

Maureen: Harbinger of Death.

By Jonny Hawkins and Nell Ranney

A Soft Tread production in association with Sign of the Acorn



Resource developed by Danii Zappia 2023

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Youth & Education Program Partners



Overview.



Warnings

Recommended for audiences aged 15+

Contains adult themes, sexual references, and the use of herbal cigarettes

Duration

1hr 20mins, no interval

Synopsis

Framed by velvet drapes and bedecked with Jatz cracker crumbs and cigarette ash, Maureen invites you into her bohemian living room. She is here to take you on an intimate journey brimming with witty repartee, well-worn life advice, an exotic array of friends now gone and the dauntless potency of limitless imagination.

With exquisite storytelling, co-writer and performer Jonny Hawkins transforms into Maureen: a razor-tongued doyenne of King's Cross in its heyday. Co-created by Nell Ranney, this poignantly funny solo show takes inspiration from Hawkins' friend, a self-described "working class glamour queen" and one of life's true eccentrics.

Magnificently flouting many of the rules of drama and narrative, *Maureen: Harbinger of Death* redefines our concepts of older women. Caustic and moving, it is an uplifting demonstration of the wisdom, vitality, kindness, and humour of women too often overlooked or dismissed by society.

Themes.

Preconception of Older Women

Society often presents an unflattering image of older women and as a result they are sometimes dehumanised and patronised, this is known as **Invisible Women Syndrome***. The creative team of Jonny Hawkins and Nell Ranney set out to redefine society's concepts of older women. The play's nominal character, Maureen is unconventional in both her approach to life, her sense of self, and self-determination. She possesses great confidence, creativity and vitality which belies her 80-odd years. Through Jonny, we see that she has a rich social life, interacting with a wide range of people from all generations and makes a significant impact on others.

Maureen: The Harbinger of Death, is a celebration of those who refuse to be invisible in a world looking the other way.

Homage and Inter-generational Relationships

"A touching and real homage to older women, celebrating the indomitable voice, wisdom and unapologetic passions of dames who defy invisibility." (Nell Ranney, 2020)

The play honours the bounties of inter-generational relationships and pays tribute to kindness, individuality, and dignity. Ranney and Hawkins explore the idea of friendship between younger gay men and older women, where they each validate the other and contribute to empowering identity and sense of self.

Imagination and Storytelling

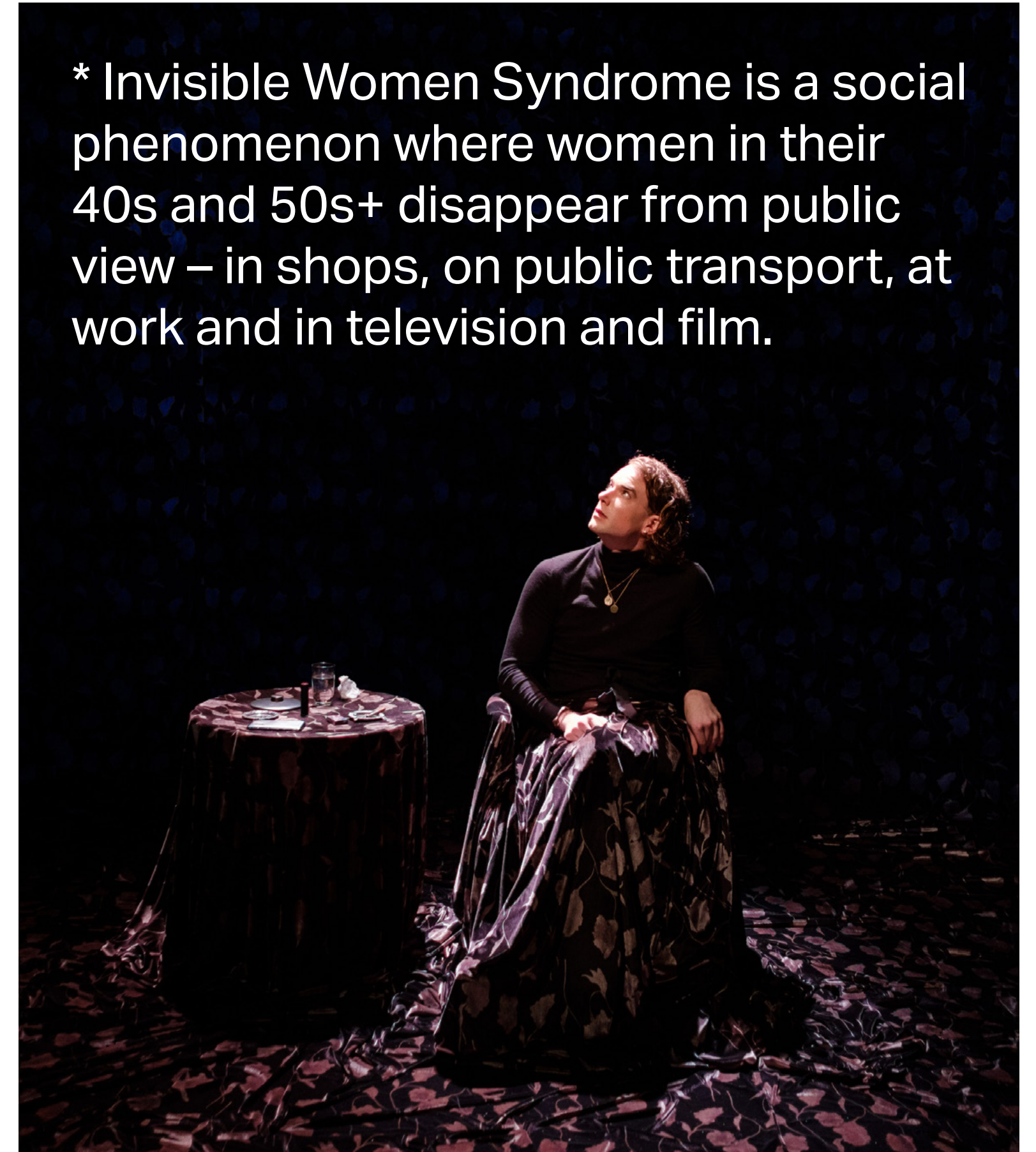
The fluid style of the production takes the audience from the static physical space of Maureen's living room onto a journey into her memories with performer and audience imagining together. With the use of simple props such as jewellery and lipstick to bring the audience into the world of the play the transformation is kept simple with no complex costume changes. The audience is invited to become part of the show through collective imagination and with Hawkins at times directing their conversation to audience members as if they are in the living room with them.

Within the world of the play, Maureen uses her own imagination to improve the narrative. The power of her imagination is integral to the storytelling. She tells the audience that the stories, including her own, are not entirely truthful but are embellished for artistic impact: *"Here is the thing, there is the truth and there is the story that surrounds it. And that is the whole picture."*

Death

Hawkins intersects Maureen with an image of Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, from Greek mythology. In her own way, Maureen presides over the dead, as Persephone did, predicting the death of her friends with some accuracy. Although the play tells the tale of the demise of many of Maureen's friends it is an affirmation of life. Students will be challenged to reconsider how they think about both life and death.

*** Invisible Women Syndrome is a social phenomenon where women in their 40s and 50s+ disappear from public view – in shops, on public transport, at work and in television and film.**



Production.

Styles and Conventions

One-hander (solo show)

The play has only one actor whose challenge is to embody all the people who are part of Maureen's stories. As the single performer, Jonny Hawkins transforms into Maureen along with the many other characters that make up her story, using a wide range of vocal and physical techniques.

Solo performance requires the actor to have exemplary focus and stamina while on stage, as well as discipline in the rehearsal process. While it may appear that there is only one member of the cast, often the lighting, sound, props, and costume become part of the narrative. These additional elements, coordinated by the stage manager offstage become vital support for the solo actor.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

Maureen: Harbinger of Death uses the theatrical device of actor being aware of the audience and addressing them directly and engaging with them as in a casual conversation, this is known as breaking the fourth wall.

The fourth wall is a performance convention in which an invisible, imaginary wall separates actors from the audience. While the audience can see through this wall, the convention assumes the actors function as if they cannot. By breaking the fourth wall, a more intimacy space is created between the actors and the audience, and it helps strengthen their relationship.

Episodic Structure

Hawkins takes the audience on a journey through many of Maureen's memories of her time spent living in King's Cross and the characters who were part of her life. The world of each memory is self-contained and is created entirely through Hawkins' performance skill, and use of sound and lighting. While the play is one continuous act, each memory is a separated episode of the whole.

Blind Casting

Gender-blind casting is the concept that the gender of the actor playing the role is immaterial to the telling of the story and the interpretation of the character.

Hawkins and Ranney wrote *Maureen: Harbinger of Death* as a homage to older women whom they respect and admire, with the intention to celebrate the lives of such women. Hawkins is sensitive to performing the role of Maureen in a respectful manner, while remaining true to her irreverential nature. They use a select range of mannerisms, gestures, and vocal techniques, to give the impression of the Maureen's gender where necessary, without creating an overly exaggerated caricature.



Lighting, Music, and Sound.

The lighting and sound design is intentionally subtle, to support the central idea of one actor in conversation with an audience and supporting them to lead each transformation of the imagination. As such there are no abrupt cues, only slow fades. The house lights remain on low, long after the show has begun as a gentle reminder to the audience of their presence in this exchange. However, this changes during the dream sequences, where sound and lights are most prominent and theatrical to enhance the metaphorical 'fourth wall' as Maureen explores her interior world.



Set and Costume Design.



Maureen's Bohemian Living Room

Set in Maureen's living room, draped velvet fabric gives the space atmosphere and drama, much like the department store windows she used to dress. Drapes are used to create a sense of intimacy and privacy and become a surface for the lighting to interact with. As with other bohemian characteristics, bohemian design involves an unconventional, relaxed, and free-spirited approach.

Minimal props or costume

Hawkins metamorphosises onstage into Maureen by putting on a skirt which appears to be an extension of the set. It is almost as if, Maureen has become an integral part of her house and her house is part of her. As Hawkins portrays Maureen's exotic array of friends, they utilise few props and costume items; only those which are essential to the storytelling.

This style of theatre making is sometimes referred to as Poor Theatre, created by Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999). Poor Theatre traditionally utilises minimal props (which were often transformative), and eschewed lavish and detailed sets and costumes. This theatre style relies on the performer's skill and involved a unique relationship between audience and performer.

Further reading: [Grotowski's Immersive Poor Theatre Techniques](#)

Character

Maureen is in her 80s and is described as 'a razor-tongued doyenne of King's Cross in its heyday'. A doyenne is an older woman who is highly regarded in her field of work. Sydney's King's Cross was a locus for artists and intellectuals in the burgeoning, unconventional bohemian lifestyle of the mid-20th century. Maureen embodies the bohemian approach to life and declares, *I am King's Cross*. Inspiration for the character of Maureen was taken from a friend of writer and performer, Jonny Hawkin's who was 'a self-described working-class glamour queen and one of life's true eccentrics. The unconventional approach to life (and death) is key to the style of storytelling used in the production as Maureen delivers her well-worn life advice in a sarcastic and scathing tone. Despite her 'razor tongue,' she demonstrates wisdom, vitality, kindness, and humour, making her not only a richly complex character but also highly engaging and endearing.








Curriculum Links.

The Australian Curriculum: Drama

General Capabilities

The Arts Learning Area has a natural link to the elements of the General Capabilities. Specific learning activities have been linked with the following icons:

-  Literacy
-  Critical and Creative Thinking
-  Ethical Understanding
-  Personal and social capability
-  Numeracy

Years 9 and 10 Band

- Learn that over time there has been further development of different traditional and contemporary styles of drama and that dramatists can be identified through the style of their work, as they explore drama forms.
- Explore meaning and interpretation, forms and elements, and social, cultural, and historical influences of drama as they make and respond to drama.
- Evaluate actors' success in expressing the directors' intentions and the use of expressive skills in drama they view and perform.
- Build on their understanding from previous bands of the roles of artists and audiences as they engage with more diverse performances.

SACE Stage 1 Drama

- Understanding and Exploration
- UE: Understanding and exploration of dramatic roles, conventions, and processes.
 - UE2: Understanding and exploration of dramatic ideas, texts, styles, and/or innovations.
- Critical and Creative Thinking
- CCT2: Analysis and evaluation of dramatic ideas, products, and technologies.

SACE Stage 2 Drama

- Knowledge and Understanding
- KU1: Exploration and understanding of dramatic theories, texts, styles, conventions, roles, and processes.
 - KU2: Understanding and evaluation of the artistic and cultural value of local, global, contemporary, and/or historical drama.
- Critical and Creative Thinking
- CCT2: Analysis and evaluation of the student's own drama-making and others' dramatic works, styles, and/or events.
- Creative Application
- CA3: Integration of theory and practice to make meaningful dramatic outcomes.

International Baccalaureate (DP)

Before the Show.



Performance Literacy

As students engage with and view live theatre, they develop a deeper understanding of the language of performance art. They develop literacies allowing them to 'read' the gestures and movements of a performer, and an understanding of the intention of the set, costume, lighting design and reflect on how they contribute to the narrative. Students consider the intended meaning of the playwrights, directors and/or artists' in choosing a setting, character, or artistic form as well as what they are looking to communicate through their work.

Attending live theatre and responding to performances, addresses the criteria for Literacy in line with the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities

... students become literate as they develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society. Literacy involves students listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing, and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts.

Art is a means of expressing emotion, a way of transmitting feelings, culture, beliefs and values between the creators and performers of the work and the audience or viewers. Some art is created for the explicit purpose of eliciting a strong emotional response from the audience and there is a myriad of emotions that students will experience when they are viewing live performance from happiness to anger, surprise, annoyance, and confusion, just to name a few.

The **Before the Show** activities are designed to support students to develop these literacy skills, knowledge and understanding in relation to their Adelaide Festival experience.

The **After the Show** activities are designed to provide students with the opportunity to discuss, analyse and comprehend their responses to the show. Having a strong knowledge and understanding of theatre terminology will support students and extend their vocabulary as they describe their theatre experience with authentic language.

[Click here for an Example of Glossary of Dramatic Terms](#)





Before the Show.



Theatre Etiquette

The French word *etiquette*, meaning 'requirements for proper behaviour', was adopted by English speakers in the middle of the 18th Century –. This can sound a bit formal but understanding theatre etiquette helps an audience understand what to expect and how to get the most out of their theatre experience.

Depending on the age of an audience the expectations can vary. Theatre designed for very young audiences will have different expectations and will often invite and encourage participation. However, as the content becomes more complex and audiences mature, there is an expectation that students will have developed an understanding of the difference between enthusiastic participation and thoughtless disruption.

Group discussion: Why does it matter?

Students to talk about the auditorium being a shared space sharing the space and respecting other audience members attending the performance.

- What experiences have they had when their engagement with the performance was compromised by others in the audience?
- What is the role of the audience? What responsibility do they have to the performers on stage?

Actors often talk about a good audience/bad audience:

- What would make a good audience or a bad audience from the perspective of the performer? And why?

Theatre protocols to share with students

- When in the foyer they should:
- Go to the toilet before going into the auditorium.
- Follow the directions of the front of house staff.
- Turn off mobile phones.
- Wear a mask if required.

When the lights go down:

- This is a sign the performance is about to start. It is time to end chats and be quiet.
- Cover coughs and sneezes.
- No eating in the theatre. Only water bottles are allowed.
- For senior students writing the review in the darkened auditorium can be disturbing for the performers, particularly if using a mobile phone as a torch. Plus, all the performers can see is the top of the student's head. Why would this be disturbing for the performers?

Photographing and filming is not permitted because:

- It can disturb the actors on the stage and break their concentration.
- Intellectual property is paramount. The production on stage is the intellectual property of the theatre company therefore no photographs or filming is allowed.

Pre-Show Discussion.



Questions to put to your students

- Consider an older woman who you respect. What are the characteristics she possesses that you admire?
- What do you think are the challenges for a solo performer?
- This production uses minimal set, props, and costume. It is set in a living room. What do you think might be the most necessary items to set the scene on stage?
- What is some life advice that you would give to your younger self?
- Imagine and describe how you will be when you are 80?



Post-Show Discussion.

Suggested Activities



Questions to put to your students

- How have your preconceptions of women in their 80s changed because of seeing this production?
- What was something you found surprising about the character Maureen?
- Maureen has a passion for fashion. How is this reflected in the set design?
- How did the lighting and sound contribute to the storytelling?
- How did the performer, Jonny Hawkins, use the tools of body and voice to create and perform the character, Maureen? Do you think this was a convincing performance? Why/why not?
- Consider the title of the play *Maureen: Harbinger of Death*. A harbinger foreshadows the coming of something, in this case, death.
- Reflect on the way in which Maureen foreshadows the deaths of her friends and how this skill is woven into the narrative?



Design

1. Students to consider a location they feel is integral to their own identity or memories.

TASK: Students to design a theatre set of this location which heightens one or two elements of the place. They might consider the following:

- Textures of the materials – natural or synthetic?
- Colours – is the palette monochromatic or polychromatic?
- Shadow and light – how does the source of the light create shadow, pattern, or impact the colour?

TASK: Students to create a costume which is integrated into the set and reflects their own connection to this location.

2. Famous female designers and fashion icons Iris Apfel (born 1921) and Vivienne Westwood (born 1941) have a unique visual style and inspiring life journey.

TASK: Students research their careers and design a set with integrated costume for one of these fashion icons.



Writing task: Imagination and Storytelling

The strength of the imagination is especially important in this play. Students to consider if they have a family member who tells stories in a funny way or tells the same story over and over. And then select a story they know well.

Questions for them to consider:

- How would you embellish or enrich this story?
- What would you add or change about some of the locations, characters, dialogue, or sequence of events?

TASK: Using the techniques of Poor Theatre*, students design or choose some props which would help to tell the story. Question to consider:

- How could some of the props be repurposed or transformed into something else in the process of the storytelling?

TASK: Students explore a range of vocal and physical techniques to differentiate between the people in their story which includes experimenting with exaggerating these physical and vocal traits to create a highly engaging performance.

Post-Show Discussion.

Suggested Activities (cont.)



Reviewing the Show

Students to consider one of the following prompts to start their analysis of the production:

Theatre Design

Choose one key scene and analyse how the dramatic elements worked interdependently to create a powerful moment.

- How did the lighting, sound, set, and props work together to create the world of the play in that scene?

Performance

- How did Hawkins transform into Maureen's many exotic friends in the play?
- How did they distinguish between the different characters?
- What change in physicality and vocality did they employ to do this?
- How did set, prop and costume items contribute to these performances?

The role of the Audience

This production uses a presentational style of acting where the performer (and character) is aware of the audience's presence. The audience is integral to building the world of the play through their collective imaginations.

- How (and when) did the performer and theatre makers involve the audience in this process?
- What was the audience's response to these moments?





Meet the Company.

Jonny Hawkins

Writer & Performer

Jonny Hawkins is an actor, writer, and DJ. They studied Acting at WAAPA, where they won the Burton Award for outstanding Shakespearian Performance, and they have subsequently won awards including the Sydney Theatre Critic's Best Newcomer Award. Their appearances across film and TV include *Mr Inbetween*, Stan's *The Other Guy*, *Les Norton*, the ABC's award-winning *RIOT* and the mini-series *Peter Allen: Not the Boy Next Door*. As a writer, their short film *Joy Boy* won Best Film at Melbourne's Queer Film Festival and Best Screenplay at Vivid's Fresh Flix. *Maureen* is Jonny's first full-length play.

Jonny is also one of Sydney's best loved DJs and founder of The Dollar Bin Darlings, preaching disco and love all over Australia.

Nell Ranney

Co-conceiver & Director

Nell Ranney is a director and producer of original and multi-disciplinary theatre work. Her credits include the Sydney premiers of *TUESDAY* by Louris van de Geer (Belvoir) and *She Rode Horses Like the Stock Exchange* by Amelia Roper (KXT), and she is currently leading creative development of *GRLZ* by Victoria Haralabidou

(supported by Australia Council of the Arts). Nell was Associate Director for Debra Oswald's solo performance *Is There Something Wrong With That Lady?* (Griffin Theatre), and in 2018 she was appointed the Baylis Assistant Director at the Old Vic in London for *SYLVIA* (Old Vic/ ZooNation) by Kate Prince. Her previous roles in artistic programming include Program Manager of The Garden of Unearthly Delights from 2018-2020 and Artistic Associate of Belvoir from 2016-2017.

Isabel Hudson

Set & Costume Designer

Isabel Hudson is a Set & Costume Designer whose recent work includes *Winyanboga Yurringa* (director Anthea Williams) and *Every Brilliant Thing* (director Kate Champion) at Belvoir, and *Jess & Joe Forever* and *TUESDAY* as part of Belvoir's 25A program. Her past credits include designing set and costumes for *The Rise & Fall of Little Voice* at the Darlinghurst Theatre, *The Shifting Heart* (White Box Productions), *The Walworth Farce* (director Kim Hardwick), *A Girl Is A Half Formed Thing* (director Erin Taylor), *You Got Older* (Kings Cross Theatre director Claudia Barrie) and *King of Pigs* (Red Line productions director Blazey Best). In 2018 Isabel was the Winner of Best Independent Scenic Design at the Sydney Theatre Awards. She

is graduate of the NIDA Design Course (2015), holds a Bachelor of Arts (Screen and Sound) from the University of New South Wales (2012) and was awarded the William Fletcher Foundation Tertiary Grant for emerging artists in 2015. Isabel is also a lecturer for the Design for Performance program at NIDA.

Nick Schlieper

Lighting Designer

Nick Schlieper designs for all of the major performing arts companies in Australia and works regularly in Europe and the USA. He is one of Australia's most highly awarded designers having received six Melbourne Green Room Awards, six Sydney Theatre Awards (two for set design and four for lighting), the inaugural 2013 Australian Production Designers Guild Best Lighting Award, as well as five Helpmann Awards and in 2016 a Nomination for Best Lighting and Best Set (with Simon Phillips) for *North by Northwest* (MTC and Kay and McLean Productions). His credits include *War of the Roses* for Sydney Theatre Company performed at Sydney Festival and Perth Festival; *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* in London's West End; *Dissocia*, *Elling*, *The City* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* for Sydney Theatre Company (Sydney, Washington, and New York) and *Poor Boy* for Sydney

Theatre Company and Melbourne Theatre Company. Nick has also designed lighting for *Scheherazade* for the Australian Ballet, the acclaimed *Cinderella* for Royal New Zealand Ballet, and several pieces for Bangarra Dance Theatre, including *Bush* and *Sandsong*.

Steve Toulmin

Sound Designer

Steve Toulmin is one of Australia's most sought-after composers and sound designers for theatre. He has worked with the country's most acclaimed companies and directors and has had his work tour nationally and internationally – most recently with *Blanc De Blanc* playing at The Spiegeltent in Christchurch. His credits as Composer and/or Sound Designer for theatre include numerous productions for Sydney Theatre Company, Belvoir, Bell Shakespeare, Queensland Theatre Company, La Boite Theatre Company, Malthouse Theatre and Sydney Festival. For Strut & Fret he has designed sound for *Blanc De Blanc*, *Love Riot*, *Funhouse*, *Life The Show*, *Blanc De Blanc Encore*, and his independent productions include *Prehistoric*, *After All This*, *Queen of Wolves*, *Me Pregnant*, *Rommy*, *Porn.Cake*, *Trapture*.

Additional Resources.

Reviews

Stage Whispers

<https://www.stagewhispers.com.au/reviews/maureen-harbinger-death>

Sydney Morning Herald

<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/theatre/maureen-harbinger-of-death-catches-you-like-a-fly-in-a-web-of-storytelling-20210117-p56uoc.html>

Interviews

Breakfasters: Jonny Hawkins on The Punk And Irreverent Maureen Harbinger of Death

<https://www.rrr.org.au/on-demand/segments/breakfasters-jonny-hawkins-on-the-punk-and-irreverent-maureen-harbinger-of-death>

Writer-performer Jonny Hawkins shares thoughts on the intersectionality between gay men and older women.

<https://www.audreyjournal.com.au/arts/maureen-the-harbinger-of-death-a-work-in-progress/>

Extra resources

Maureen: Harbinger of Death (20sec clip)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLRnUJTB698>

KING'S CROSS: BOHEMIAN LIFE IN SYDNEY

<https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/stories/kings-cross-bohemian-life-sydney>

