

Jack Maggs

by Samuel Adamson

based on the novel by Peter Carey

Recommended for ages 15+ / Year 10 and 12

The production runs for approximately 2 hours and 10 minutes with an interval. Note that this is subject to change.

Jack Maggs is an original play by South Australian playwright Samuel Adamson. The play is an adaptation of Peter Carey's novel of the same name, which is a "reworking" of Charles Dickens' classic novel Great Expectations. It embraces a Gothic Victorian era form of theatre with magic lanterns, tableaux and dumb show. It will be poor theatre on steroids! A showcase of Victorian music hall/ vaudeville.

Note that this What To Expect contains spoilers.

Jack Maggs is set in a 'Gothic, distorted, Dickensian London'. It is a play within a play, where "The Actors' production occurs in 1879, [and] their play is set in 1837."

The story follows ex-convict Jack Maggs returning to London from Australia and embarking on a relentless quest to find his 'son' Henry Phipps (played by Rachel Burke). Maggs soon becomes entangled in the web of Phipps' neighbour, Percy Buckle and his bizarre household, where he makes a deal with young novelist and "mesmerist" Tobias Oates to find Phipps. Oates has other plans though...

The play explores themes of unrequited love, crime, ambition and secrets and will be an interesting exercise in exploring dramatic form.

Coarse Language:

There is occasional use of the words 'shit', 'fuck', 'frig', 'bastard', 'bitch', 'cock' and 'damn' and variations of these throughout the play.

Characters also speak derogatorily to each other and of themselves e.g 'you stupid little bitch'.

Sexual Content:

It is important to note that Peter Carey's original novel is very careful to provide balance in terms of discussion of predatory sexuality (look at Mercy's story with Buckle and her relationship with her mother) and to provide a positive gay love story both in terms of the value given to Constable and Pope's historical relationship, Constable's crush on Maggs and the fact that he ends up with George Conklin at the end of the piece.

There is reference to a sexual relationship between Maggs and his childhood sweetheart Sophina: "When I embraced Sophina, I was a boy embracing a girl."

We lay beneath our sheets, exhausted”

There is sexual relationship between two male characters where Phipps (who is played by a female actor) explicitly talks to Constable about how “for two weeks I rogered you so hard you couldn’t stand straight at your master’s table”.

There are physical re-enactments of kissing onstage, two characters kiss passionately”. There is also a couple of physical re-enactments on stage through tableaux/dumb show and shadow play. There is also possible full-frontal depiction as Phipps is described to deliver a line ‘(fucking)’ while at an establishment he is known to go for sex.

Child Abuse/Neglect:

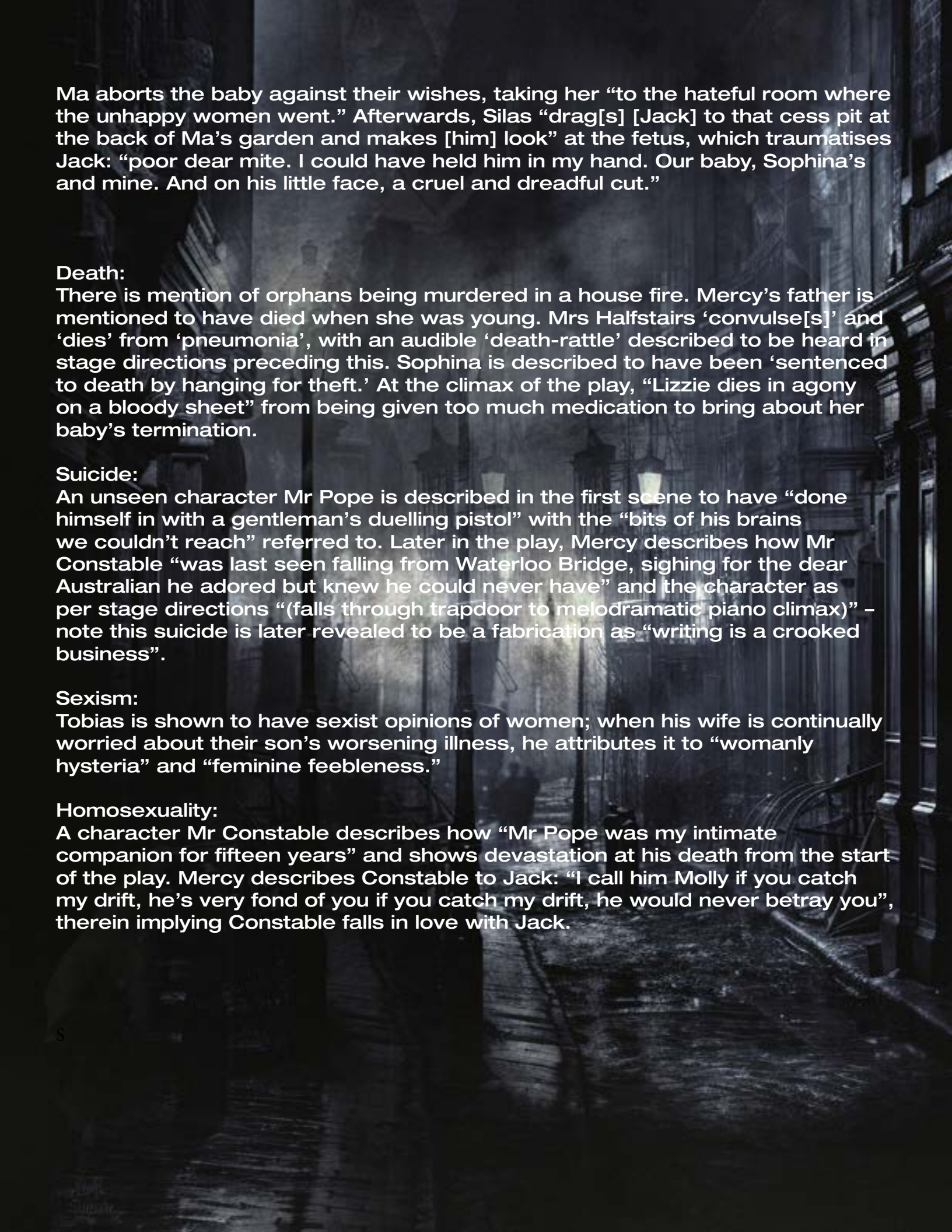
Main character Maggs is described to have been “abandoned as a child” “at three days old [...] found ’neath London Bridge by Mudlarks”. He was found by Ma Britten “who’d clip me as soon as look at me” implying physical beatings, and “by four I was working the floors for her at Smithfield Meat Market, finding bones in the filth and fat and blood, bones” implying child labour. As a child, Maggs also was made to go down chimneys and unlock doors of houses for them to be stolen from by Ma’s affiliates, often the “most valuable silver plate.” Maggs and Sophina were subjected to extensive domestic labour such as “rugs to beat, floors to wax” and were made to clean up the mess made by Ma in administering abortions to women. When Sophina falls pregnant due to a sexual relationship with Jack, “Adolescent Jack is whipped by Ma”. Another character who experiences child abuse is Mercy, who describes how her mother forced her into prostitution at age 13: “she rouged my cheeks and took me into the street where before I knew it I was in a doorway with a man inside me and money in my hand. Afterwards, Ma slapped me and burst into tears.” Further, Jack is described to have abandoned his Australian children: “you left them alone”, hinting at child neglect.

Adultery:

Tobias Oate and his wife’s sister Lizzie are engaged in an extramarital affair which leads to her being “with child”. Lizzie decides to go away to “stay in a good Protestant house” for six months to have the baby, and on her return “wouldn’t say he was our own. I’ll tell Mary I wish to adopt a foundling.”

Abortion:

The character Ma Britten makes a living by at first “mix[ing bones] with snakeroot to make her belly-ache sausages” and then selling ‘Dr Britten’s Famous Pills for Female Disorders’, both of which cause ‘unhappy women’ to miscarry ‘unwanted things’. Tobias and his wife Mary buy these pills from Ma Britten, and give them to Lizzie. Ma is also described to work “in a room where she ministered to unhappy women too far gone for pills” and Maggs and Sophina in cleaning this room would “find blood in great quantities, and things in muslin-covered basins that still haunt me. Sophina and I said nothing, but emptied the basins into the cess pit at the back of Ma’s garden, and scrubbed that hateful room quickly, holding our breath.” When Sophina falls pregnant,



Ma aborts the baby against their wishes, taking her “to the hateful room where the unhappy women went.” Afterwards, Silas “drag[s] [Jack] to that cess pit at the back of Ma’s garden and makes [him] look” at the fetus, which traumatises Jack: “poor dear mite. I could have held him in my hand. Our baby, Sophina’s and mine. And on his little face, a cruel and dreadful cut.”

Death:

There is mention of orphans being murdered in a house fire. Mercy’s father is mentioned to have died when she was young. Mrs Halfstairs ‘convulse[s]’ and ‘dies’ from ‘pneumonia’, with an audible ‘death-rattle’ described to be heard in stage directions preceding this. Sophina is described to have been ‘sentenced to death by hanging for theft.’ At the climax of the play, “Lizzie dies in agony on a bloody sheet” from being given too much medication to bring about her baby’s termination.

Suicide:

An unseen character Mr Pope is described in the first scene to have “done himself in with a gentleman’s duelling pistol” with the “bits of his brains we couldn’t reach” referred to. Later in the play, Mercy describes how Mr Constable “was last seen falling from Waterloo Bridge, sighing for the dear Australian he adored but knew he could never have” and the character as per stage directions “(falls through trapdoor to melodramatic piano climax)” – note this suicide is later revealed to be a fabrication as “writing is a crooked business”.

Sexism:

Tobias is shown to have sexist opinions of women; when his wife is continually worried about their son’s worsening illness, he attributes it to “womanly hysteria” and “feminine feebleness.”

Homosexuality:

A character Mr Constable describes how “Mr Pope was my intimate companion for fifteen years” and shows devastation at his death from the start of the play. Mercy describes Constable to Jack: “I call him Molly if you catch my drift, he’s very fond of you if you catch my drift, he would never betray you”, therein implying Constable falls in love with Jack.