



EVERY BRILLIANT THING

BY

DUNCAN MACMILLAN

WITH JONNY DONAHOE



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



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For Dad

EVERY BRILLIANT THING was first produced by Paines Plough and Pentabus Theatre, on June 28, 2013, at Ludlow Fringe Festival. It was directed by George Perrin and produced by Hanna Streeter. The line producer was Francesca Moody and the stage managers were Alicia White, Charlotte McBrearty, and Hamish Ellis. It was performed by Jonny Donahoe.

EVERY BRILLIANT THING had its North American premiere at Barrow Street Theatre, New York City, on December 6, 2014, presented by Barrow Street Theatre and Jean Doumanian Productions. It was directed by George Perrin and performed by Jonny Donahoe.

EVERY BRILLIANT THING was commissioned with the support of Anne McMeehan and Jim Roberts. It was produced and toured with the support of Arts Council England's Strategic Touring Fund.

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The play also owes a debt to those who have contributed to the list over the years.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Every Brilliant Thing is a collaboration between myself, George Perrin, and Jonny Donahoe. It is an adaptation of my short story “Sleeve Notes,” originally written for the Miniaturists and performed by Rosie Thomson at Southwark Playhouse, Theatre503, and the Union Theatre; by myself at Trafalgar Studios, the Old Red Lion, and Village Underground; by Gugu Mbatha-Raw at 93 Feet East; and by various people at the Latitude Festival. George and I worked for over a decade to turn it into a full-length play. During this time it has been through several incarnations, including an installation created by Paul Burgess and Simon Daw for Scale Project. This particular incarnation was developed with Paines Plough and Pentabus with support from Anne McMeehan and Jim Roberts. The play wouldn't exist were it not for George's persistence, his enthusiasm for the story, and his openness to work in an entirely new way.

It also owes a particular debt to Jonny Donahoe who, drawing on his experience as a stand-up comedian, found ways to tell the story and use the audience that George and I couldn't have conceived of. By its nature, the play is different every night and, as such, Jonny essentially co-authored the play while performing it.

This text was published after two years of devising, several trial performances around the UK, runs in Edinburgh and London, and a four-month run at the Barrow Street Theatre in NYC. It has been filtered through Jonny's interactions with hundreds of audiences. I've provided footnotes throughout to explain certain aspects of the play in performance and to give examples of some of the things that have happened unexpectedly.

—DM

CHARACTERS

NARRATOR

And, played by various audience members:

VET

DAD

AUDIENCE

SOCK

LECTURER

SAM

MRS. PATTERSON

NOTE

The Narrator can be played by a woman or a man of any age or ethnicity. In the first production, the Narrator was performed by a British man, so appears as such in the text.

The word “Narrator” is included for ease of reading. It is never heard by the audience and shouldn’t be included in programmes or production materials.

An ellipsis (...) on a separate line denotes a brief active silence, the length of which is to be determined by context.

There is no interval.

EVERY BRILLIANT THING

The houselights are on full and will remain so throughout. There is no set. The audience are seated in the most democratic way possible, ideally in the round. It is vital that everyone can see and hear each other. Music is playing, some upbeat jazz—Cab Calloway, Cannonball Adderley, Hank Mobley, or Duke Ellington perhaps. The Narrator is in the auditorium as the audience enters, talking to people and giving them scraps of paper. As he does so, he explains that when he says a number he wants the person with the corresponding entry to shout it out.¹

Eventually, when everyone is seated, the music fades and the Narrator begins.

NARRATOR. The list began after her first attempt. A list of everything brilliant about the world. Everything worth living for.

He calls out the numbers and the audience member with the corresponding entry shouts it out:²

1. Ice cream.
2. Water fights.
3. Staying up past your bedtime and being allowed to watch TV.
4. The colour yellow.
5. Things with stripes.

1 The audience will be involved throughout and need to feel relaxed and safe. Greeting them also helps the Narrator cast the play. Jonny would be in the theatre for at least half an hour before the start of the show to speak to as many people as possible and work out who he was going to use in performance. The pieces of paper should look like authentic parts of the list—ones written during childhood could be written in crayon for instance, others should be written on napkins, beer mats and the backs of envelopes (for example).

2 Unless stated otherwise, the Narrator will call out the numbers throughout and the audience member with the corresponding entry will shout it back.

6. Rollercoasters.

7. People falling over.

All things that, at seven, I thought were really good but not necessarily things Mum would agree with.

I started the list on the 9th of November, 1987.³ I'd been picked up late from school and taken to hospital, which is where my Mum was.

...

Up until that day, my only experience of death was that of my dog, Sherlock Bones.⁴

Sherlock Bones was older than me, and he was a central part of my existence. He was really sick and so the Vet came around to put him down.

*The Narrator speaks to someone from the audience.*⁵

Would you mind, I'm going to get you to be the Vet, it's just that you have an immediate... *Veterinary* quality.

*The Narrator gets the Vet to stand.*⁶

It's alright, I won't ask you to do very much. Just stand here. And would you mind if I borrowed your coat?

The Narrator takes a coat from someone else.

Thank you.

Okay, so you're the Vet, and I'm me as a seven-year-old boy, and this here...

The Narrator holds the coat carefully in his arms, as if it's a docile animal.

... this is Sherlock Bones. I know you because you're one of the parents from school. And you say something reassuring, like:

"You're doing the kind thing. It's not a moment too soon."

VET. You're doing the kind thing. It's not a moment too soon.

NARRATOR. And I don't know what that means because I'm seven. I've no real concept of finality. Or mercy.

3 This date should be amended to correspond to the Narrator's age.

4 Originally the dog's name was Ronnie Barker, but we had to change that for the U.S. Other possible names included Charles Barkley and Edward Woofwoof.

5 Throughout the play, audience members will be invited to play characters. They are allowed to say whatever they wish and the Narrator has to work with what he's given. Though improvisations shouldn't go on too long, the spontaneity of these interactions is a central element of the show.

6 The Vet can be a man or a woman.

But you are clearly a very kind man, so I trust you.
Now do you have a pencil or a pen on you?

The Vet has one or the Narrator asks him to get one from someone in the audience.⁷

So that pencil is the needle.

And inside that needle is an anaesthetic called pentobarbital. The dose is large enough to make the dog unconscious and then depress his brain, respiratory, and circulatory systems, and to put him to sleep forever.

(To the owner of the coat.) It's completely blunt so we won't draw on your nice coat okay?

When you're ready I want you to come over here and inject Sherlock Bones in the thigh.

The Vet approaches the Narrator and attempts the task.

No, the thigh.

If the Vet is smiling or laughing:

Now I'm going to stop you for a moment there. There is one hard and fast rule while euthanising a child's pet and that is you really mustn't laugh as you do it. Totally changes the tone of the situation. So um, no... let's do this again. Go back to the start and try to respect the solemnity of the situation.

Maybe take a moment.

Okay. Let's try this again.

The Vet completes the task.

Okay, now stroke his little head.

Could someone with a watch tell me when thirty seconds has passed? I held Sherlock Bones, who I'd known my entire life. I held him as he died.

The Narrator looks at the coat, stroking it gently.

And I thought about the walk we'd had that morning. And about the smell of him in my room. His toys in the garden. The recently opened packet of dry food. His bed under the stairs. All the things that could now be thrown away.

⁷ There are several props used during the play but they should all be sourced from the audience.

The Narrator looks at the coat for a little longer.

And he became lighter. Or heavier, I'm not sure. But different.

An audience member tells the Narrator that thirty seconds have passed.

And that was my experience of death.
A loved one, becoming an object...

The Narrator hands the coat to the Vet.

... and being taken away forever.
Thank you.

The Vet returns to their seat.

It's the 9th of November, 1987. It's dark and it's late. All the other kids had gone home long ago.
Eventually, my dad pulls up.

The Narrator speaks to someone in the audience.

I'm going to ask you to be my dad if that's okay. You don't have to do much, just sit here on this step.

The Narrator indicates where Dad should sit.⁸

Now, normally it's my mum who picks me up and normally she's on time. Normally I travel in the back because I am seven and I make things sticky.

But this time it's Dad. And it's late. And he opens the door to the front passenger seat.

The Narrator indicates to Dad to open an imaginary passenger door.⁹

Dad looked at me. I looked at him.

When something bad happens, your body feels it before your brain can know what's happening. It's a survival mechanism. The stress hormones cortisol and adrenalin flood your system. It feels like a trap-door opening beneath you. Fight or flight or stand as still as you can.

⁸ If the Dad can be seen by everyone, and if the Narrator can sit next to him, there's no need for him to move.

⁹ In the U.S. Jonny would correct Dad: "Actually, it's a British car, so—" and they would mime opening the other door.

I stood very still, looking at my dad.

Eventually, I got into the car. Dad had the radio on. He'd been smoking with the window down.

The Narrator sits down next to the man.

Now, actually what's going to happen is that I'm going to be my dad and you're going to be me as a seven-year-old. You don't have to do much, you just say "Why?" Okay?

The Narrator speaks as the Dad. He doesn't alter his voice.

DAD. Put on your seatbelt.

AUDIENCE. Why?

DAD. Because cars can be dangerous.

AUDIENCE. Why?

DAD. Because other drivers don't always pay attention.

AUDIENCE. Why?

DAD. Well, because there's lots to think about when you're a grown-up. There are bills to pay and work to do and relationships to sustain and there's never enough time to do it all.

AUDIENCE. Why?

DAD. Because there are only twenty-four hours in a day.

AUDIENCE. Why?

DAD. Well, because that's how long it takes for the Earth to rotate.

AUDIENCE. Why?

DAD. Because... I don't know.

AUDIENCE. Why?

DAD. Because I don't know everything.

AUDIENCE. Why?

DAD. Because that's impossible.

AUDIENCE. Why?

DAD. Because there's only so much anyone can know.

AUDIENCE. Why?

DAD. Because if you were able to know everything then life would be unlivable.

AUDIENCE. Why?

DAD. Because then there would be no mystery, no curiosity, no creativity, no conversation, no discovery. Nothing would be new and we'd have no need to use our imaginations and our imaginations are what make life bearable.

AUDIENCE. Why?

EVERY BRILLIANT THING

by Duncan Macmillan

1 n/s

You're six years old. Mum's in hospital. Dad says she's "done something stupid." She finds it hard to be happy. So you start to make a list of everything that's brilliant about the world. Everything that's worth living for. 1. Ice cream. 2. Kung Fu movies. 3. Staying up past your bedtime and being allowed to watch TV. 4. The colour yellow. You leave it on her pillow. You know she read it because she's corrected your spelling. Soon, the list will take on a life of its own. A play about depression and the lengths we will go to for those we love.

"[A] heart-wrenching, hilarious play... One of the funniest plays you'll ever see about depression—and possibly one of the funniest plays you'll ever see, full stop... There is something tough being confronted here—the guilt of not being able to make those we love happy—and it is explored with unflinching honesty." —**The Guardian (UK)**

"EVERY BRILLIANT THING finds a perfect balance between conveying the struggles of life, and celebrating all that is sweet in it." —**The Independent (London)**

"What Macmillan offers, with great sensitivity behind the abundant laughs, is a child's fierce, flawed attempt to make sense of adult unhappiness and a meditation on the shadow that a loved one's depression casts over the lives of a family."

—**Evening Standard (London)**

"... very charming... offers sentimentality without shame... guaranteed to keep your eyes brimming... [The script] balance[s] acuity and affability... with unobtrusive artistry... captivating..."

—**The New York Times**

"[EVERY BRILLIANT THING] is sad, but it is also gloriously funny and exceptionally warm. It's a show that spells out a little of what depression can do to people, but it also highlights the irrepressible resilience of the human spirit and the capacity to find delight in the everyday."

—**Time Out (London)**

Also by Duncan Macmillan

1984 (Icke)

LUNGS

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