of us.

*The Pig Iron People* continues until Dec 13. <http://www.timeoutsydney.com.au/theatre/the-pig-iron-people.aspx>

## *The Pig Iron People* – by Sandra Bowden



Pictures: Brett Boardman.

From John Doyle's *The Pig Iron People*: above, Judi Farr and Caroline Craig; right, Jacki Weaver, Bruce Venables, Danny Adcock and Glenn Hazeldine.

Pig iron is a crude, brittle product, not malleable or ductile — it is cast into molds and has a relatively low melting point. This could describe many of the characters in John Doyle's first foray into playwriting, *The Pig Iron People*.

Set in inner-city suburbia, the time is 1996, the day of John Howard's first election victory. Nick (Glenn Hazeldine), an ex-teacher and would-be writer, moves into (groan) Liberal Street in the hope of starting his life anew after the loss of his marriage and, briefly, his sanity.

Here he finds an array of characters, all members of the generation who spent their formative young adult years under the leadership of Robert "Pig Iron Bob" Menzies. They're set in their ways — and their parking spaces — and Nick develops rocky relationships with his neighbours, and uses snippets of their lives, colourful language and opinions as inspiration for his writing.

Nick also meets April (Caroline Craig), an aspiring actress who tasted brief fame as a soap star before her character was unceremoniously killed off. They begin a tentative romance under the watchful, and often judgemental, eyes of their neighbours.

At first, the comedy is fast-paced and broadly drawn, as the neighbours display their idiosyncrasies, prejudices and eccentricities — at times by the songs of their era. The characters are almost caricature. It is undoubtedly hilarious, even if the laughter they evoke is occasionally the "Oh-my-God-I-can't-believe-he/she-said-that" variety.

As the story unfolds, narrated in fourth-wall-breaking style by Nick, we start to witness the stories behind the characters, made real by Doyle with empathy and tolerance for their flaws. It is this entry into their personal worlds, their demons, regrets and failings — often as a result of their own inflexibility — that elevates the tale beyond simple comedy or satire.

The actors are superb in bringing these personalities to life. Glenn Hazeldine as Nick has the daunting task of not only engaging with the audience, but also delving into the action, and he does this with ease and charisma. Caroline Craig adroitly conveys the

vulnerability and spirit of April. The awkwardness of the developing love story between Nick and April is almost painful at times.

But it is the 'Pig Iron People' who really shine. Director Craig Ilott has skilfully built the characters from the initial larger-than-life outlines to fleshed-out individuals with subtler humour and pathos. Claude the truckie (Bruce Venables) and his wife Rosie (Jackie Weaver) embody the simple Aussie couple, and the affection and background to their tale is both sweet and tragic.

Max Cullen's Kurt, the ranting far-right-wing, eccentric German is commanding whenever he enters the scene. His verbal attack on April is surprising and vicious, and slightly unnerving in that it seems to come out of nowhere.

The most compelling performances are those of Danny Adcock (John "Jack" Howard) and Judi Farr, his bitter wife Jeanette (groan again). The ferociousness of their hatred for one another, and the unfolding reasons for this, are stunning.

But the play is less effective in the attempted link between the influence of the politics and values of Menzies' era on the neighbours' generation and the impending Howard rule. Other than passing comments about the comparison between the leaders and the return to a more socially conservative time, this idea is not fully explored. Perhaps it is too soon to speculate on the long-term generational effects of a Government that has only relatively recently lost power.

The set design is brilliant and perfectly complements the action. The deceptively simple use of projection and tracks keeps the action fluid and works wonderfully.

Hugely satisfying as a comedy, less so as sociopolitical comment, *The Pig Iron People* will undoubtedly produce varying reactions. But if the purpose of theatre is to entertain, provoke, and elicit thought beyond the curtain call, John Doyle has hit the mark.

[http://www.ozbabyboomers.com.au/theatre/2008/11\\_08/pig\\_iron\\_people/pig\\_iron\\_people.html](http://www.ozbabyboomers.com.au/theatre/2008/11_08/pig_iron_people/pig_iron_people.html)