

Faith in the Future, continued from inside

Every time I look at her pictures they touch something so profound, something that I recognize so well.

CA: I'm interested to hear about the discussions you had with journalists and charity workers.

HE: I do remember having a very good chat with a charity worker. I was curious to know how emotionally involved they got and whether that was actually helpful. I was trying to get to understand somebody like Srinivas, who's very politically motivated to help but who doesn't see it as being sympathy or charity, he just sees it as meeting somebody's needs and rights. The person I talked to did say that it was hard not to become emotionally involved but they had trained themselves not to, otherwise you're actually not really doing your job properly. And I had been saying "when you've seen all these things first-hand how do you sleep at night?" and the answer was: well, bleeding hearts are really not that useful. That was interesting. I also talked to a journalist who had worked in India for a long time and who helped to fill me in on some of the Indian mentality towards the British and the whole very ingrained class system in India. And I talked to one person about rag-picking, you know the children who work on the streets and rubbish dumps picking out any little bits of rag which can be recycled.

CA: Mother Teresa had to get the permission of the Catholic Church, but it seems she really was able to basically wander the streets of Calcutta and start this single-handed mission. I wonder if that kind of thing is even possible today, just even from a practical point of view. How can one person have that kind of impact in combating the world's ills today?

HE: I think, yes, I think that she is so iconic because it did just seem so pure and simple—but then, she was a nun and that gave her a particular status and opened possibilities. I know a story of a British woman working in India now who I don't think is attached to any particular charity but she did set up a clinic—she's either a doctor or a nurse—and she's recently received awards for the work that she does and I think that hers was surprisingly straightforward. So, you know, maybe it is possible. I think that's probably what some of us fantasize about, you know, the purity and simpleness of going somewhere where you are genuinely, truly needed.

CA: Collectively, have we begun in any way since you wrote the play in 2001 to examine the values of many Western societies?

HE: I like to think that we're almost at the peak of our age of excess in the Western world. I think maybe global warming and all those issues are starting to kind of filter through and people are starting to think that maybe we need to seriously

“The Inside Scoop”

by Artistic Director Tracy Brigden

My first wildly successful, critically praised, award-winning, audience-pleasing production was of the play *The Clearing* by Helen Edmundson. It was the play I chose to be my first production as Artistic Director of City Theatre. I directed four productions of it at different theatres, and at each one the audience gasped and sighed and wept and leapt to their feet at the curtain call. This is the effect Helen Edmundson's writing has on an audience. *Mother Teresa is Dead* will move you and leave you tied up in knots over which character to side with. The play is masterful in its exploration of big complex themes in the guise of a heart-rending human story.

look at the way that we're living our lives. And so I think that there is hope. It does seem to me that history teaches us that even if it takes a thousand years, you know, there will be a massive shift in which empires are going to be great and which ones are going to go into decline. And I think if there's one thing that's going to make Britain and America and countries like that wake up, it will be when it finally does, kind of, eat itself to death, not just in terms of food but in terms of everything—in terms of consumption. I can't believe that it can carry on and I do always have a great faith in the future, in the generations coming through.

CA: The play offers multiple points of view, and each character makes some valid points and some questionable points. What do you hope the audience is thinking as they leave the theatre?

HE: I try to make myself question why I feel the need to make money and accumulate things and have what we're being told we ought to have and have things way beyond what I need, and why we're so fearful in a way. I think that's probably what I would most hope people come away thinking—"do we really need to let our world be controlled and let our world kind of shrink under the demands of modern life or can we actually stop and think like they do at the end of the play?" I suppose that's what I would hope people would do when they're back home or when they're in bed that night or brushing their teeth—you know, that they might just actually think what really is truly important in their own lives and are we really sure that we want to be on the path that we're on.

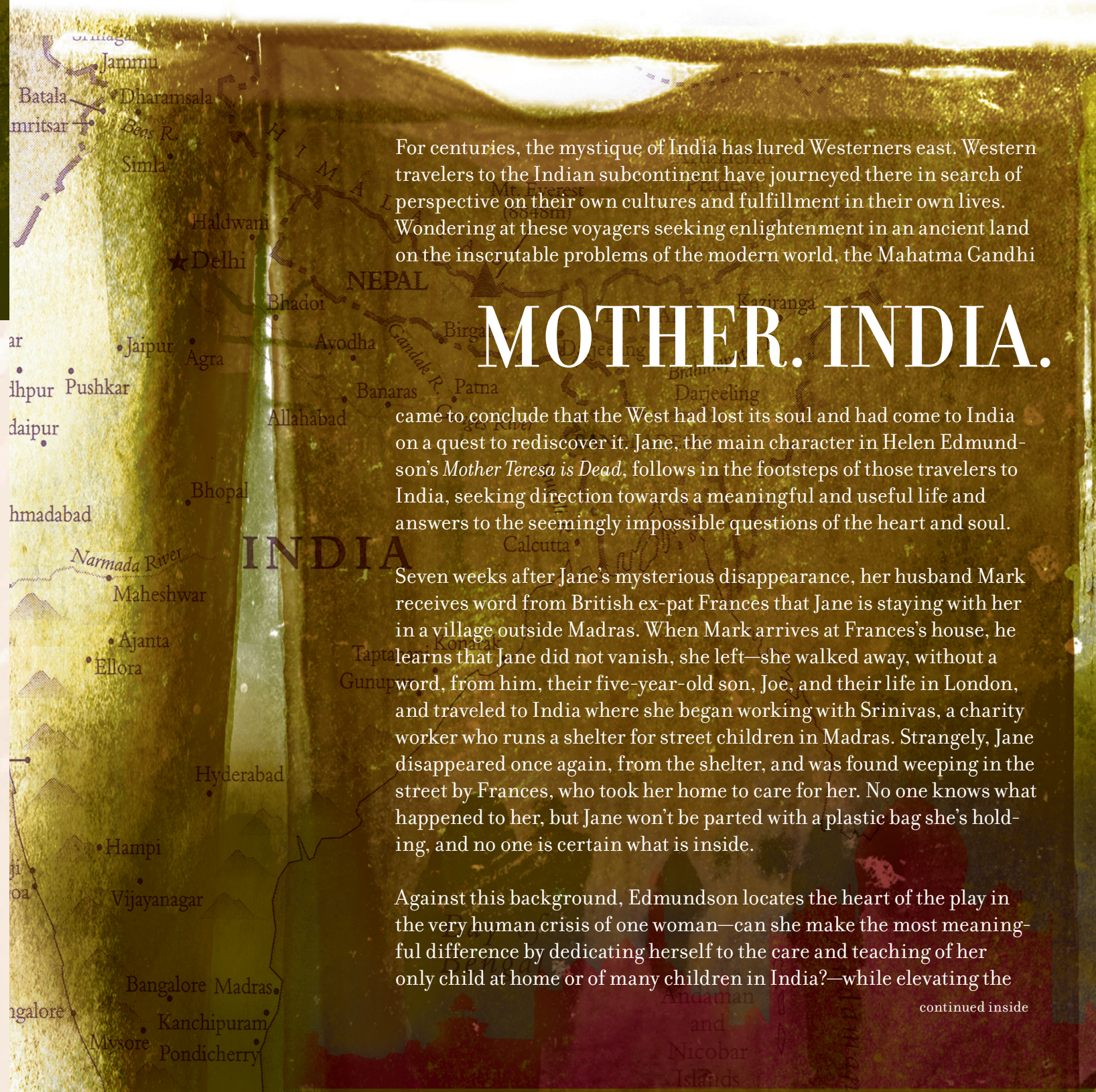


Tracy Brigden

Artistic Director

Greg Quinlan

Managing Director



For centuries, the mystique of India has lured Westerners east. Western travelers to the Indian subcontinent have journeyed there in search of perspective on their own cultures and fulfillment in their own lives. Wondering at these voyagers seeking enlightenment in an ancient land on the inscrutable problems of the modern world, the Mahatma Gandhi

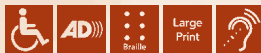
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came to conclude that the West had lost its soul and had come to India on a quest to rediscover it. Jane, the main character in Helen Edmundson's *Mother Teresa is Dead*, follows in the footsteps of those travelers to India, seeking direction towards a meaningful and useful life and answers to the seemingly impossible questions of the heart and soul.

Seven weeks after Jane's mysterious disappearance, her husband Mark receives word from British ex-pat Frances that Jane is staying with her in a village outside Madras. When Mark arrives at Frances's house, he learns that Jane did not vanish, she left—she walked away, without a word, from him, their five-year-old son, Joe, and their life in London, and traveled to India where she began working with Srinivas, a charity worker who runs a shelter for street children in Madras. Strangely, Jane disappeared once again, from the shelter, and was found weeping in the street by Frances, who took her home to care for her. No one knows what happened to her, but Jane won't be parted with a plastic bag she's holding, and no one is certain what is inside.

Against this background, Edmundson locates the heart of the play in the very human crisis of one woman—can she make the most meaningful difference by dedicating herself to the care and teaching of her only child at home or of many children in India?—while elevating the

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HELEN EDMUNDSON

Faith in the Future: TALKING WITH HELEN EDMUNDSON

CARLYNAQUILINE:
At the heart of *Mother Teresa is Dead* are questions about the social and political values of the West, but the play also has a distinctly personal feel to it. Is it too intrusive to ask how personal experience influenced the genesis and writing of the play?

HELEN EDMUNDSON:

I did go to India when I was in my 20s. To be there was much more of a shock than I had imagined it would be. The level of need, the kind of relentless in-your-face need was really unbearable. I didn't deal with it very well. I started off staying in moderately rough hotels and then gradually I retreated and retreated into smarter and smarter hotels. Every time I stepped out of the door I felt I was being—all my senses were being affronted with this very raw sort of need and some of the things that happen to Jane in the play did happen to me. For example, I did make the mistake of giving some money, much too much money, to one child in this kind of shanty-town and suddenly I was absolutely mobbed by people grabbing me and asking for money and literally had to run away. And on the beach, walking on the beach in what used to be Bombay—Mumbai. These children came and started trying to—I mean, it started as a kind of joke, but the longer it went on the more they kind of grabbed at me and the more panicky I got. And I did try to pull them off me in quite a physical way because they literally—they had grabbed hold of my legs so that I couldn't move. And when I finally got them off of me I was quite shaken by it. But they were laughing and they were turning somersaults—there's no escaping the actual grabbing hands and the beggars thrusting stumps inside your taxi window as you're driving down the street, asking for money. It had very profound effects on me, the whole experience of that kind of Third World poverty and need. And then I had a baby, my first baby, a few years after. And it just had—I think it does for most people—it had a huge effect on my perspective on the world. The little card inside the goody box in hospital is absolutely true. I have this little leaflet that says "What does a mother in India get for her baby?"—and I remember just sobbing and sobbing when I read this—you turn and open it and it says "Nothing" and on the back there are all these pictures of women with their starving children. I think it really brings it home to you that the idea of one suffering child becomes unbearable. It was all those things coming together that I think drew up the play.

CA: Have you come to some reconciliation in yourself between that desire to help the world and the fact that one person can only do so much and we all have competing obligations in our own lives?

HE: No, I don't feel like I've sorted it out. I still think it's sort of unfinished business. I mean, I do all the probably slightly feeble things that most of us do in sponsoring children in Third World countries and giving money to charity and all those things. But it's a difficult one because also you have to think, well, does real help begin with the family and with nurturing and teaching the right values to one's own children? Is that actually the way that we all collectively help? I think my view on it all shifts. One thing I do feel quite strongly is that some people in the Western world—not everybody by any means—but there is a sense that some people do have children almost in the way that they collect *things*, you know, that there's a sense of bolstering ourselves against having nothing and bolstering ourselves against death, which I think is essentially what it is, by supplying ourselves with *things*, which include children. There's a biological drive, obviously, to have



Mother and Baby Resting 2, 1996 (oil on canvas)
by Evelyn Williams (Contemporary Artist)
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children, to procreate, but I do think that there's also something in us which makes us feel that if we have children somehow we're cheating death. If we accumulate wealth and we pass that down to our children then we're somehow winning this

strange game of life. The only thing that I feel I can do, apart from the obvious of giving money to charity, is to constantly question myself and ask whether the values that I'm passing on to my children are the right ones.

CA: What do you think the role of art and theatre can be in social change or at least social awareness?

HE: I'm quite a strong believer, really, in theatre provoking thought and awareness. Now, I think when I started in the theatre I was much more politicized, you know much more dogmatic, I had very strong views about things, I was very young and I fully embraced political theatre and agit-prop. Then obviously as I've got older I've understood that there are two sides to every issue and that people come at things from different angles. What I feel now when I write is that—

I like to think I will have opened debate, you know, that people will come out of the theatre and possibly talk about what they've seen and what it's made them feel, and also just possibly think about it for a few days.

CA: The play takes place in India, near Madras, which was the bastion of the British East India Company and then one of the presidencies under the Raj. How did Britain's colonial history (and its legacy) in India influence your decision to set the play there?

HE: The main reason I set it in India was because of the experiences which I'd had there. On the other hand, the fact that I was there at all is something to do with the fact that there is this link between Britain and India. I think there's such a complex relationship—obviously we were Empire-building and we did lots of greedy, selfish things but we also gave a lot to India, and I think most Indian people would be the first to acknowledge this. The education system is still very much based on what the British started there, and the railways. But on the other hand there's no getting away from the fact that when we pulled out, when we engineered the partition of India and Pakistan—I think basically where the shanty-towns come from, you know, it was the displacement of those massive numbers of people. And that is where we are really directly responsible for the levels of poverty in the cities and that obviously is very poignant and something that all British have to acknowledge really.

CA: You mentioned to me the art of Evelyn Williams as a primary inspiration. How did her work speak to you?

HE: I think there's something so raw about the way that Evelyn portrays human beings, there's sort of the nakedness of the human soul, I think, the fear that you

can see in some of the eyes which I think I was trying to grapple with in the play. The insecurity and the need and the actual kind of shivering fear that's at the heart of most people, I think, sadly. And I think that she somehow manages to capture that. She also did some fantastic paintings of mothers and children where the mother and baby were kind of swaddled together, the



Face in the crowd, 2002 (oil on canvas) by Evelyn Williams (Contemporary Artist)
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baby was very large and she was almost overwhelmed by this large looming baby that seemed to be kind of disabling her. And I think that Evelyn is not scared of acknowledging the emotional difficulties involved in becoming a mother and being responsible for a child and the feeling that sometimes you get of being trapped and overwhelmed. Also, in other paintings, the absolute beauty of the intimacy between mother and child, so she seemed to manage to capture all the very deepest, rawest emotions involved in that relationship.

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driving question to a monumental conflict between converse world views and antithetical life choices, and whether it's possible to reconcile them within oneself in a meaningful way. As Mark and Srinivas vie to pull Jane in opposite directions—return to England or stay in India—*Mother Teresa is Dead* explores the gulf between Western individualism and Eastern collectivism, between love and duty, between the nuclear family and the global family. It provocatively probes the ambitions of most contemporary Westerners and whether the "ideals" we take for granted—materialism, consumption, economic and cultural superiority—will lead, ultimately, to the demise of Western society. No new saint ascends in *Mother Teresa is Dead*—the characters are all human, all flawed, and our sympathies can shift as each provides a different but convincing perspective on what's most important in life and to whom we owe the greatest share of responsibility. The play provides no answers, but compels us each to look inward to seek answers for ourselves.

Gandhi was once asked what he thought of Western civilization. His answer: "I think it would be a good idea." *Mother Teresa is Dead* lays open to questioning the assumptions of our society, forcing us to reflect on the principles by which we live and how we can best bring that good idea—a more thoughtful, open, forward-thinking, and charitable civilization—to fruition.

—Carlyn Aquiline, *Literary Manager & Dramaturg*