

O'DONOGHUE, John – Much Admired Teacher

Tributes to Newcastle playwright John O'Donoghue, 'a magician with words'

By Felicity Biggins (*reproduced with her kind permission*)



Newcastle playwright John O'Donoghue at the Civic Playhouse. Picture by Max Mason-Hubers

Local playwright John O'Donoghue, who had an unlikely hit with his play about the origins of BHP's Newcastle steelworks, has died aged 93.

Three of his plays were published by Currency Press: *A Happy and Holy Occasion* and *Essington Lewis: I Am Work* (1987) and *Abbie and Lou, Norman and Rose* (1993).

Essington Lewis: I Am Work told a very Newcastle story about an industry that shaped the city during much of the 20th century but when it opened at the Playhouse for the Hunter Valley Theatre Company in early September 1981, it struggled to find an audience. It wasn't until Australia's most successful playwright David Williamson came to town to see it and alerted the media to its

merits, expressing bemusement at the small houses, that the show began selling out. The HVTC revived the production in February the following year due to popular demand, and then again in 1997 for the Bicentenary of Newcastle and the Hunter Region, this time at the Civic Theatre.

A documentary drama in the total theatre mould of Joan Littlewood and Bertolt Brecht and influenced by Erwin Piscator's emphasis on the social and political influences on human behaviour it told the story of Essington Lewis, a pivotal figure in the development of the BHP whose motto was "I am work". It was epic in scope, with songs set to stirring music by Allan McFadden, a large cast portraying a range of colourful characters, and humour and pathos in equal measure. As actor and writer John Doyle said in his eulogy at O'Donoghue's funeral on Wednesday, he was "a magician with words and with a poet's eye for the theatrical".



John O'Donoghue was born in Newcastle in 1929, within "sight and smell of BHP". Picture by Simone De Peak

Essington Lewis: I Am Work would go on to be produced by the state theatre companies in every Australian capital city except Hobart, and in 1985 was awarded the Sydney Theatre Critics Circle Award for most significant contribution to theatre. *With Essington Lewis: I*

Am Work O'Donoghue found his tribe, a team of creatives that included Newcastle actors John Doyle, Vic Rooney, David Wood and Jonathan Biggins, and designer Brian Nickless. Crucially, it was the start of a long and productive collaboration between the playwright and the director and dramaturge Aarne Neeme, who'd been appointed artistic director of the HVTC in 1980 and who steered O'Donoghue through endless revisions of the script.

"He understood that a good play is written and rewritten, and so was relentless in his pursuit of perfection. I was privileged to have worked on a number of his plays, including his masterpiece *Essington Lewis: I Am Work*, which played and was lauded around Australia," Neeme said.



John O'Donoghue was given an OAM in 2006. Picture supplied.

Neeme would go on to direct O'Donoghue's *In the Field Where They Buried Peter Pan* for the Playhouse Theatre Company (1982), *Abbie and Lou*, *Norman and Rose* for the HVTC (1993), *Sao for Freewheels* (1996) and *Madonna del Parto* for Shakespeare et al (2002).

John O'Donoghue was born in Newcastle in 1929 within "sight, sound and smell" of the BHP, the eldest of seven children born to Irish immigrant James Patrick O'Donoghue and Eileen Mary Nolan, a descendant of an Irish convict.

His Irish/Catholic background informed his first play *A Happy and Holy Occasion*, which is set on the eve of 12-year-old Christy Mahon's admission to a seminary and explores sexual repression and domestic violence through one night in the life of a working-class Newcastle family. Its first production was directed by Terence Clarke in 1976 for the then fledgling Hunter Valley Theatre Company at the University of Newcastle's Arts/Drama Theatre (sadly now a grassy knoll) and it would go on to have professional productions in Adelaide, Perth and Sydney, with frequent revivals in Newcastle.

He understood that a good play is written and rewritten, and so was relentless in his pursuit of perfection

- Aarne Neeme

O'Donoghue qualified as a teacher, teaching English and Maths in high schools before becoming a Lecturer in English at Newcastle College of Advanced Education.

His passion for playwriting developed when he became obsessed with the West End theatre scene while teaching in London in 1956, the year John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* made its transformative debut.

In 1958, at the Downunder Club in Earl's Court, he met Rebecca "Ruby" Young. They married in 1963 and had 27 years together before Ruby's death from cancer in 1990, which devastated O'Donoghue, as would the untimely death of his beloved daughter Fiona from cancer in 2014.

Among many honours and awards John O'Donoghue was given an OAM in 2006.

He spent his final years relishing his role as grandfather to Amelia, Liam, Sophia, Declan and Ronan. His son Conal noted in his eulogy that his father's passion for playwriting and alcohol made for some challenging times for the family growing up, but he became a doting and attentive grandfather, and the feeling was mutual. Terence Clarke summed him up beautifully in his tribute: "An Irish Australian of formidable intelligence and craggy mien, he has the irresistible quality of being quite without guile. This makes for prickly socializing at times, but for powerful art".

John is survived by Conal, his daughter-in-law Kristine, his son-in-law Theo Drinkwater, his grandchildren and his extended family.

Dr Felicity Biggins, whose Honours Thesis for Drama at the University of Newcastle was on O'Donoghue's best-known plays, *A Happy and Holy Occasion* and *Essington Lewis: I Am Work*

O'DONOGHUE

John Daniel

Late of Bupa ACF, Waratah
Formerly of Adamstown Heights
Passed away
18th October 2022
Aged 93 Years

Dearly loved husband of The Late Rebecca 'Ruby' O'Donoghue. Much loved father & father-in-law of Fiona (dec'd) & Theo, Conal & Kristine. Loving Grandad of Amelia, Liam, Declan, Sophia, & Ronan. Loved brother, brother-in-law, uncle & cousin of his family.

The family & friends of **John** are warmly invited to attend a Celebration of His Life to be held in The Chapel, 7 Murray Dwyer Circ, Mayfield West (Entry via Steel River Estate) this **Wednesday 26th October, 2022** service commencing at **12 noon**.

For those who wish, **John's** service will be live streamed. Please visit; pettigrew.com.au/odonoghue-john

'John Will Be Sadly Missed'

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