

# What I Wrote

Joanna Murray-Smith



**Teacher's Notes**

# Introduction

This study guide for What I Wrote: Joanna Murray-Smith has been written for senior secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in English, Literature, Theatre Studies and Drama.

What I Wrote: Joanna Murray-Smith is a DVD on Australian playwright Joanna Murray-Smith. Dr Tess Brady interviews Murray-Smith and provides a critical introduction to *Flame* (1994), *Love Child* (1993), *Honour* (1995), *Nightfall* (1999), *Bombshells* (2001), *Rapture* (2002), *The Female of the Species* (2006), *Ninety* (2008). The DVD includes an investigation of Murray-Smith's approach to writing for the stage.

What I Wrote: Joanna Murray-Smith is one title from a series of DVDs spotlighting Australian playwrights. The series offers students information about the ideas and processes of the playwrights, as well as the opportunity to hear what the writers have to say about their work. Other titles available in the What I Wrote series include:

## Series 1:

- + What I Wrote: Matt Cameron
- + What I Wrote: Louis Nowra
- + What I Wrote: Hannie Rayson
- + What I Wrote: Katherine Thomson

## Series 2:

- + What I Wrote: Debra Oswald
- + What I Wrote: David Williamson
- + What I Wrote: Andrew Bovell



The DVDs are available from Ronin Films, <http://www.roninfilms.com.au>

Further information about the series and film trailers can be found at: <http://www.whatiwrote.com.au> or on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/pinkcat1>

The play scripts are available from Currency Press, <http://www.currency.com.au/>

## About the Filmmakers

### Dr Tess Brady *Presenter*

Dr Tess Brady is a highly respected editor, researcher and teacher of writing at university level. She was the co-founding editor of the international online scholarly journal *TEXT* and has published children's picture books, adult radio drama, crime fiction, short stories and popular non-fiction. Her most recent publication is *Creative Writing: Theory beyond practice*, with Nigel Krauth.

### Catherine Gough-Brady *Director*

Catherine Gough-Brady is a documentary maker. She has made works for a variety of media. This includes radio features for the ABC, educational videos, online

interactive websites and advertising. She is currently working on Series 3 of What I Wrote, which includes an interview with Ray Lawler. You can find out more about her by visiting <http://www.snodger.com.au/catherine/>





## About Joanna Murray-Smith

Joanna Murray-Smith is a Melbourne-based playwright and author. Many of her plays have been performed widely in Australia and overseas and translated into other languages. She has also published novels, *Truce* (1994), *Judgement Rock* (2002) and *Sunnyside* (2005), screenplays, a libretto for Paul Grabowsky's opera *Love in the Age of Therapy* (2002) and has written for children.

*Honour* and *Rapture* both won the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, (1996, 2003) and *Honour* had a successful seasons on Broadway. *Bombshells* won the 2004 Edinburgh Fringe Festival First Award, and in 2005 won the London Theatregoers Choice Award.

More about Joanna Murray-Smith's publications can be found at her publisher's site: <http://www.currency.com.au/search.aspx?type=author&author=Joanna+Murray-Smith>

## The Writer's Context

Joanna Murray-Smith writes about the power of language and how the middle classes employ language to control and safeguard their world. She is fascinated with the moment in a character's life when the surety of their world begins to disintegrate and crumble, and how these, otherwise articulate people, are left, stammering, grasping for words.

Murray-Smith's critique of the middle classes is subtle. And it is this subtlety that is her strength because it allows her concerns as a playwright to gradually seep through the cracks of audience resistance. Her plays are deeply unsettling.

Murray-Smith's plays are widely performed in the UK and USA and there are some works, such as *Scenes from a Marriage* (2008), which were commissioned overseas.

### Discussion

- As you view *A Matter of Language – the plays of Joanna Murray-Smith*, compile a list of statements that describe Murray-Smith's fascination with language.
- Murray-Smith says of the power of articulation: "Being able to express yourself is one of the most powerful ways of controlling people and yourself." Form teams and debate: *Language is a weapon not a tool?*
- One of the early influences on Murray-Smith was Henry Lawson's short stories. In a group take one of his stories and using a storyboard show how you would structure it as a play to be performed to your class. Illustrate why you selected that story.
- Murray-Smith says she learnt from Lawson the art of slowly developing tension. Using a powerpoint presentation, map the tension from inception to its climax in the play you are studying.
- From her childhood holidays Murray-Smith recalls: "Ideas always came in the form of dissenting voices... one idea could be viewed from multiple perspectives." In what sense has this become a personal definition of drama for Murray-Smith? Discuss.
- Take one character from the play you are reading and construct a detailed study of that character's use of language and how it changes over the play.



# Critical Perspectives

Possibly more than any other Australian contemporary playwright, Joanna Murray-Smith has polarised reviewers and those who critique her work.

- Search through the newspapers for the theatre review pages. Make a copy of three or more reviews. List the kinds of things the reviewer commented upon - plot, acting, direction, etc. Are there differences between the reviews? Is one more informative than another? Is a review of a new play different from a review of a well-known play? What would you like to see in the review but which is missing? Discuss the role of a reviewer.
- Go to a live performance of a play. Now write, in point form, the kind of review you think would be helpful to other students. Discuss what you would include and leave out if you were only allowed three points.
- Use the internet, critical commentaries and reviews to arrive at a detailed knowledge and understanding of the critical reception of Murray-Smith's playwrighting. What viewpoints do you support? What viewpoints do you refute?

# Views and Values

- Drawing on *A Matter of Language* – the plays of Joanna Murray-Smith and your knowledge of the play you are studying, make a list of the issues that Murray-Smith has brought to audiences' attention.
- Do you think Murray-Smith's plays have the power to move the audience into a deeper understanding of themselves and others? Do we identify with the characters or is it the story which captures our imagination, or both? Discuss in class.
- In many of her plays Murray-Smith writes about love as a deeply human and profound emotion. We see how, in order to preserve the love, characters are prepared to engage in self deception. Discuss the role, if any, of self deception in loving relationships of any kind. Write a short scene to illustrate your views on this. Perform it.
- All plays are about change; Murray-Smith is more interested in personal rather than political change. Drawing on the play that you are studying, create an annotated visual display that explores Murray-Smith's portrayal of change.
- Complete a detailed analysis of one of Murray-Smith's central characters. Notice how the playwright employs humour to temper the situation. Turn your analysis into a monologue in which the character articulates his or her views and values.



# Analytical Responses

The following topics could be used for written responses, debates, panel discussions and online forums.

- 'People have already said that the laughter in the theatre... reminds them of the heyday of David Williamson. I think that Murray-Smith is much funnier than Williamson. Her writing is more fluently intelligent, and she handles dramatic form with a sharper imagination.' Alison Croggon, *Theatre Notes*. Discuss.
- Joanna Murray-Smith's plays are box-office sellouts. Aubrey Mellor, artistic director of the Playbox Theatre, explains, "They love her," he says "because she's a personality, she's articulate, she's an interesting woman, and because she's about things that we are thinking about. She is thinking internationally. She doesn't write plays about the backyard." (Marianna Latham, *Sunday*) Discuss Murray-Smith popularity with contemporary audiences.



## The Writing Process

"The magic of the play is in the first rush when the characters are taking off..." Joanna Murray-Smith.

- View the film clip on *Adaptation* (DVD 2). Why do you think Murray-Smith feels that ideas come packaged in their form?
- Drawing on Murray-Smith's comments in the DVDs discuss how she creates and structures the drama.
- Were you surprised to learn that, for Murray-Smith, from 80-90% of the play is in the first draft which comes quickly and the remaining 20-10% happens slowly over years as she re-writes? Discuss the various writing processes used by the class and reflect on the different methods used.
- Murray-Smith points out that different plays have

begun with a character, an idea or an image. In groups take one of these starting positions and devise a storyboard of a short play. Compare notes with the other groups. Were the plays begun in different ways fundamentally different types of plays?

- Joanna Murray-Smith considered her role as a playwright is to keep her audience engaged throughout the entire play, without a dull moment in between. What lengths does she go to in order to achieve this?



## From Script to Stage

- Were you surprised to learn that Joanna Murray-Smith finds the first week of rehearsal a terrifying time? In small groups take a scene of a five minute play or scene you have written and 'put it under the microscope' discussing character's back stories, plot points, consistencies. Discuss how you found the experience both as the writer of the piece and in other groups, as a member of the cast.
- Murray-Smith finds the reading process a valuable experience and hearing the draft being read finds places to re-write the script. In small groups write a five minute script. Then give it to another group to do a reading. What sections of the play would you re-write after hearing it read?
- Discuss why you think Murray-Smith prefers to have several actor-readings of her drafts rather than a workshop of the final draft.
- Murray-Smith is acutely aware of the audience and its needs. She considered that everything possible should be done to ensure that the play belongs to the world in which it is performed. Do you agree?





*Ninety*: William and Isobel's marriage is over and he is about to re-marry. She asks for 90 minutes of his time to try and convince him that she still loves her. At the end of the play, which is performed in real-time, the couple understand that what they share is grief and memory.

By combining these two plays we can see the development of Joanna Murray-Smith's skills as a playwright. They are both two-handers between a man and a woman, they are both played in real-time and both deal with similar issues of loss, renewal and the complexity of love.

### Discussion

- Watch the video interview on *Flame* and *Ninety* (DVD 2). Take either of these plays and map the emotional journey Murray-Smith takes us on.
- In point form create a scenario where two people face the possible end of their love. Now apply the map (made in the exercise above) of Joanna Murray-Smith's play to your own story and characters. Was it a close fit or did you need to adjust the map? Share your findings with the class.
- Is it possible to convince someone they love you? Should you even try? Discuss this in class.
- Both *Ninety* and *Flame* are performed in real-time. Write a five minute real-time piece between two people on any issue. Give a rehearsed reading to the class.

## Flame & Ninety

*Flame*: Louisa is looking at her wedding dress and remembering her husband Max who died in a car crash. She 'calls him up' and they discuss their marriage. She reveals that she has been having an affair with his friend Earl, even when he was alive. At the end of the play she burns her wedding dress.

This early play has a good number of one liners, and some terrific humour.





## Love Child

Billie is a soapy queen. She has been adopted and traces her birth mother, Anna, who is a film editor. They agree to meet. The entire play is set in the real time of their first meeting.

The two are miss-matched. Anna is cool, detached, and lives in her designer house and hopes for a sophisticated child. Billie is disappointed as she was looking for a mother in a cottage with shawls and puffy cushions.

Murray-Smith says, the two women are trapped and limited by the confines of the worlds they have set up for themselves - Billie by her acting, her willingness to pretend and invent, Anna by her designer lamps, her carefully edited life.

As the play unfolds the two women chip away at each others emotional protection until it is revealed that the whole thing is a lie. Billie just wanted to find a mother, knowing hers was dead, and so sought out this woman whose child was still born.

The shared inner need for love pushes its way through

Billie's pretence and Anna's edited world. Once they had found each other they decided to carry on the ruse and act as mother and daughter.

The denouement of the play is like a birth - panting, breathy, fast. There are over five pages of tight, fast dialogue. The speed is unbearable. It stops suddenly in a blackout, like a screaming noise that ends and rings through the silence.

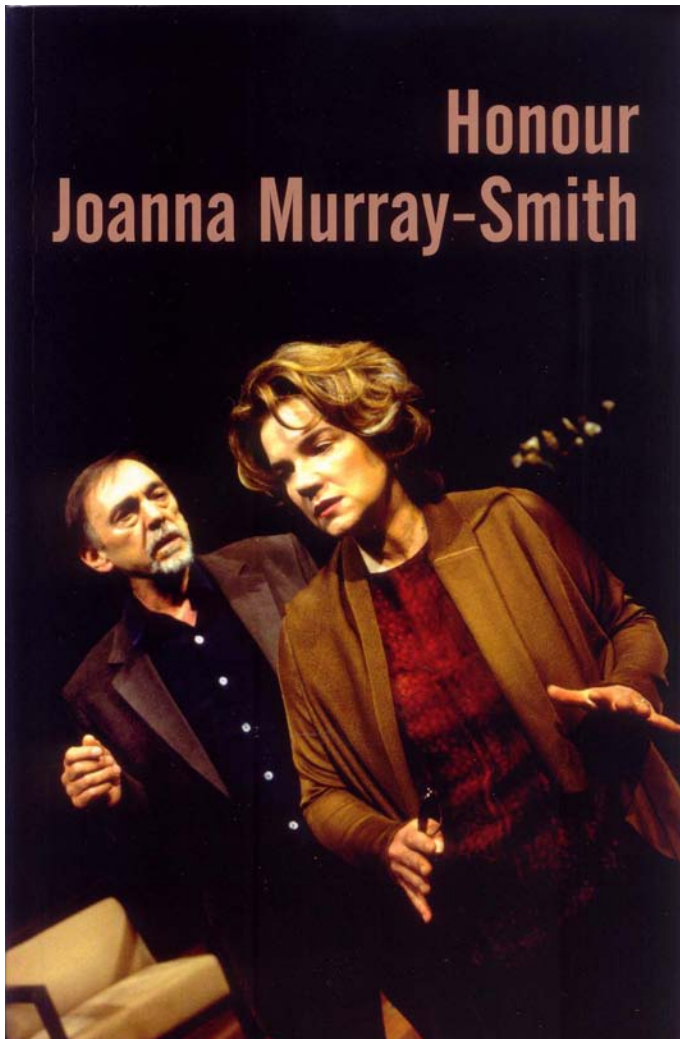
In this play Murray-Smith says she found her rhythm as a playwright.

### Discussion

- Watch the video clip on *Love Child* (DVD 2). Where you surprised to learn that Murray-Smith would now write several scenes differently? Why do you think she still likes the way she wrote the last few pages?
- This is a play about redemption. Discuss.
- *Love Child* deals with the enormous issues surrounding adoption. Using the web and other sources find out about agencies which try to re-unite children with their birth parents. Give a presentation on one of these agencies and their work.
- Using the library make a list of other literary works on the subject of adoption. Take one of these and write a scene from the story, revealing either belonging or abandonment.
- Form teams and debate: *Some issues are more important and come before personal emotional needs?*







## Honour

Gus/George and Honour are married. George is a famous journalist, Honour was an important poet in her youth but let it slide for married life. Sophie is their daughter at University. Claudia is a young journalist/writer who is working on a book of interviews which include George.

George is overwhelmed by Claudia's youth and attractiveness and decides to leave Honour for her.

The play is an interesting take on the husband-leaves-his-wife-for-a-younger-woman story. In this case we are asked to sympathise with *all* of the characters. Honour is not a frump but a fascinating older woman and poet, George is caught up in a paradox – on one hand wanting youth and sexuality and vigour but on the other needing the companionship of his life-long friend, Honour. Claudia is not a bimbo but an intelligent woman who is attracted to George and her sexual power to captivate him.

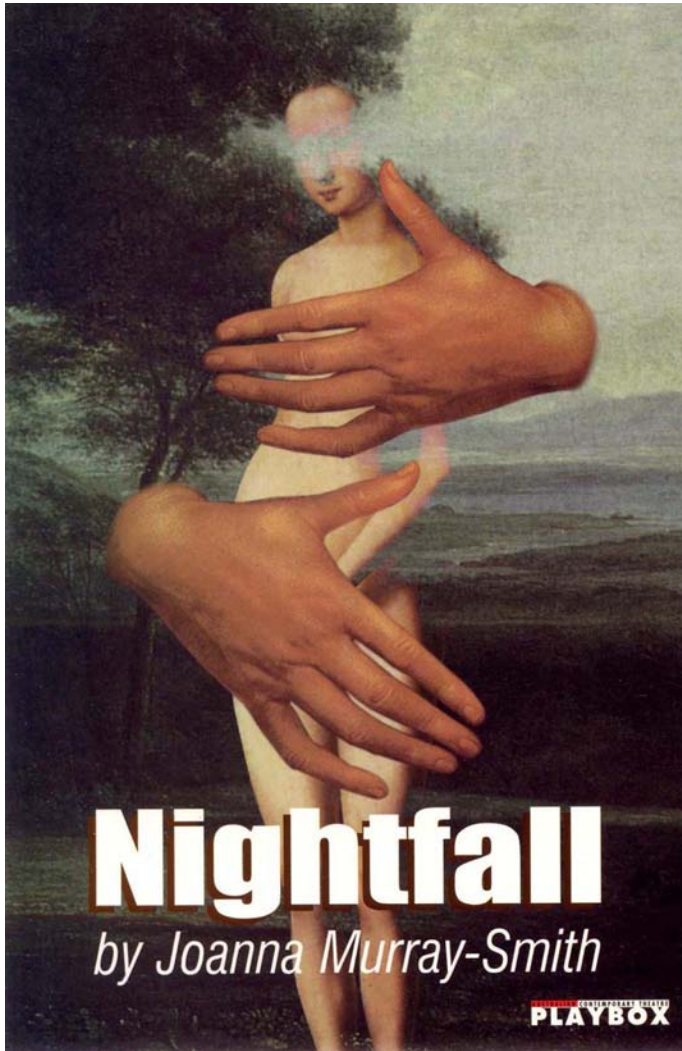
The play presents a perfectly balanced triangle. They all want what the other has. Claudia wants Honour's gift as a poet, Honour wants her husband, and previous life back from Claudia, George wants Claudia's youth and the opportunity of life.

### Discussion

- Watch the video clip of *Honour* (DVD 2). Were you surprised to hear that this play began with Murray-Smith thinking about the character of Honour? Take one of the characters in this play and using powerpoint to present your work, make a list of character attributes by showing what the character would select in clothes, books, pictures, cars, rooms, etc. In this exercise try to think about detail. For example what colour toothbrush would they use, what kind of diary?
- In the play *Honour*, who has lost and gained the most? Discuss.
- In groups discuss where the lives of the various characters might take them in 12 months after the ending of the play. Take one character and write a short monologue from that point of view.
- *Honour* works as a play because we feel sympathy for all the characters. Discuss.







## Nightfall

As the play begins Emily and Edward are waiting for the return of their daughter Cora, who, seven years earlier, at the age of 16, left home on her way to school and walked out of their lives. She was an only child.

The doorbell rings and it isn't Cora but a stranger, Kate, who claims to be a friend of Cora.

Kate chips away at Edward and Emily's comfortable

memories and interpretation of reality. She is trying to get Edward to admit that he sexually assaulted his daughter- and that once this is admitted, Cora will return. But did he?

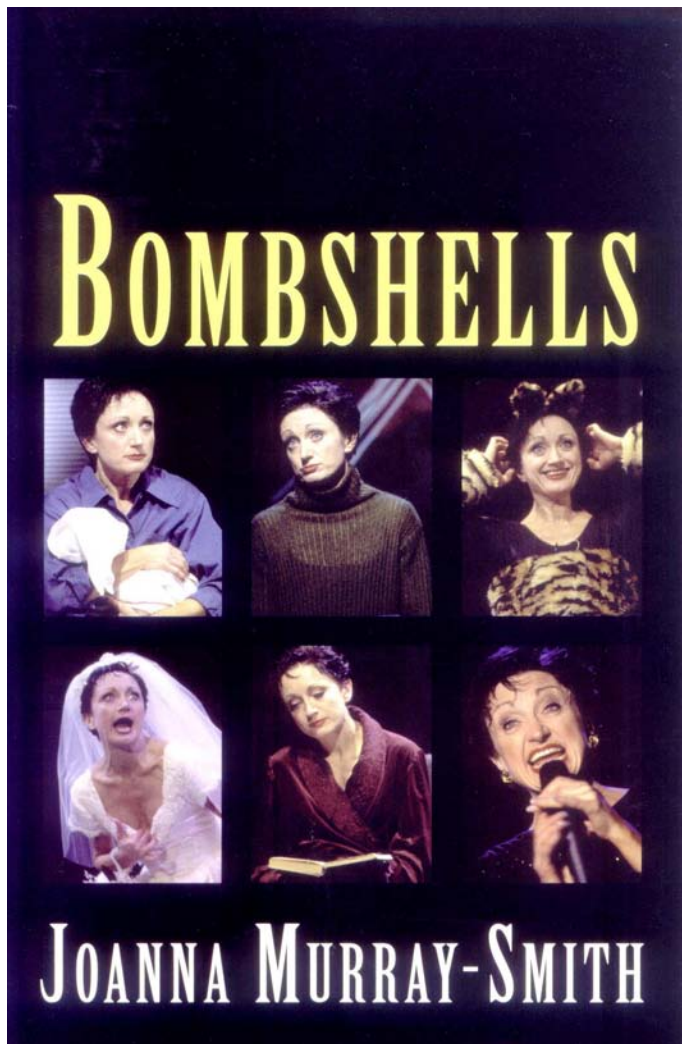
This is a play about realities and memory. We ask, whose memory, whose reality?

### Discussion

- Watch the film clip *Nightfall* (DVD 2). Were you surprised to learn that the play used the structure of a suspense piece? Map Murray-Smith structure and see how it relates to any other suspense films or plays. Share your findings.
- Form teams and debate: *Words are meaningless if they are untrue.*
- Murray-Smith says that for us all our public persona can be as much as 90% of who we are. Work with someone you know well and make lists of attributes of your private and public personas. Do you agree with Murray-Smith? Share with the class the parts of this exercise you feel comfortable sharing.
- What is the role of small talk? Discuss.
- Take a scene from the play and give a rehearsed reading. Explain why you chose that section and its importance in the play.
- Can love be greater than our sense of self? Using a storyboard share a short scene which illustrates this.







## Bombshells

This is a virtuoso piece which consists of 6 monologues. The work was devised for the actor Caroline O'Connor.

The monologues are:

- Meryl Louise Davenport – A frustrated woman with too many babies and not enough time for dreaming
- Tiggy Entwhistle – A woman giving a talk about cacti but she is really talking about being left by her

husband.

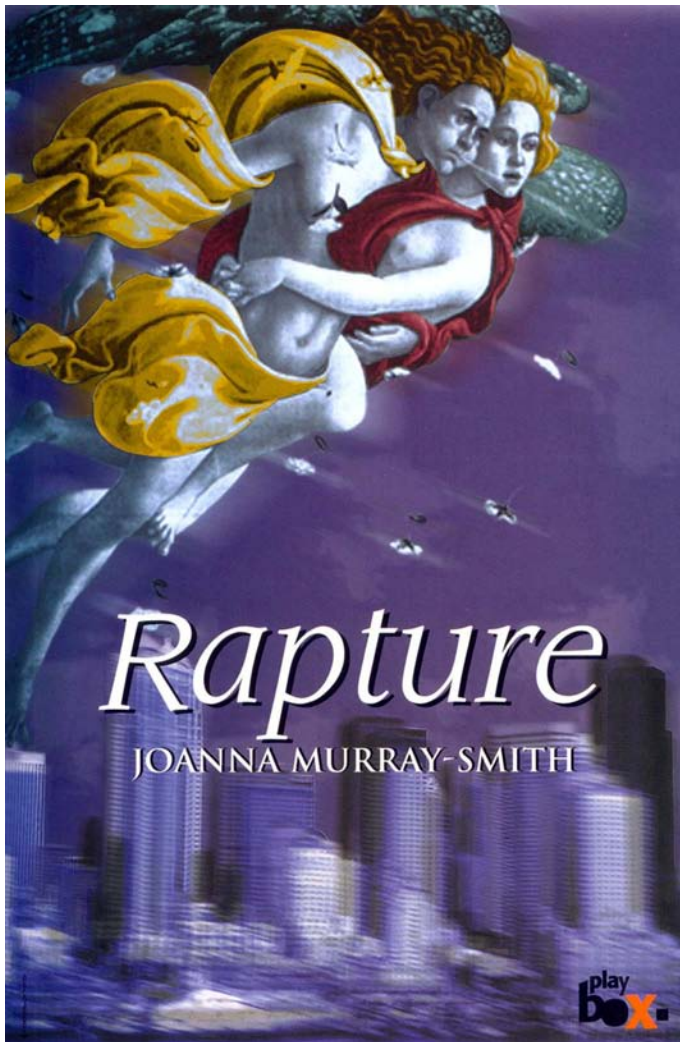
- Mary O'Donnell – A schoolgirl who wants to out-shine her school friends at the talent show.
- Theresa McTerry – A bride-to-be getting dressed for her wedding and more in love with being a bride than with the reality of marriage.
- Winsome Webster – A widow who reads for the blind and unexpectedly finds a sexual encounter
- Zoe Struthers – An aging star who is making a comeback on stage

### Discussion

- Choose one of these monologues and present your ideas for costume, set, and lighting. Prepare an extract and perform it for the class.
- Murray-Smith uses humour to show us the soft underbelly of our society. Discuss.
- Research your world- the shopping centre, the bus, etc and makes notes on a character you find. Write a short monologue revealing one aspect of that character.
- Using the library and other resources research the monologue as a form. Find other examples as a literary, poetic or film device and share them with your class.
- What is the difference between a stand-up comic routine and a monologue? How close or apart are these two forms? Discuss in groups.
- The monologue is a form which is at home in many genres. Discuss.







## Rapture

Henny, a celebrity chef and Harry, the Real-Estate-Salesman-of-the-Year drive home from a function to discover their house has burnt down. Nothing is left.

Their friends try to contact them but assume they have gone OS while the house is re-built – however during all that time they were living in the local Hyatt and not talking to anyone. They have had a life changing epiphany.

The play opens as they arrive at a dinner party held by their friends. This is the first time they have talked with them since the fire.

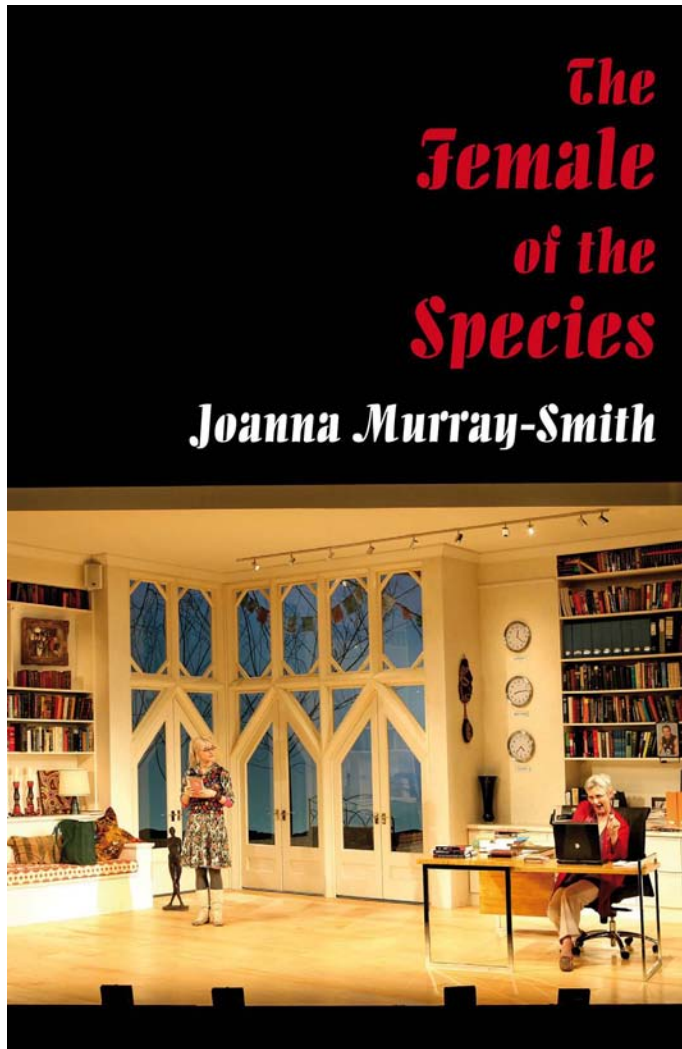
The friends feel betrayed. How could these two give everything up? How could they suddenly be free of the shared history?

There is a recurring theme in this play - face your demons.

### Discussion

- After watching the film clip on *Rapture* (DVD 2), did you sympathise with Murray-Smith when she claimed that almost nothing is shocking any more? What revelation from a friend would you find shocking. Discuss this in class.
- You become captive to your possessions. Discuss.
- In small groups discuss how we can change and become something new? How difficult is this? Share your findings with the class.
- *Love and terror go hand in hand.* Discuss this in class and then, using your findings, write a short scene depicting your position.
- Prepare the back-story for any one of the characters in *Rapture*. If you were the director who would you cast in that role and why?
- Design a set or program for *Rapture*. Discuss your ideas and how they suit the thematic concerns of the play.
- Using powerpoint, prepare a character profile from images of possessions. The profile should include the large and the minute. Ask the class to discuss your character. From this write a character description. Or choose a character in the play and carry out the same exercise.





## The Female of the Species

Margot Mason is a great 1970s feminist trying to write her next book – she has writers' block. Her publisher, Theo, needs the manuscript urgently to financially boost his failing publishing company.

As Margot is talking to Theo on the phone it goes dead. Molly has cut the lines – she enters through the French doors and handcuffs Margot to the desk. She intends to kill Margot after she has told her story. Molly believes her life has been wrecked because of Margot's writings and ideas.

The play is a farce and unfolds, largely via the French doors, as characters enter and complicate the action. Tess, Margot's daughter, Frank the taxi driver, Bryan, Margot's son-in-law, Theo, the publisher, all add to the escalation.

The gun represents power and it moves around the players. Finally, Margot tosses a book away; it accidentally lands on the gun which fires and kills Margot. Is the

book mightier than the gun? Is the pen mightier than the sword?

This is a successful comedy which illustrates Murray-Smith great ability as a comic playwright.

### Discussion

- After watching the film clip *The Female of the Species* (DVD 2) were you surprised to learn that the play was originally being written as a serious piece? Forms teams and debate: *Comedy makes serious ideas palatable.*
- Using the web and the library make a list of five intellectual provocateurs throughout history. Write a few sentences about each one. Share this with the class. Pick one intellectual provocateur from the class list and, after further research, write a character study of them.
- Find out what you can about Germaine Greer and the incident the play is based upon. Using stand-up-comic mode, write a brief monologue or sketch of some part of the real incident. Perform this for the class.
- Farce has serious overtones. Do you agree?
- Speed is an important aspect of farce. Make a tempo line for *The Female of the Species* indicating entrances and exits, and significant plot developments.
- Design the set or program for *The Female of the Species* and discuss how your ideas suit the essential nature of the play.
- Sitcoms have emerged from farce. Discuss, with reference to *The Female of the Species* and any currently playing sitcom. Consider set design, tempo, story development etc.





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## Our Address

What I Wrote

1 / 39 Murray Lane

Caulfield, VIC. 3162

sales@snodger.com.au

03 9528 2502

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