

**ANU School of Cultural Inquiry, College of Arts and Social Sciences presents**

## **EERIE EXPLORATION OF FATEFUL COLLAPSE:**

### **ARCHIBALD MACLEISH'S *PANIC***

**Experience the unsettling power of Pulitzer Prize-winning** American playwright **Archibald MacLeish's** groundbreaking verse drama *Panic*, a searing exploration of financial collapse that eerily foreshadows the contemporary drama of the GFC. Starring **Tony Turner** as an embattled banker struggling to survive financial ruin, *Panic* will play on the mainstage at the **ANU Arts Centre** from **August 18 to 27**.

***“Crisis increasing... Crash grows!”***

**NEW YORK, 1933:** After the terrifying stock market crash of 1929, the brutal effects of the Depression have wreaked havoc upon the lives of ordinary Americans. The banks, once the stronghold of economic security, are failing. Fear spreads amongst the populace. Amidst the burgeoning panic, the citizens of America look to one man to help them out of the crisis: banking magnate Mr. McGafferty (Turner). As more businesses close their doors, the frightened crowd turn to McGafferty to help them stay afloat.

***“Do you fear the fall of the walls and the sky high over you shining there?”***

In *Panic*, poet-playwright MacLeish explores the sense of profound insecurity, the feeling of “being the play-things of some higher and possibly malignant power”, that shattered the foundations of American society during the years of the Great Depression. “Although clearly set in the Great Depression and directly dealing with that specific banking crisis, *Panic* does also seem eerily prescient with the economic world today as it comes out of the Global Financial Crisis,” says **director Andrew Holmes**. “The closing of banks, the concerns of the people, the struggle of powerful men to halt the effects... It all echoes with experiences that the world has gone through in recent times.”

This groundbreaking verse drama written in 1935 originally starred Orson Welles in the role of McGafferty, but its themes and concerns resonate clearly with the modern world shaken by the GFC. In verse of profound and unsettling power, *Panic* asks the difficult question: can one man withstand a tide of fear that threatens to wash away the very ground upon which he stands? How can we overcome despair, anguish, and hopelessness, when our world suddenly and irrevocably falls apart?

#### **About the Playwright**

**Archibald MacLeish** (1892-1982) is a towering figure in the cultural life of twentieth century America. Winner of the **National Book Award**, the **National Medal for Literature**, and the **Pulitzer Prize for both poetry and drama**, MacLeish wrote 9 verse dramas and more prose plays, more than 20 collections of poetry, and an Academy Award-winning script for a documentary feature on Eleanor Roosevelt. His verse drama

**J.B.** won both the Pulitzer and the **TONY** Award for Best Play in 1959. His personal and professional relationships brought him into close contact with TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway and Elia Kazan. A poet, playwright, and dramatic theorist, MacLeish was also deeply engaged with his world and passionate about political activism. He was a speechwriter for FDR, editor of *Fortune* magazine, Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University, and the Librarian of Congress. With close interests in the political and social life of America, Archibald MacLeish's poetry and plays demonstrate a deep engagement with the task of effecting change through the arts.

**"As a poet...[he] has illuminated the most serious problems which the twentieth-century literary artist must face, and at the same time has shown how they may be solved."** *Grover Smith*

### **About the Production**

Performance researcher and director Andrew Holmes is bringing *Panic* to the Australian stage as part of a wider research project looking into MacLeish's contribution to the genre of verse drama. "MacLeish is rarely studied and underappreciated playwright," says Holmes. "When he is studied, most people approach his later works, including *J.B.* which won him his Pulitzer for Drama. [...] Whilst still using sweeping, elevated verse, his early works have a real grittiness and grounding in reality of the world he was confronting." As part of his research, Holmes will produce two MacLeish plays – *Panic*, and *Fall of the City*, to be performed in October – enabling audiences to experience the eerie power of MacLeish's verse.

As the performances are for the purposes of research, **entry is free**, but Holmes invites audience members to complete feedback questionnaires following each performance. Interested audiences can also take part in **a Q&A forum following each Thursday performance**. These Q&A sessions and questionnaires will form a crucial element of the research into the reception of verse drama by modern audiences. In this sense, *Panic* is truly invested in the audience experience.

**FOR MEDIA ENQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT NAOMI MILTHORPE on 0408 631 387 or [naomi.milthorpe@gmail.com](mailto:naomi.milthorpe@gmail.com)**

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## **PANIC by ARCHIBALD MACLEISH**

**Directed By Andrew Holmes**

VENUE: ANU Arts Centre Main Stage

DATES: Thursday 18 – Saturday 20 & Thursday 25 – Saturday 27 August

TIMES: 8pm

TICKETS: No charge

BOOKINGS: [andrew.holmes@anu.edu.au](mailto:andrew.holmes@anu.edu.au)