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Review: Brilliant describes ASF's 'Every Brilliant Thing'

Rick Harmon, Special to the Advertiser Published 11:52 p.m. CT Oct. 2, 2018 | Updated 2:45 p.m. CT Oct. 4, 2018



(Photo: Courtesy ASF)

If you are writing down everything that makes life worth living, British playwright Duncan Macmillan and comedian Jonny Donahoe's "Every Brilliant Thing" should probably make that list.

Creating such a list is the premise of this Alabama Shakespeare Festival production, which is the first of the productions chosen by ASF Artistic Director Rick Dildine, who also directs it. The main character, played by David Lee Nelson, begins making the list when he is 7, after his mother has attempted suicide, so he can show her why life is still worth living.

It is surprising that "Every Brilliant Thing" can manage to address such a sad topic, but still be funny and filled with an almost light-hearted fun. But with the talents of Nelson and Dildine, the production somehow gracefully walks the line between tragedy and laughter without a single misstep.

But from beginning to end, this is a production full of surprises. Just to be seated, the audience is led through a series of passages, finding themselves eventually taking their place among intimate phalanxes of seats.

At the one-man show begins, disconcertingly the lights stay on. Then we discover it isn't a one-man show at all. Nelson has handed out numbered notes to select audience members, and when he mentions a number on his list, an audience member will read out one of his reasons life is worth living, such as "the prospect of dressing up as a Mexican wrestler, not actually dressing up like one, just the prospect."



The audience joins along with actor David Lee Nelson in Alabama Shakespeare Festival's production of "Every Brilliant Thing." (Photo: Courtesy ASF)

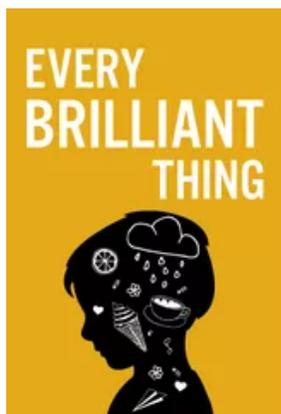
But after this important but minimal interaction, audience members soon find themselves being recruited to play more major roles from his father to the woman he falls in love with. Some of the audience members are surprisingly good, but even the ones who aren't add a strange honesty to the roles. While the audience performances may be erratic, Nelson is consistently brilliant. He manages to be so disarmingly affable that none of the performers he selects from the audience seem nervous. While scripted, there is plenty of room for Nelson's considerable impromptu abilities, and he projects a vulnerability that allows us to see the pain residing just beneath his humor.



David Lee Nelson stars in the one-person production of "Every Brilliant Thing" at Alabama Shakespeare Festival (Photo: Courtesy ASF)

Dildine's direction allows the story to flow with simplicity and honesty, even as it throws more unexpected wildcards at us.

This results in an often-unexpected quality in theater productions – the excitement of not knowing, as surprise and spontaneity dominate interactions. Let's face it, you go to "Romeo and Juliet" and you know you're not getting invited back to an anniversary party. You go to the "Sound of Music" and you know the Nazis are not going to trap the von Trapps. But with "Every Brilliant Thing," you are never sure what is going to happen next or even the actor to whom it will happen.



"Every Brilliant Thing" (Photo: Courtesy ASF)

As the story unfolds, it is not just the character's mother who battles depression. He winds up fighting the disease himself with the aid of some understanding people and his by-this-time incredibly long list of brilliant things.

Perhaps it is reading too much into the play and how it is presented, but you wonder if the play isn't making a statement about depression and suicide by creating this intimate community of theatergoers and then selecting people who help Nelson through the problem – a statement that this is a problem we all need to help people fight.

"Every Brilliant Thing" is sad, funny, touching and uplifting - the sort of play for which the bromide "You'll laugh. You'll Cry" was written. If this is the start of the Rick Dildine era, area theatergoers can only hope it is a sign of the entertainment to come.

WANT TO GO?

WHAT: "Every Brilliant Thing"

WHERE: Alabama Shakespeare Festival

WHEN: Performances through Oct. 20

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