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THOM PAIN
(BASED ON NOTHING)

by Will Eno

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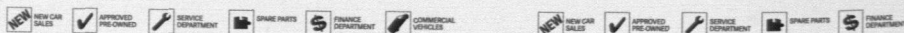
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THOM PAIN

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Nothing

This article is about nothing, a vast topic to which justice cannot really be done in an article of this size. So this is an incomplete survey, a sampler of nothings, which, for its admitted deficiencies, is still something.

Nothing is a concept which must be at least as old as language, since it seems indispensable to answer basic human questions: 'What are you doing?', for example. Mathematically, though, it was ignored for centuries. Neither the Greeks nor the Romans had a symbol for it; Pythagoras, Archimedes and Euclid managed without it. But there were a number of *ad hoc* symbols around. A merchant keeping track of his sales would place some mark next to those classes of goods from which he had sold none that day – a clear dot was the most common: the same symbol, incidentally, still used in cricket scorebooks to denote 'nothing happened'.

Our symbol zero (0) was introduced from India via Arabia in the thirteenth century by the Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci, who successfully spruiked the advantages of a decimal number system. In it, zero's main task (except for those people dabbling in the higher reaches of mathematics) is as a placeholder, which doesn't mean it has no value. Consider the difference between 30 and 3000. Each of those nothings stands for something.

In common language there are few concepts with greater flexibility. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare seems to be trying to see how many different meanings he can give to nothing in a single play. When asked what she has to say to flatter her father, Cordelia says, 'Nothing', which, in context, is loaded with meaning. Lear's reply, 'Nothing will come of nothing', is one of those multi-layered puns that Shakespeare loved to lob into the dialogue, detonating three or four meanings and one or two ironies at once. What the Fool speaks is 'nothing' – gibberish, but really disguised wisdom; a king who gives away his power is 'nothing' (what the Fool calls 'an 'O without a figure'; today, we might say he is

'a hole without the donut'); nothing is the amount Lear's rents come to after he has given his lands away; nothing is what the blind Gloucester sees; and finally, nothing is at the heart of Lear's desolation on the death of Cordelia: 'No, no, no life' and 'Never, never, never, never, never' express the greatest nothing of all – oblivion.

Oblivion is undoubtedly the spur to much religious thought, since to many it is unthinkable that there isn't something after death. Various Heavens, Valhallas, Happy Isles, Limbos and Hells have served to fill the terrible void. Atheists, too, have contemplated the problem. 'Nothingness,' wrote Jean Paul Sartre, 'curls inside Being like a worm.' The gut feeling of the French existentialists towards the concept of nothingness is probably best expressed in the title of Sartre's novel *Nausea*. By contrast, the Buddhists are quite upbeat about it all. They embrace nothingness. The things of this world are illusions, our very selves are illusions, and Nirvana is a condition in which the world and self are stripped of their appearance and are revealed for what they truly are: nothing. That the same concept can cause calm and contentment in a Buddhist and anxiety and dread in an existentialist is one of those curiosities of human psychology.

In the arts, attempts to represent 'nothing' always wind up representing something. The darkness that wraps around the figures in a Caravaggio, for example, gives the figures their form. John Cage's notorious piece 4'33", in which the pianist sits silently at the piano for exactly the time specified, makes the audience aware of the ambient noise: coughs, audience rustlings, the air-conditioning, traffic outside. In Harold Pinter's plays pauses and silences are pregnant with meaning, and he has been very strict about their length. 'The script says, "dot, dot, dot,"' he is said to have told one actor, "but you keep bloody doing "dot, dot"!'" Making fun of club owners, an old time soccer player, Len Shackleton, wrote a chapter in his autobiography entitled, 'The Average Director's Knowledge of Football', and left the pages blank.

Scientists have long abhorred a vacuum. Observations of light travelling through empty space inevitably led to the question of what it was travelling through. Rather than say 'nothing', scientists of the nineteenth century said 'the ether' instead, but all attempts to discover the ether failed. Einstein solved the problem by rejecting both the something and nothing hypotheses and showed that 'travelling through' was just the wrong way of looking at it. However, other nothings remain. There is the nothing beyond the universe – no matter, no space, no time, no light – which is to say there is no 'beyond'; the universe is all there is. While the nothing before the Big Bang almost seems to be something; the future universe coiled up in a singularity, a point of infinite smallness. Which leads to the ultimate question, first put by Leibniz but more recently rephrased by Stephen Hawking: 'Why does the Universe bother to exist? Why is there something rather than nothing?'





DOUBT

'I have just woken, it seems. It is about ...well, the time doesn't matter. The same applies to my origins. It could be that I was born in Birmingham ...or Brooklyn...or Murwillumbah. What is important is that, thanks to a succession of meat pies (the gristle-and-gravy, cardboard kind) and many cups of pink tea, I am alive! Therefore ...and this is the rather painful point ...I must go in soon and take part in the play, which, as usual, is a piece about eels...'

This prologue – it is not from *Thom Pain* – spoken directly to the audience by a character only referred to as Young Man, continues in the same vein for the next few minutes and all of it strikes the mind as completely contemporary, even post-modern, if we permit ourselves that dread term. It could be from any *avant garde* work cooked up in the last few years in the theatre labs of New York or London or the experimental fringes of Melbourne. (The mention of Murwillumbah, however, is a giveaway that this is an Australian play). Its surprising modernness – surprising because it was written in 1947 – is not due to it being a prologue. Although not common, the technique of having a character begin a play by stepping to the stage edge and addressing the audience directly has gone in and out of theatrical fashion for centuries. At the time, there was a small vogue for it: Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) had a Narrator and Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) has the lead character, Tom, presenting the play as his memory.

Both these narrators also announce that they are part of a play – so the self-referential aspect of the speech is not what makes it seem so up-to-date.

No, the quality that makes the prologue to Patrick White's *The Ham Funeral* seem like it was written last week is doubt. Doubt permeates our post-modern sensibility; we have retreated from authority, from the big statement, from telling it as it is, and here it is fifty years before time. The play starts in uncertainty for both the Young Man (who, for instance, doesn't know, or won't say, where he was born) and the audience. For their part, the audience would be expecting the Young Man to set the scene, or say something informative that will colour their appreciation of the drama to follow, but all they get is the unhelpful description that the play 'is, as usual, about eels.'

Eels? Had this play been performed in 1947, the first walk-outs might have started about then, or, if not, then a few lines later when he says defensively: 'Probably quite a number of you are wondering by now whether this is your type of play. I'm sorry to have to announce the management won't refund any money.'

The prologue is to some degree a parody – another thing that makes it seem newly-minted. The certainties and affability of a reliable narrator, such as Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, have been emptied out and

replaced by the doubts and mild irritation of the Young Man. Instead of answers, the audience gets evasions, disclaimers and cryptic utterances. The sentences don't seem to connect and the monologue takes jolting turns of logic; it is fragmented in the way that post-modernists like to tell us that contemporary consciousness is fragmented. He seems intent on avoiding meaning. He tells the audience that he is not going to give them a message, because 'the message always gets torn up. It lies on the bottom of the basket, under the hair, and everything else.' Finally he tells the audience not to expect much: 'plays are, of course, only plays. Even the great play of life. Some of you will argue that *that* is real enough...but can we be...sure?'

When one reads the prologue to *The Ham Funeral* the impulse is to look backwards for influences, yet one comes up with very little. There is something of Pirandello in the Young Man acknowledging that he is just a character in a play and a little of Wedekind and the later Strindberg in the expressionist slipperiness of the symbolism. But, actually, the plays it best resembles lie in the future: those of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, Sam Shepard, Heiner Müller, the Wooster Group and Richard Foreman – with the resemblance getting stronger as one

moves towards the present. The more self-consciously doubtful about the whole enterprise of communicating meaning the plays are, the more akin they seem to be to *The Ham Funeral*'s prologue, leading all the way up to recent works such as *Thom Pain*, who is White's Young Man in a modern black suit, diffident, testy, and unsure of the point to it all.

**THE TRUEST AND MOST INCISIVE
THOUGHT FOR OUR TIME MUST
BE APHORISTIC THOUGHT.
THOUGHT IN FRAGMENTS.
FRAGMENTS APPEAL TO US.
FRAGMENTS RELATE TO THE
SITUATION WE'RE IN, BECAUSE
THE WORLD, IN A SENSE, IF
IT'S NOT FALLING APART,
AT LEAST, IT'S MIXING UP,
PREPARING TO GIVE BIRTH TO
SOMETHING ELSE.**

RICHARD FOREMAN



THINKS

What is *your* consciousness like? Mine is completely chaotic. My inner life comes at me in a rushing, unpredictable procession of impressions, sense perceptions, thoughts, half thoughts, inklings, images, words, memories, emotions... Very little of it seems to be under my direct control and there is a strange ambiguous quality to it. It seems to be 'me' and yet 'not me'. If push came to shove, I would equate my consciousness with my 'self', and yet there is a sense in which I am outside it somehow, that there is an even more primal self (the real me, perhaps?) watching the passing parade.

Descriptions of consciousness tend to be impressionistic, because introspection is necessarily self-defeating to some degree. In order to examine my consciousness, I must dedicate a large amount of it to the act of examination, maddeningly reducing its richness. Introspection slows down the internal *Mardi Gras* – or at least gets it to behave with greater decorum.

This is one of the reasons why modernist stream-of-consciousness writing, irrespective of its achievements as art, fails to be an adequate representation of consciousness. Another reason, the main reason, is that they use language.

Words are simply not up to the job. When modernist writers, such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, attempted to recreate consciousness in their novels, they came up with the interior monologue: which is surely to present the tip as if it were the iceberg. 'She's lame! O!' thinks Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*, watching Gertie McDowell walking away on the beach. The words suggest Bloom's sudden pang of pity, but would those words actually form in his head? Speaking of my own experience – which is the only thing I can do when speaking of consciousness, since I don't have access to anyone else's – true pangs of pity tend to happen wordlessly, flitting across the mind as a mingling of sadness, memory and other things too diaphanous and momentary to name. If someone were near me, I might feel a need to express my pity out loud – 'She's lame! O!' – but that would only *indicate* my pity, not describe it.

Finding the right words to describe feelings is particularly hard, but we are not much better at finding the right words for ideas, thoughts and recollections. Our conversations rarely express clearly and succinctly what is on our minds; our expression is fractured, with sentences begun and abandoned, restarts, repetitions, revisions, umms and ahhs,

trailings off, 'you knows' and other place holders, ellipses, wrong words and re-phrasings. It is as if our thoughts are in another language, one in which we are not fluent that we must nevertheless translate for the other person; and always imperfectly, always unsatisfactorily.

It is the same whether you are speaking the words or writing them down. As I am experiencing now, putting what I could find out about consciousness and language in one 800-word article, writing is hardly a matter of just ordering one's thoughts and transcribing them onto a computer screen. It is more like duck shooting. As I ruminate about the subject, an idea or an apt phrase will suddenly fly up from its hiding place, a fleeting blur, which I have to shoot down on the wing before it is lost forever. And, to continue with the metaphor, it is likely that, at those times when I do bring the thought to ground and put it in prose, it will not be the soaring, vital, brightly-coloured thing I perceived in my mind, rather it will be wounded, or fatally mangled, or sometimes dead.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein put it this way: 'Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said at all can be

SUFFERING IS THE GREAT EDUCATOR, SAD TO SAY. PAIN IS THE UNWELCOME STIMULUS TO SELF KNOWLEDGE. IT IS UNFORTUNATE THAT THERE EXISTS A DANGEROUS AND SEDUCTIVE MIX OF EVIL AND RAVISHING, POETIC, VISIONARY BEAUTY, BUT IT IS THE WAY OF THIS FALLEN WORLD.

RICHARD FOREMAN

said clearly.' But, as his philosophy goes on to imply, not everything that can be thought can be said.

In time, Wittgenstein came to the conclusion that consciousness was not a fit study for philosophers, because we cannot speak meaningfully about the contents of our own minds. You can't observe what is going on in my mind, nor can I observe what is going on in yours. We are forced to tell each other. And, since that is the case, how can you know when I speak of my 'pain', for example, that it coincides with what you know as a 'pain'. It could be quite different. Unlike objects in the world, we cannot give words to the objects of our interior life with anything like the same certainty.

It is, of course, very well for a philosopher such as Wittgenstein to abandon discussion of consciousness, but for the rest of us, telling others what we are feeling, thinking, remembering and so on is crucial to our communion as human beings. Our inability to communicate our experience well enough will, from time to time, infuriate us, or sadden us, or make us feel so desperately alone, but what else are we to do?

Melbourne Theatre Company presents

THOM PAIN

(BASED ON NOTHING)

by Will Eno

With
Neil Pigot

Director
Lighting Designer
Design Consultant
Stage Manager
Directorial Attachment
Rehearsal Photography
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About the play

In this play you will see a man in a plain black suit, a plywood cut-out of a man in a plain black suit, a chair, a bag of sunflower seeds. He has no socks, but he has words. The words will tell you about his yearning, his confusion and his pain – whatever.

Originally produced by Soho Theatre Company in association with Chantal Arts + Theatre and Naked Angels (NYC) at the Pleasance Courtyard, Edinburgh in August 2004.

Subsequently produced by Soho Theatre Company, London in September 2004.

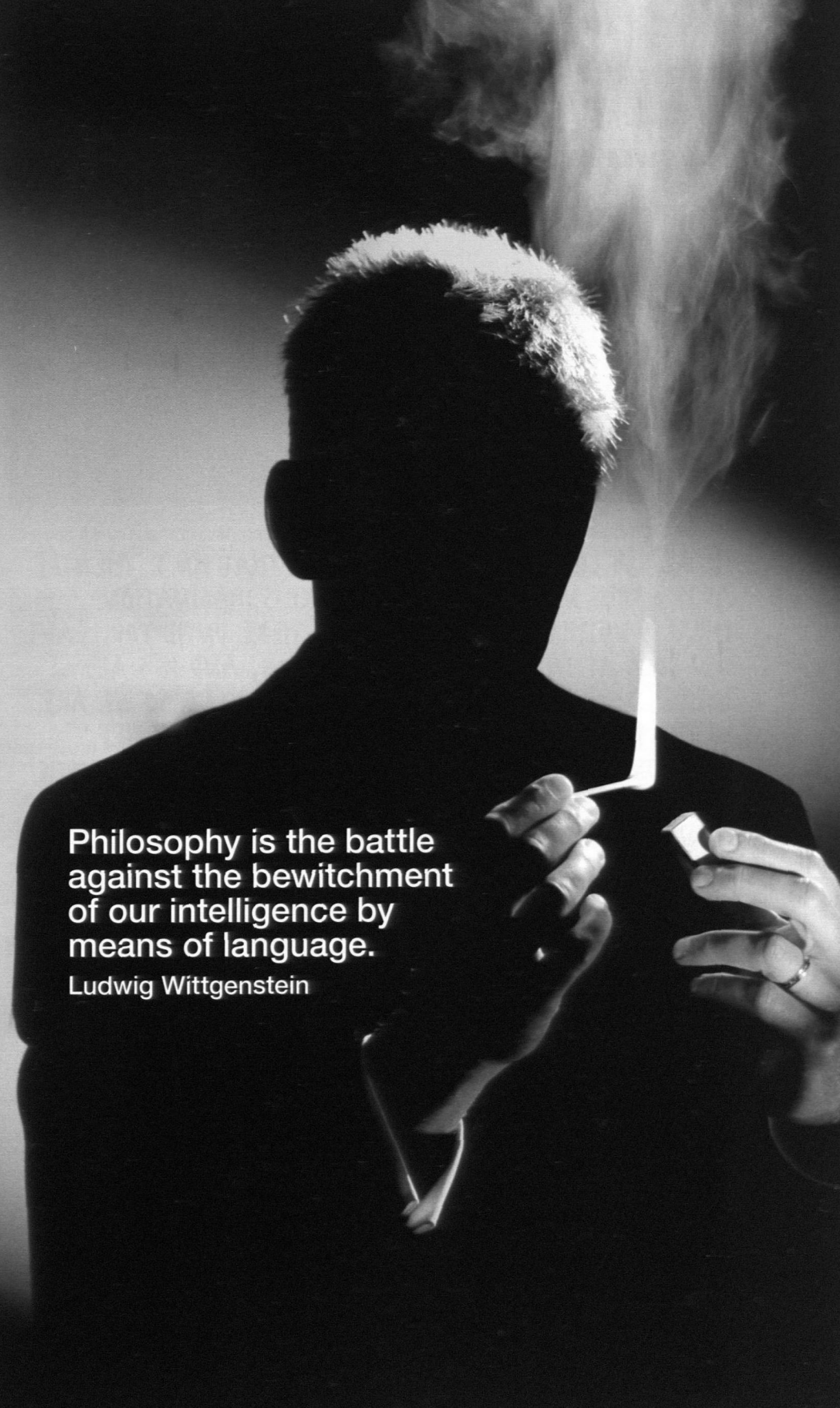
Original Production at DR2 Theatre, New York; produced by Daryl Roth and Bob Boyett in February 2005.

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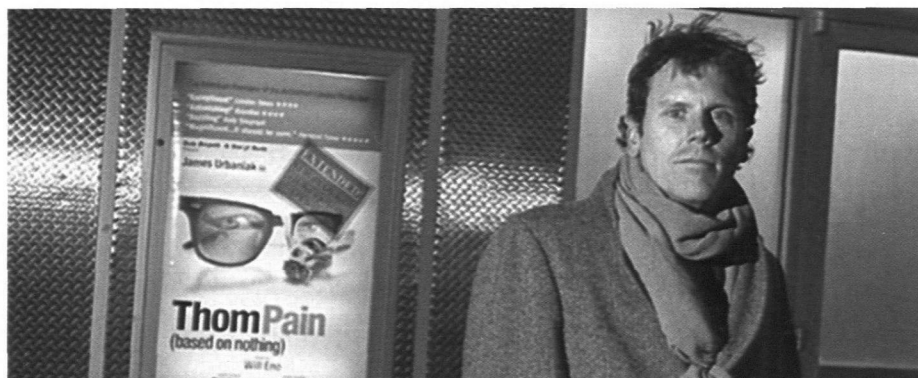
Philosophy is the battle
against the bewitchment
of our intelligence by
means of language.

Ludwig Wittgenstein



WILL ENO

PLAYWRIGHT



THERE'S A LOT OF 'THEATRE' AROUND THAT ISN'T 'THEATRE' AS IT MAKES NO USE OF THE AUDIENCE'S IMAGINATION. THERE'S NOTHING TO DO EXCEPT SIT THERE UNTIL YOU LEAVE. YOU LOOK AT THE SET OF A LIVING ROOM, AND IT'S ALL THERE, DOWN TO THE LAST ELECTRICAL OUTLET. SO WE ARE IN THE HABIT OF SUSPENDING LESS AND LESS DISBELIEF. OCCASIONALLY, AN ACTOR IN A DESPERATELY NATURALISTIC PLAY WILL SWITCH ON A LAMP BESIDE A BED, AND THE LAMP (CONTROLLED BY THE STAGE MANAGER) WILL COME ON A SECOND EARLY OR LATE. SUDDENLY, THERE'S THIS FEELING, THIS LIFE, REAL HONEST LAUGHTER IN THE AUDIENCE, EVEN SELF-AWARENESS, SOMEHOW. SO ... IT ISN'T THEATRE IF THE LAMP COMES ON AT THE EXACT MOMENT IN WHICH THE ACTOR PRETENDS TO TURN IT ON.

WILL ENO, AMERICAN THEATRE, SEPTEMBER 2005

There is not much known about Will Eno beyond a neat little list of credits, citations and awards. He doesn't seem to do press interviews, except for one a couple of years ago for *American Theatre* that allowed him to be tangential and cryptic in the style of his plays. According to one unreliable source, he was born in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1965 and nowadays lives in Brooklyn. He definitely wrote this play, *Thom Pain (based on nothing)*, which opened during the Edinburgh Festival in September 2004 and later played to great acclaim in London and New York.

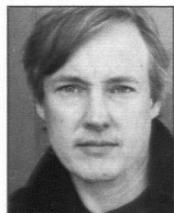
In New York, the critic for the *Times*, Charles Isherwood, called Eno 'a Samuel Beckett for the Jon Stewart generation', which is one of those nifty lines that you really want to put on the press ads to sell tickets but don't want dogging your career. Because there is nothing particularly Beckettian (or Stewartian, for that matter) about his other plays, besides a playfulness with words and a tendency for his characters not to get straight to the point. (You will notice from *Thom Pain* that Eno avoids the perfectly expressed thought. Perhaps he hates the contrivance of it, though obviously, as you can also tell from *Thom Pain*, he seems not against contrivance in the theatre in other ways.)

Anyway, if you want to look them up, those other plays are *Lady Grey (in ever-lower light)*, *Oh, the Humanity*, *The Flu Season*, *Tragedy: a tragedy*, *King: a problem play*, *Kid Blanco* and *Intermission*. Most of them premiered in small theatres in Britain, where he has developed quite a following. Now that *Thom Pain* has been such a success, they are beginning to turn up on stages throughout America. One would expect Australia will follow suit, because they are perfect for fringe theatre – small casts, simple sets, intriguing ideas, a bit quirky, and so on. As to what he is working on now, reports vary. One report has him adapting Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. That sounds plausible; the subject matter is down his alley – a man who doesn't quite have a firm grasp on his identity – though it would be a much larger play than any he has written so far. On the other hand, according to the website of the New York Public Library where he currently has a Cullman Centre Fellowship, he is working

on 'a historical play about a genealogically defunct family, for which he will draw materials from the Milstein Division of US History, Local History and Genealogy.' Sounds intriguing. He could be working on both, of course. Let's wait and see.

Before he wrote those plays listed above, the earliest of which dates back only to the late nineties, he must have been doing something to earn a living, but, again, the record is hazy on exactly what – in fact, the record is completely opaque. But by 1999, he evidently showed enough artistic promise to earn a Guggenheim Fellowship. Other fellowships, grants and awards followed and they make an impressive list: an Edward F Albee Foundation Grant, the first-ever Seldes/Kanin Fellowship, a Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University and a Helen Merrill Playwriting Fellowship. He received an Oppenheimer Award for *The Flu Season*, and *Thom Pain* was short-listed for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Two final things: first, he said in the *American Theatre* interview that his partner's name is Weena, which sounds unlikely, although there is no good reason to doubt it, and second, that he has visited Brussels. Make of that what you will. So, that's just about all we know about the playwright Will Eno. Hope it helps.

Julian Meyrick Director

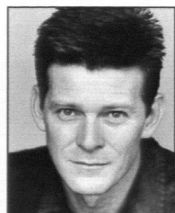


Associate Director and Literary Advisor at Melbourne Theatre Company, responsible for running the Affiliate Writer's Program and the annual Hard Lines play readings, Julian has directed for the Company

Enlightenment, The Ghost Writer, A Single Act, Doubt (also for STC), *Cruel and Tender, Dinner, The Memory of Water, Blue/Orange*, and *Frozen*. Other directorial credits include new and challenging plays such as Luke Devenish's *Grace Among the Christians*, *St. Rose of Lima*, *Fun and Games with the Oresteia*, Garcia Lorca's *The Love of Don Perlimplin*, Reinhardt Goering's *Seeschlacht*, Barry Collins's *Judgement*, and *Quarter Hour Stories* for Melbourne University. He directed the inaugural production of *Who's Afraid of the Working Class* for the Melbourne Workers Theatre and won the 1998 Green Room Award for Best Director on the Fringe. Most recently he directed *October* by Ian Wilding for Griffin Theatre.

Also a theatre historian specialising in post-war Australian drama, Julian has written *See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave* (2002), a history of MTC in the fiftieth anniversary book, *The Drama Continues*, and the Platform Paper *Trapped by the Past* analysing the crisis in Australia's theatre culture.

Neil Pigot Performer



Neil has appeared for MTC in Jane Bodie's *A Single Act*, Moira Buffini's *Dinner*, Beatrix Christian's *Fred*, and for our Education Program Euripedes' *Medea*. He has been involved in many of our Hard Lines play readings, including

playing Brett Whiteley in *Whiteley's Incredible Blue*. His other recent theatre credits include *Weary – The Story of Sir Edward Dunlop* for McPherson Touring, *Oleanna* for HotHouse Theatre, *Traitors* for Branch Productions, the European tour of *Soft for Back to Back Theatre*; *The Country and Crave* for Belvoir Street/In Situ; *Rapture* for Playbox; the title role in Michael Gow's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* for Playbox/Queensland Theatre Company; *Uncle Bob* for Red Stitch and *Ned Kelly* and *Judgement* for kickhouse.

Neil's numerous television appearances include *Blue Heelers*, *Stingers*, *The Secret Life of Us*, *Marshall Law*, *State Coroner*, *The Games*, *Backberner*, *The Last of the Ryans*, *Adventures of Lano and Woodley*, and the telemovie *The Society Murders*. He can be seen in the films *The Dish*, *Stepsister from the Planet Weird*, *Head On*, *Redball*, *The Teacher*, and *Spotlight*. He is a six-time Green Room Award nominee, awarded Best Actor, Independent Theatre in 1998 for his performance in *Judgement* and again in 2002 for *Uncle Bob*.

Meredith Rogers Design Consultant



Meredith Rogers is an award-winning performer, designer, and director. She was a member of the innovative Mill Community Theatre Project and a co-founder of Home Cooking Theatre Co,

for which she performed *Running Up A Dress*, *Not Still Lives*, *Looking In... Looking Out*, *I am Whom You Infer*, and *The Accompanist*; and directed *Edna for the Garden*. She has designed and directed for Arena Theatre, the Church, La Mama, and the Epidavros Summer Festival. Earlier this year she directed *Dora Dolorosa* by Suzanne Spunner, commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria to accompany the exhibition *Picasso: Love and War*. Her previous work with Julian Meyrick and Neil Pigot includes *The Othello Project* and Barry Collins's *Judgement*. In 2002, she received the Ewa Czajor Award for a woman director, and directed and designed *Breath by Breath* by Peta Tait and Marta Robertson, which was nominated for a Green Room Best Production Award. Her next project is John Cage's *Musicircus* with composers Madeleine Flynn and Tim Humphrey, for the Melbourne International Arts Festival this October.

Kerry Saxby Lighting Designer



Kerry has worked on more than 250 MTC productions in the positions of sound designer, special effects designer, recording engineer, lighting technician and realiser. His most recent lighting design was for the

MTC Education's *View from a Bridge*. This is his first lighting design for an MTC mainstage production. During the 2006 Commonwealth Games, Kerry was a Production Manager for the River and managed the floating aquatic creatures and fountains. He was recently awarded the 2006 Green Room Association Technical Achievement Award.

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