

**Company B
presents
a Griffin Theatre Company Production**



Photo: Toby Dixon

Holding the Man

Adapted by Tommy Murphy
From the book by Timothy Conigrave
Directed by David Berthold

Teacher's Notes

Freehills

EDUCATION PARTNER

Company B

Company B sprang into being out of the unique action taken to save the Nimrod Theatre building from demolition in 1984. Rather than lose a performance space in inner city Sydney, more than 600 arts, entertainment and media professionals as well as ardent theatre lovers, formed a syndicate to buy the building. The syndicate included nearly every successful person in Australian show business.

Company B is one of Australia's most celebrated theatre companies. Under the artistic leadership of Neil Armfield, the company performs at its home at Belvoir St Theatre in Surry Hills, Sydney and from there tours to major arts centres and festivals both nationally and internationally. Company B engages Australia's most prominent and promising playwrights, directors, actors and designers to present an annual artistic program that is razor-sharp, popular and challenging.

Belvoir St Theatre's greatly loved Upstairs and Downstairs stages have been the artistic watering holes of many of Australia's great performing artists such as Geoffrey Rush, Cate Blanchett, Jacqueline McKenzie, Noah Taylor, Richard Roxburgh, Max Cullen, Bille Brown, David Wenham, Deborah Mailman and Catherine McClements.

Sellout productions like *Cloudstreet*, *The Judas Kiss*, *The Alchemist*, *Hamlet*, *The Small Poppies*, *Waiting for Godot*, *The Underpants*, *Gulpilil*, *The Sapphires* and *Stuff Happens* have consolidated Company B's position as one of Australia's most innovative and acclaimed theatre companies. Company B also supports outstanding independent theatre companies through its annual B Sharp season.

Belvoir St Theatre has recently undergone a major renovation to provide Company B with a state of the art home for the future whilst retaining the charm of the original building.

For more information visit www.belvoir.com.au

Company B
Presents

Holding the Man

Adapted by Tommy Murphy
From the novel by Timothy Conigrave
Directed by David Berthold

With

**Jeanette Cronin
Nicholas Eadie
Guy Edmonds
Robin McLeavy
Brett Stiller
Matt Zeremes**

**Brian Thomson
Micka Agosta
Stephen Hawker
Basil Hogios
Stephen Toulmin
Nic Dorward
Liam Fraser
Nicole Robinson
Suzanne Large
Pip Runciman
Tirian Rodwell**

Set Designer
Costume Designer
Lighting Designer
Composer & Sound Designer
Associate Sound Designer
Assistant Director
Production Manager
Stage Manager
Assistant Stage Manager
Props Coordinator
Costume Supervisor

*The Company B season of **Holding the Man** opened at Belvoir St Theatre
on 26 September 2007.*

Tommy Murphy's adaptation of ***Holding the Man*** is published by Currency
Press. You can purchase a copy of the script on the Currency Press website at
<http://www.currency.com.au/>

Thinking about the World of the Play

Holding the Man is adapted from a memoir written by Sydney actor and activist Timothy Conigrave in 1994.

Holding the Man is set over 15 years, from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, in both Melbourne and Sydney. The play is set in many locations, from schools to suburban shopping centres, from nightclubs to NIDA, from clinics to five star accommodation.

As well as being a very personal and moving account of a fifteen year relationship, Nick Enright described Timothy Conigrave's memoir as documenting, "...some aspects of life in our [the gay] community in two particular periods of self-definition ('70s liberation and the health crisis of the '80s)."

In the early 1980s HIV/AIDS surfaced in Australia for the first time. There was a great deal of fear, misinformation and misconceptions about this disease in the beginning. The perceptions and information you and your peers have today about HIV/AIDS are probably very different from those of high school students in the early 1980s.

At the end of 2005, there were an estimated 15,310 people were living with HIV in Australia.
[Source: AVERT.org]

From the Director: David Berthold

I first read *Holding the Man* in 1995 on the day it hit the bookshops. I bought it on my way to the airport to catch an international flight. I read the book in one go, as many people have, and found myself sobbing over the last fifty pages or so, as many people have. My fellow passengers must have thought I'd lost it. I passed it to a colleague, and a leg of the journey later she was bawling too. Many people have a story about when they first read *Holding the Man*.

I had read a few of the early chapters in manuscript form thanks to my friendship with Nick Enright, Tim's NIDA acting teacher and friend who shaped and edited much of the book, and so knew some of what to expect. Yet the physical impact was a bombshell.

The book is, magically, more than the sum of its parts. This makes it a tricky prospect for any adaptation: where, exactly, is the magic and how can it be captured? After the amazing success of Tommy Murphy's *Strangers in Between* at Griffin in early 2005, I asked Tommy if he thought the book could make a play, and if he thought he was the playwright for the job. I knew he was, but wanted him to say it. I wasn't going to ask another writer if he said no. I gave him the book to read (he'd heard of the book, but had not read it), and a few days later his response came in the form of a very long and very personal letter. He read the book on a bus journey home to Queanbeyan - it's amazing how many people first read the book on a journey. Reading the book, he said, was like reading his own life, even though he was of a different generation and had no experience of HIV/AIDS. He read the final chapters with his head in his boyfriend's lap, sobbing. He wanted to make the play, for Tim.

We knew we were embarking on a very special journey. We were about to step inside one of our greatest love stories.

It has, indeed, been a singular experience. Over the production's three sold-out seasons, we have received more letters and emails about the show than about any other I've ever had anything to do with, anywhere. Long, personal, handwritten letters. For a great many people, gay and straight, male and female, young and old, the story has touched a well. For some, the theatre became a place of remembrance and reclaiming; for others, it was a place of wide-eyed discovery; for others still, it was a place to hold a loved one in a tender act of repair.

The story travels. The play will be seen in Melbourne, San Francisco, Auckland, and in other cities too. Stimulated by the play, the book has been published in the USA and Canada for the first time, with an afterword by Tommy. The journey continues, but at the beginning we had to ask

a lot of basic questions. Why should this book be a play? What part of the story do we focus on? What does AIDS mean, onstage, now, 20 years after the Grim Reaper?

At the simplest level, the idea to adapt emerged because of the story's connection with Griffin Theatre Company. Tim Conigrave was involved with the company during the mid-1980s, most notably as instigator of the part-verbatim *Soft Targets* (Australia's first full theatrical response to HIV/AIDS), which followed the first production of Michael Gow's *Away* in Griffin's 1986 season. Several episodes in the book are set at Griffin, one even on the Stables stage itself. We noted that theatre is everywhere in the book: a shopping centre *Wizard of Oz*, a school production of *Romeo and Juliet*, NIDA, Tim's own plays. This theatrical connection provided a way in: the play could release the theatre inherent in the book. After all, Tim was an actor and playwright, not a novelist, and the book was partly shaped by Nick, another playwright. Tellingly, in early letters to his publisher Tim calls sections of the book 'scenes'.

This observation suggested a way to tell the story – playfully, through the idea of theatre itself – but not necessarily *what* story. We wanted the love story. Initially, we were interested in the question: 'why do we hurt the ones we love, and how do we answer that?' Tim hurt John many times during their 15 years together, and John absorbed the hurt. In story terms, AIDS might be seen as a metaphor.

We have come to believe that Tim wrote the book partly to say sorry (for all the hurt) and thank you (for all the love). Maybe that's why he wrote John so idealistically, and himself so judgementally. The book is a kind of gift to John. The play is able to make a point of this. Throughout, there are many gifts, mostly from John to Tim, and throughout we see writings of all kinds: pencil-case graffiti, letters, newspapers, scripts, scrapbooks, and finally the book called *Holding the Man*. In a quiet way, we sense the story, the final gift, being written as we watch.

Tim adjusted the raw material of his life to meet his storytelling needs, and Tommy has adjusted the raw material of the book to meet his theatrical needs. Not everything happens in the book as it happened in life, and not everything happens in the play as it happens in the book. Characters have been omitted and others conflated. Most notably, Phoebe in the play is a fusion of several characters in the book, and so has a name we've invented. Details from various episodes in the book have found their way into single scenes in the play. Sometimes, the chronology is a little different. Somehow, Tommy has managed to retain the full sweep of the book, and, through some conjuring trick, we don't see what's missing.

Tommy shares a few things with Tim, and two of these are a sharp sense of humour and an ability to be astonishingly, but disarmingly candid. Maybe these qualities, combined with the remarkable examples of unconditional love and superhuman endurance, help give the book its magic. I think Tommy has understood and caught this magic, and has managed to make the story both completely faithful to Tim's and yet wholly his own. Both works acknowledge the pain, but elevate the wonder, make the familiar strange and the strange familiar, and invite us to understand what love and survival can be. Both, I think, leave us wanting more of their charm, their candour, and their wisdom. Both, I think, in their own ways, are achievements of the highest order.

Imagining the World of Play

Look at the following production photo taken during the original season of *Holding the Man* at the SBW Stables Theatre.

- What clues are there in each photo to indicate *when* the play is set? Look closely at the costumes each actor is wearing.
- What clues are there in each photo to indicate *where* each scene is set?
- What might be happening at each of these moments in the play?
- What do you think the relationship might be between the characters in these photos?
- Describe what you see in the background of the photo below. Where would you expect to find these things?
- In pairs, groups of three or by yourself, form a tableau using one the photos below as a starting point. Improvise a short scene in which you justify the body positions and facial expression of each of the characters.



Brett Zemerer

photo: Robert McFarlane



Robin McLeavy, Brett Stiller, Jeanette Cronin

photo: Robert MacFarlane



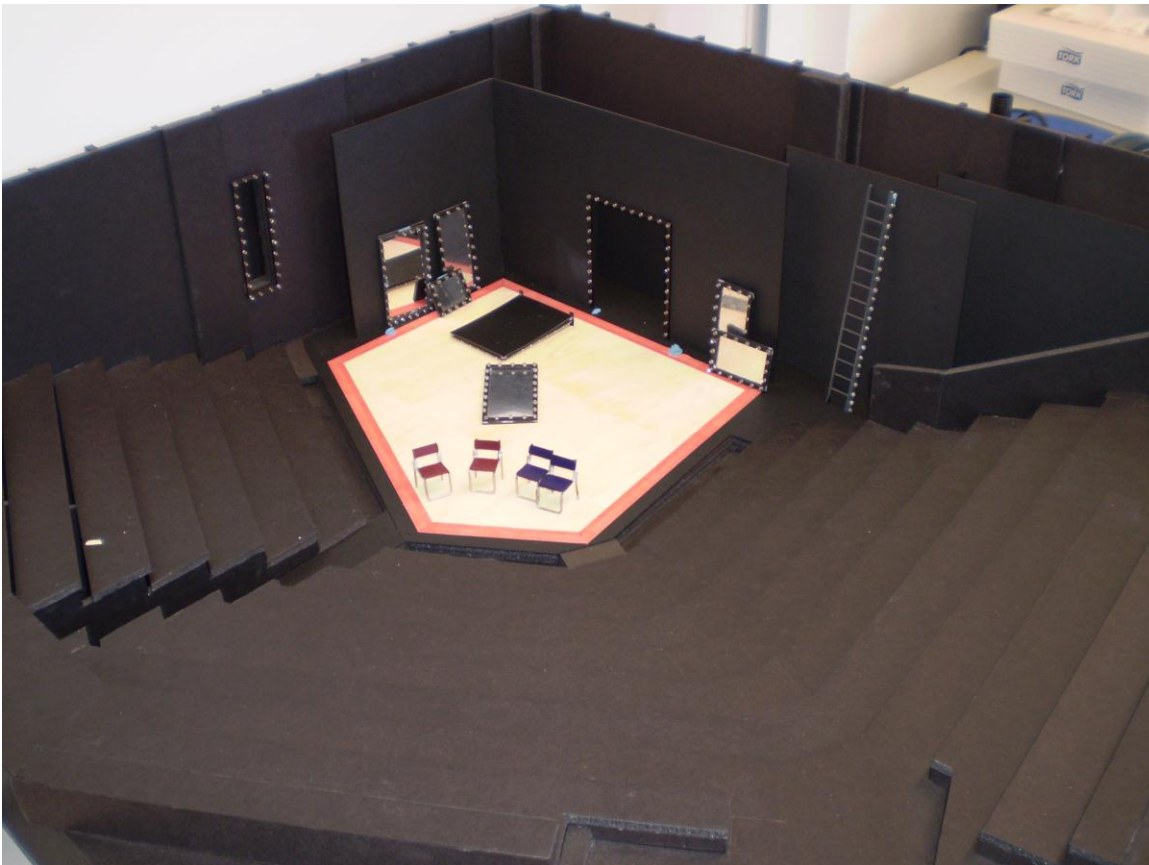
Matt Zeremes and Guy Edmonds

photo: Robert MacFarlane

Imagining the World of the Play

Look carefully at the following photo of the model box for *Holding the Man*. Model boxes are built to scale and are used by the designer to present his or her ideas to the director, cast and crew and by the production manager as a guide for managing the building of the set.

- Describe what you see in the photo. (NB a couple of the mirrors have fallen over in this photo!)
- What images does this design evoke?
- What ideas about the production might an audience member have upon seeing this set for the first time?
- Why might the designer have chosen this design for *Holding the Man*? Consider the ideas of the play and the number of different locations in the story.
- Why do you think model boxes need to be built to scale?



Set Design: Brian Thomson

Thinking About the Production

Read the following scene from Act Two of *Holding the Man* on the following page and consider the following questions.

Imagine you were directing this scene for performance. Consider the following questions:

- Where could you set this scene?
- What time of day might it take place?
- What might the actors be doing physically during this scene? Consider any props you might wish to introduce in the scene.
- What do you think Dick wants in this scene? What do you think Mary-Gert wants?
- How might Tim enter the scene? How might he leave? What has changed for Tim during the course of the scene?
- The extract ends before the end of the scene. Tim has one more line. What might it be? On what emotional note do you consider the scene might end?

Reading About the Play

Read the enclosed article which appeared in the Sun-Herald on September 16, 2007 before seeing the play. After seeing the play, discuss the following questions with your class.

- Did you find the play moving? Why or why not? How does the production achieve a balance between the humour and the emotional impact of the story?
- What does Tommy Murphy mean when he says, "Theatre intervenes throughout Tim's story..." How are the conventions of theatre used in telling Tim's story?
- What theatrical techniques are used in the production to show that the story has moved forward in time?
- What is the effect of the puppet in the final scene of the play? Why might this device have been used in the production?
- What is the effect of having cast members playing different characters? Did you find it confusing? Challenging? Humorous? Consider how each actor plays each different character. Did you notice any particular choices made by the actors to distinguish their portrayals?
- What images from the play have stayed most strongly in your mind a few days after seeing the show?
- Imagine you were designing the set for a new production of *Holding the Man*. Can you come up with a different design concept for the show? Consider how many different locations in the play and the ideas the story is communicating.

From *Holding the Man*, adapted by Tommy Murphy from the book by Timothy Conigrave
(For classroom use only)

DICK

Could you come in here, son?

TIM

Just a minute, Dad

DICK

Can we see you please?

Tim approaches his parents. Dick takes a deep breath.

DICK

You and John can't see each other anymore.

TIM

Yes we can.

DICK

His father was in my office this morning, waving a pack of letter at me and yelling that you had corrupted his son, a good catholic boy, trying to make him homosexual.

TIM

Where the hell did he get our letters?

MARY-GERT

While John was staying here last night Mr Caleo went through his room. He obviously expected to find something. He accused your father of being a party to the whole thing.

TIM

He has no right to go through John's stuff.

DICK

Don't you understand? You're not to see each other. The man's threatening court action.

MARY-GERT

Who knows what he'll do next time.

TIM

And do you support him?

DICK

You listen, Tim. You know we've never been happy with this lifestyle you've chosen. We've tried to stay out of it, but this morning was the most humiliating moment of my life. You hear?

TIM

We're adults now. We're at uni.

DICK

Living under our roof.

TIM

You can't stop us.

MARY-GERT

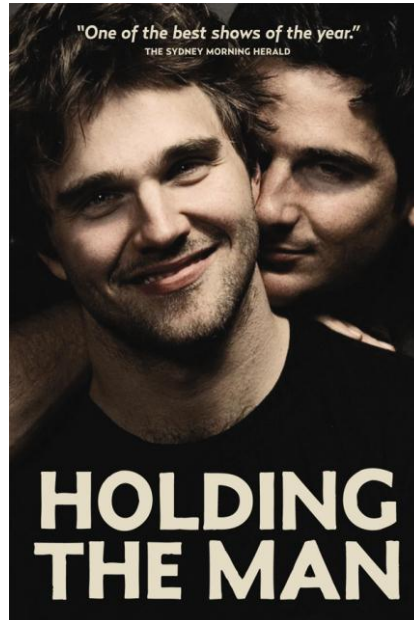
Of course we can't. We can't stop you, Tim. But John won't be staying here anymore and you won't be invited to the Caleos'.

DICK

And you can't use the phone to contact him

Thinking about the Production

Below is the main marketing image for *Holding the Man*. Does it grab your attention, why or why not?



This image appears on the front of an Avant Card.

- What is an Avant Card?
- What is the purpose of an Avant Card?
- Where might you find this Avant Card? Who might it be trying to reach?

The information on the following page appears on the back of the Avant Card. Read the information carefully and answer the following questions.

- Who designed the set for the play?
- Who is Basil Hogios?
- Name two members of the cast.
- I am 62 years old and want to be the cheapest ticket I can to a performance of *Holding the Man*? What is the cheapest ticket I can purchase? Are there any conditions attached?
- What time is the performance of *Holding the Man* on Tuesday 30th October?
- After reading this Avant Card, describe in your own words what you think the play *Holding the Man* is about.

HOLDING THE MAN

ADAPTED BY
Tommy Murphy
FROM THE BOOK BY
Timothy Conigrave

DIRECTED BY
David Berthold
SET DESIGNER
Brian Thomson
COSTUME DESIGNER
Micka Agosta
LIGHTING DESIGNER
Stephen Hawker

**COMPOSER &
SOUND DESIGNER**
Basil Hogios
**ASSOCIATE
SOUND DESIGNER**
Stephen Toulmin
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
Nic Dorward

WITH
Jeanette Cronin
Nicholas Eadie
Guy Edmonds
Robin McLeavy
Brett Stiller
Matt Zeremes

22 September – 4 November, 2007
Belvoir St Theatre

"10/10" THE SUN-HERALD

Following its world premiere last year, *Holding the Man* became the most sought after theatre ticket in Sydney (along with Company B's *Keating!*) with three sold-out seasons, the 2007 NSW Premier's Literary Award and 2007 AWGIE and Helpmann Award nominations for Best Play.

Already described as a modern classic of Australian theatre, *Holding the Man* is back for a strictly limited season at the intimate Belvoir St Theatre.

Adapted from the award-winning memoir of Timothy Conigrave, this is one of the great love stories. Tim and John met in high school in the mid-1970s. Their fifteen-year relationship weathers disapproval, separation, temptation and ultimately, death.

**"Unflinching, devastating, moving and funny...
I laughed, and I wept."** THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

"... a theatrical triumph." VARIETY

PREVIEWS: SATURDAY 22 SEPTEMBER 8PM, SUNDAY 23 SEPTEMBER 5PM
PERFORMANCE TIMES: TUESDAY 6.30PM, WEDNESDAY-FRIDAY 8PM, SATURDAY 2PM & 8PM, SUNDAY 5PM
TICKET PRICES: ADULTS \$52, SENIORS (60+ FRIDAY & SATURDAY) \$44, CONCESSIONS \$32, PREVIEWS \$32
UNDER 27: \$32 TICKETS FOR TUESDAY 6.30PM. AVAILABLE FROM 10AM ON THE DAY (SUBJECT TO AVAILABILITY)

BOOKINGS (02) 9699 3444 OR WWW.BELVOIR.COM.AU

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PKF
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Thinking About the Ideas of the Play

Following are some of the ideas or 'themes' explored in *Holding the Man*.

Students could start thinking about some of their associations with these ideas before they see the play.

Growing Up

Identity

Love

Faithfulness

Trust

Ambition

Prejudice

Fear

Guilt

Loss

Death

Grief

- Collect images and media which represent or deal with one or more of these ideas.
- Make a list of books, films or plays you have studied that explore one or more of these ideas.
- *Holding the Man* is played in a slightly heightened naturalistic style. In groups of 3, 4 or 5 improvise a short, naturalistic scene around one of the ideas above. Present your scene to the class. Now improvise the scene again, making it a slightly heightened version of reality. Can you exaggerate the humour in the scene? Can you find ways to represent the idea of the scene physically (rather than just through the lines spoken).
- Can you think of a concrete stage prop could represents each of the 'intangible' ideas or 'themes' listed above?

E.g.

BETRAYAL – a broken gift

What the Critics Say

Read the following review of the original production of *Holding the Man* at the SBW Stables Theatre in 2006. The review, by theatre critic Stephen Dunne, appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on November 13, 2006.

After reading the review, answer the following questions.

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts-reviews/holding-the-man/2006/10/26/1161749228028.html#>

Tommy Murphy's adaptation of Tim Conigrave's memoir is an act of urgent remembrance - and the story of two people in love.

It is easy to forget, to allow the memories of the relatively recent past to slide away to a possibly helpful distance.

Australia's experience of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and '90s is thus ancient history, and so much of that time is gone: a time of the dead and the dying; vigil shifts at ward 17; watching brilliant and beautiful men sliding into garbled dementia; polite efforts to avoid funeral scheduling conflicts; two full pages of obits in the *Sydney Star Observer*; anger and love and screaming horror at the waste of so many lives. Surprisingly easy to let all that go.

Tommy Murphy's adaptation of Tim Conigrave's memoir is an act of urgent remembrance, an unflinching, devastating, moving and funny reanimation of that awful time. It is also the story of two people in love.

Conigrave (Guy Edmonds) falls for John Caleo (Matt Zeremes) at high school and they are, mostly, a couple until death. Their lives are skilfully theatricalised and biographically clear: for Tim it's GaySoc at uni, NIDA, acting, *Soft Targets* (the first Australian performance work to deal with HIV/AIDS) and other theatre work. For John, training as a chiropractor and opening a practice. For both, a relationship, and then diagnoses and telling friends and family (the other coming out) and the grim inevitability of blood tests and decline.

The adaptation makes the love of these two men, and the world they lived and died in, completely real. Brian Thomson's nicely messy, actor's mirror design and Michael Agosta's costumes are evocative, and beautifully functional, while Basil Hogios's sound and Stephen Hawker's lights are theatrically efficient and temporally accurate.

David Berthold's direction plays fully with the theatricality of a work that's set, at least partially, in a theatre. The entire space is used. There's a sharpness of pacing and a richly rewarding attention to emotional detail.

Jeanette Cronin, Nicholas Eadie, Robin McLeavy and Brett Stiller play everyone else (48 characters by my count) in a bravura display of ensemble skill and sharp delineation.

Edmonds and Zeremes are superb, with an unaffected directness and tenderness.

There's a famous slogan from that time: "knowledge equals power". It still does, but knowledge isn't just safer sex and treatment regimens. It's also knowing how the past helps prevent recurrence.

Murphy, Berthold and the cast's tribute to Caleo and Conigrave is compelling, wrenching and essential. I laughed, and I wept. History's like that.

Stephen Dunne

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think Stephen Dunne means when he writes, “It is easy to forget, to allow the memories of the relatively recent past to slide away.”
2. What does the word ‘unflinching’ mean? Would you describe Tommy Murphy’s adaptation as ‘unflinching’?
3. Stephen Dunne describes the performances from Jeanette Cronin, Nicholas Eadie, Robin McLeavy and Brett Stiller as ‘...a bravura display of ensemble skill...’ What is an ensemble? What qualities do you consider an outstanding ensemble cast needs to possess?
4. Stephen Dunne is reviewing the original production of the play staged at the SBW Stables Theatre. In his review he writes of the production, “The entire space is used.” Is this your experience of the production as it is staged at Belvoir St Theatre? Describe the different ways in which the Belvoir St Theatre stage is used in this production.
5. Write your own review of *Holding the Man*.



Guy Edmonds and Matt Zemerres

photo: Robert MacFarlane