



STATE EDUCATE 2023

EVERY BRILLIANT THING

State Theatre Company South Australia presents

EVERY BRILLIANT THING

By Duncan MacMillan with Jonny Donahoe

SYNOPSIS

What makes life worth living? How does a young child deal with the impact of a parent who suffers from depression?

The storyteller begins at age seven, when he is taken to see his mother in hospital after 'she has done something stupid'.. her first attempt to take her life. He begins a list, of everything brilliant in the world. Everything worth living for.

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
6. Rollercoasters
7. People falling over

We move to age seventeen when he rediscovers the list after visiting the hospital yet again to bring his mother home. He recognises that at seventeen he is less able to manage this than at seven, and in an attempt to console himself and find light in living, continues the list.

The play gives an insight to what it is like to be a child of a mother who does not want to be here and the lengths we will go to for those we love. It explores depression and hope, uncertainty and change, confusion and joy, heartbreak and anger, relationships and solitude, risk and resistance, guilt and forgiveness, love and loss. It is a life affirming story of how to achieve hope through focusing on the smallest miracles of life. The storyteller interacts with audience members to weave the story and recreate his childlike wonder of all the brilliant reasons to stay.

SPACE THEATRE: 28 APRIL — 13 MAY 2023

SCHOOL PERFORMANCES: 5 MAY, 9 MAY, 10 MAY, 11 MAY AND 12 MAY

RUNNING TIME

Approximately 80 minutes

Ages 15 +

Contains adult themes, references to mental health issues, depression, self-harm and suicide.

Please see the 'What to Expect' notes for specific trigger warnings for your students.

It is on the website, link here:

If you or anyone you know needs support, Lifeline offers a 24 hour counselling service and can be reached at 13 11 14. Additional information can be found on their website, www.lifeline.org.au. Other services which may be of assistance include mental health advocacy organisation, Beyond Blue (www.beyondblue.org.au, 1300 224 636), and youth mental health foundation, Headspace (www.headspace.org.au).

Note the What to Expect link on the website for information relating to the themes of the production.

Resource created by Fiona Lukac for State Educate. ©

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CREATIVE TEAM & CAST



Playwright
Duncan MacMillan



Playwright
Jonny Donahoe



Director
Yasmin Gurreeboo



Set/Costume Designer
Kathryn Sproul



Lighting Designer
Nic Mollison



Composer & Sound Designer
Andrew Howard



Performer
Jimi Bani



Stage Manager
Bridget Samuel



Assistant Stage Manager
Jen King

Costumes made by State Theatre Company South Australia Wardrobe.
Set made by State Theatre Company South Australia Workshop.



EVERY BRILLIANT THING TEAM: JESS ZENG

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHTS

EVERY BRILLIANT THING

DUNCAN MACMILLAN

Duncan Macmillan is an English playwright and director. Most of his work focuses on modern socio-political issues. Macmillan won two awards in the inaugural year of the Brentwood Playwriting Competition at Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre for his play, *Monster*. *Monster* also received nominations for the TMA and Manchester Evening News Awards for Best New Play. *Lungs*, an exploration of parenthood, premiered at the Studio Theatre in Washington DC. The British production, starring Kate O'Flynn and directed by Richard Wilson, debuted on the West End and won the 2013 Off West End Award for Best New Play. It has since been produced all over the world.

His next play, *People, Places and Things* opened at the National Theatre in co-production with Headlong Theatre Company in 2015. The play centres around one woman's experience with addiction and attempts at recovery. The show was nominated for the Olivier Award for Best New Play and Denise Gough won the Olivier for Best Actress. It transferred to the Wyndham Theatre in the West End in 2016 and premiered in New York City at St. Ann's Warehouse in 2017.

Every Brilliant Thing, an interactive monologue, was performed for three years at the Edinburgh Festivals and has toured worldwide. It was filmed by HBO during its run at the Barrow Street Theatre in New York City.



JONNY DONAHOE



Jonny is an actor, comedian, playwright, screenwriter, broadcaster and musician. His one-man show *Every Brilliant Thing*, (which he co-wrote and originally performed), has played more than six hundred times over four continents, including five months off-Broadway at The Barrow Street Theatre. The show was filmed by World of Wonder and screened as a special on HBO. He was nominated for a Drama Desk Award, Lucille Lortel Award and an Off-Broadway Alliance Award for his performance.

He is the frontman of musical-comedy-satirists, Jonny and The Baptists, as well regularly performing stand-up in his own right. His play *30 Christmases* (starring himself and Rachel Parris), premiered at The Old Fire Station in Oxford, before transferring to the New Diorama Theatre in London. He has also created a twelve-part series on parenthood with real-life partner Josie Long called *Josie and Jonny Are Having a Baby (With You)* for American Podcast Network.

Jonny's role as the first performer for the work, he was also influential in shaping the script, so much so that Duncan Macmillan shares the writing credit with him.

THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

We often talk about theatre being live, a different experience each time. An interaction between the performer/s and the audience, where each laugh, snuffle, cough, chuckle and gasp will effect the way the actor plays their next moment. We can feel the emotion flow between audience member and the performer. The audience is the reason that live theatre exists.

Duncan Macmillan's short story "Sleeve Note" was the base of this play. From this many conversations, drafts, readings and discussions arose. Duncan worked with a director and then with Jonny Donahoe, the performer, to create a story which relied on the audience to bring everything together. With the audience, not for it. The story is woven together with members of the audience playing characters in the story, helping us understand moments in the storytellers life. Significant, poignant moments. It is important to note that the play does not require the audience to act, but simply to respond, to support him. For example, there is a moment late in the play where the actor mentions having gone to a support group, turns to the audience and says 'hello everyone' to which we respond. We can't help it, we are his support group, we are in this together. We are feeling the ups and downs together, asking questions together, trying to figure it out.

There are clear instructions, phrases handed out on pieces of paper at the top of the show, simply to be read in response to a number called by the actor. There are also moments of audience response, unscripted and guided by the actor, these will provide a different story each night and a different challenge to the actor each performance.

Duncan Macmillan has created a beautiful interaction with so much living and feeling in this spare, honest, open work. We discover challenges, heartache, love and hope together.

More than the narrators telling of his life story, the play is about the participation of the audience in the telling and the community we feel in having delivered the story.

Script Excerpt

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.

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.

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.

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.



PHOTO: STAGE DOOR, BERKELY STREET THEATRE, TORONTO

DIRECTOR'S NOTE FROM YASMIN GURREEBOO

Every Brilliant Thing is a remarkable work that brings something new to every performance, depending on the participation of members from the audience. This unpredictability makes each show all the more thrilling.

The play's universal message has the power to resonate with everyone, and one line that particularly stands out to me is, "Things get better. They might not always get brilliant. But they get better."

I have been using this quote lately to comfort my friends and family who are struggling, especially during these challenging times.

I remember watching the original production years ago and being caught off guard by the heavy subject matter, leading me to silently cry throughout the entire performance. Growing up with a mother who had lost her will to live and was in and out of institutions, seeing a production that was told from the perspective of a child, my perspective, was truly life changing. When Mitchell offered me the opportunity to direct this play, I felt like it was destiny calling, and I am grateful to have had the chance to collaborate with such a talented creative and stage management team.

Working with the exceptional Jimi Bani has been an absolute honour and privilege. Words cannot fully capture the experience of working with him. Jimi's generosity as a performer and as a human being is simply remarkable, and his big heart shines through every moment of his performance. I am certain that Jimi's presence and influence have left a lasting impression on all the emerging artists who had the opportunity to sit in on our rehearsals. He is undoubtedly the best actor I have ever had the pleasure of working with.

The themes of this play can stay with you long after the performance and may elicit intense emotions. If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health, seeking support is crucial. It is okay to reach out to someone and talk about what you've experienced. Taking care of yourself and others after the show is essential, and there are numerous resources available to assist. Remember that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Thank you for joining us on this journey. Our production of *Every Brilliant Thing* is intended to uplift and inspire, reminding us of the power of human connection and that things can improve even in the darkest moments.



YASMIN GURREEBOO: PHOTO JESS ZENG

AN INTERVIEW WITH YASMIN GURREEBOO

These responses have been taken from video interviews with Jimi and Yasmin which can be found here::

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5JErzAf_AY

Questions asked included the following.

What was the impact of this play for you?

How do you approach directing a one person play?

What is the role of the audience in the work? How do you direct Jimi for that?

What do you hope the audience feel after the play?

An integral part of this play is the staging in the 'round'. What are some of the considerations you need to think about when directing in the round?

Working in the round is different, you have to recognise that the audience needs to be able to see you from all sides. Each time you work on any scene, or do a run, you must sit in a different position (in a different seating bank and side) to ensure that the audience are getting enough on all sides.

The actor must not stand still for too long in one spot unless it is an integral moment of the work, and they have earned the ability to give one side of the audience the actors back for a period of time. In our production Jimi will be wearing a mic but when an actor has their back to the audience then their volume will drop so projection is essential.

In our round, there are aisles, so there are some spots that are great for sightlines where most people can see the front of the actor, however they are not great visually for the audience looking at the actor, so you need to balance sightlines with visual aesthetics.

Importantly you need to try to block it so that each seating bank gets a moment, so that it is balanced across how much each seating bank gets, whilst also bringing each bank into the production. As there is audience participation you want to make sure you are going to each section at least once.



Script Excerpt

I couldn't sleep that night. I started to clear out my room, packing up the things I wanted to keep and throwing away the things I didn't. I started shaking. Have you ever had that? Where you notice that your hands are shaking and your breathing is deeper and you're surrounded by bin bags full of your things and you realise that, you know, I'm really upset. I must be really upset.

And then, inside a box under my bed, underneath some sticker albums, sea shells, and action figures, I found the list. I sat on the floor and I read it through.

1. Ice cream.

The younger me had dealt with this so much better. He wasn't self righteous. The younger me was hopeful. Naive, of course. But hopeful. So once I got to the end of the list I picked up a pen and continued where that little boy had left off.

- 315. The smell of old books.
- 316. Andre Agassi.
- 317. The even numbered Star Trek films.
- 318. Burning things.
- 319. Laughing so hard you shoot milk out of your nose.
- 320. Making up after an argument.

The next morning I sat at the end of Mum's bed and I read the list to her, and she got up and left the room. I followed her and read louder.

- 516. Winning something.
- 517. Knowing someone well enough to get them to check your teeth for broccoli.

Over the next few days and weeks I would leave messages on the answer-phone. I would turn off the radio or stand in front of the TV. I spent a lot of time talking to her back.

518. When idioms coincide with real-life occurrences, for instance: waking up, realising something and simultaneously smelling coffee.

521. The word "plinth."

I began leaving Post-It notes around the house, stuck to various things. On her mirror was:

575. Piglets.

On the kettle: 654. Marlon Brando.

And on her bed: 11. Bed.

Every morning I would open my door and I would see a small stack of yellow squares of paper. I became more inventive, writing on the inside of cereal packets or shoes, carving words into fruit or rearranging the fridge magnets.



REHEARSAL ROOM CHECK IN: PHOTO JESS ZENG

What next?

Our “What next?” sections include questions and activities based on previous pages. These can be used for individual reflection or as class exercises.

One topic of the play is depression. What do you know or what have you heard about depression?

Think about the different ways in which people respond to things. What are some ideas that you can come up with to help manage these emotions?

Tell a short story or short play (write your own, or use one you know) using the technique of this play. How can you integrate the audience to create a shared experience?



JIMI BANI IN REHEARSAL : PHOTO JESS ZENG

JIMI BANI Q&A

These responses have been taken from video interviews with Jimi and Yasmin which can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5JErzAf_AY

What first drew you to the play?

The structure of the play, when I read the play and then when I met Yasmin - it all came together and cemented it. I loved the play and was really hopeful that after chatting with Yasmin that she would want me to do it. It is a really beautiful play with such careful writing. The writing is amazing, where you have a script that has a particular rhythm and is warm and caring, this is beautiful. It has its' own thing that happens between all of us. Just having a yarn together, it is so beautiful, it magically spreads around and we are all involved, and looking after each other.

How will you approach the participatory nature of the play?

I think being a father of five helps. Managing my family and listening to my partner and my boys requires a great sense of communication, and listening. Your antenna is always up, so from this when you deal with audience members, you are aware that you want to be welcoming. It's ok, we are here to have a

yarn and that helps break the fourth wall. Understanding that you are going to get different responses and be open. You don't know what to expect, maybe someone has had a big day, or happy day, but for that little moment we have an opportunity to tell a yarn, to have an escape from the day. So I look forward to that.



Script Excerpt,

The next morning I took the list and I ran to the library and Sam and I kissed for the very first time.

From that moment on we spent every second together. I wrote new list entries every day as a gift for Sam.

The Narrator continues with the list entries himself

2389. Badgers.

The Narrator puts his hand on someone's shoulder:

2390. People who can't sing but either don't know or don't care. Pages and pages of it.

4997. Gifts that you actually want and didn't ask for.

4998. Falling asleep as soon as you get on a plane, waking up when you land and feeling like a time-traveller.

Everywhere I looked, everything I thought about...

- 9993. Dreams of flying.
- 9994. Friendly cats.
- 9995. Falling in love.
- 9996. Sex.
- 9997. Being cooked for.
- 9998. Watching someone watching your favourite film.
- 9999. Staying up all night talking.
- 10000. Waking up late with someone you love.

Right. Everyone put your right hand in the air.

Everyone raises their right hand.

I'm going to HIGH-FIVE THE ENTIRE ROOM!

He high-fives as many people as he can.

Eventually, the Narrator signals to the stage manager to stop the music.

No that was a big mistake. It's actually much harder than I anticipated.

The Narrator is out of breath.

My mum...

She would do this. Get carried away. Ups and downs.

As a little boy, it was never shyness, or thoughtfulness. Happiness scared me because it was usually followed by...



JIMI BANI AND YASMIN GURREEBOO IN REHEARSAL: JESS ZENG



JIMI BANI: PHOTO JESS ZENG

CHARACTERS/ROLES

There is one actor in the play, with the title of 'Narrator', although they are never referred to in that way throughout the play.

The 'Narrator' plays the main character, as a seven year old boy, at seventeen, and then as a young adult, who shares their story. Along the way we are introduced to other characters who help not only the young child, but also the audience, to understand what the character is going through.

It is these engagements with the audience that help us to create the 'community' and support that is needed to help the main character deal with the situation, with the suicide attempts of his mother.

So while we have only one character, the audience is in itself another main character, broken down by the individual components of a vet, a university lecturer, the dad, Mrs Paterson and the romantic interest. On top of that we have the collective of those reading the list; on reading out each 'brilliant thing' the audience immediately becomes a small part of the cast, ultimately leading to a play performed by one main actor but delivered by an entire community cast.

Script Excerpt

In the first week of university, I posted the list to my mum, anonymously.

When I returned that Christmas I found it on my desk, neatly folded back in its envelope. I still don't know whether or not she had read it. It certainly hadn't seemed to change her outlook.

I put the list between the pages of a favourite book and I forgot about it.

That Christmas was quiet. Difficult.

In the New Year, Dad drove me back to university. He gave me a box of his records. I wanted to ask him why but I knew better than that. We didn't speak. We just listened to the radio.

The Narrator sits down next to the person he cast as his Dad. Music plays, ideally something a little upbeat but bitter sweet. They listen for a moment, then it fades slowly as the Narrator speaks.

I was quite shy at university. I didn't socialise. I'd mostly just listen to records in my room. I would even avoid lectures and seminars. But there was one lecture series that I never missed.

It was led by someone whose books I had read and loved and had inspired me to choose the course in the first place.

Would you mind being my Lecturer? It's just because you really look like her.

The Narrator selects someone from the audience to be the Lecturer, leads them to the centre of the room and gives them a copy of The Sorrows of Young Werther.

This particular lecture series was on the Victorian novella and built up to this one book, The Sorrows of Young Werther by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

What she would do is, at the start of the lecture, she would hold the book aloft...

The Lecturer holds up the book.

And then she would leave a long dramatic pause...

. . . and when she felt she had everybody's undivided attention ...

.. . she would give a very accurate and detailed precis of the novel.

The Narrator sits in the audience and waits.

What next?

Think of the role the audience characters play. What do we feel when the vet gets up and helps the young child with Sherlock Bones?

We are given three different ages, or time periods, of the character - can you think of others that may help propel this story?

Who are the characters whose voices we don't hear?





SET DESIGN - PHOTO: JESS ZENG

DESIGN ELEMENTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH KATHRYN SPROUL
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER

This interview can be viewed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkiCYfgwWv0>

What are the challenges of designing in ‘the round’?

It is always interesting when a play calls for an actor to perform ‘in the round’. That means that at all times there are people who will see their back. So the directing performance and design challenge is to make sure that the experience is shared, democratically speaking. With *Every Brilliant Thing* in the round, the play has been written specifically to be a democratic experience. We have also made the design and production choice to have access for everyone, to be from the ground level up, so anyone with access requirements can choose to come in at floor level. The big thing with the round is you try not to have anything blocking the actors. This set is just the one actor in the space with the audience so I don't have to consider set, structures and walls and how to shape and frame that to not lose any moments.

How did you approach designing the 'List'?

The starting point of *Every Brilliant Thing* is that it is the story of this person, who from the age of seven, has had this traumatic thing happen in their life. They made the choice to try to make sense of it through creating this list, of every brilliant thing worth living for.

So in the retelling of their experience they do reach out for the list as it was when they were seven, and then again to the list of things they have compiled when they revisit at age seventeen. And part of the experience and joy and life affirming idea of reminding someone who is sad or depressed that this is worth living for, is for all of us in the audience to have the chance to share in this discovery. The play relies heavily on the actor at the start handing out pieces of paper that they have chosen to write these items on.

Every night we will have a fresh version of those to share with the audience, and these are not specified as to what they are on. We have been having great fun in the creative development of the rehearsal discovering what we might grab to write something on. There are quite a few objects, and items of paper or envelopes, that form the list that we are stockpiling so we can have bundles to hand out and share the joy and playfulness of that with the audience. So while it is a very sad and distressing subject matter dealing with mental health issues and people in that dark place: this is through the eyes of someone who has found a way to cope, through the heartfulness of the list. So we are looking at lists of 30 for each show, where the actor will ask each person as they come in if they wouldn't mind participating. Coming into the shared democratic safe space they receive the item and in a big voice are asked to read, to respond to the number and read that item on the list.

What are some, if any, of the challenges of working with two different directors on two different productions at the same time?

I think it is being very democratic, and being very conscious of the directors. One director I have worked with previously and the other I had not, but we were aware of each others work.

I tasked myself with being very available for whatever works. So the timing worked well as one person had more time available early, and one play requires a lot of work prior to going in the rehearsal room and the other is very responsive. This meant that timing wise it actually worked well.

How did you approach designing one stage for two productions?

The decision to have one floor for *Prima Facie* and for *Every Brilliant Thing* came from very early discussions with both Artistic Directors of each play. I asked what world do they see the action happening in and also had to factor in the technical world of the production team and the crew who have to transform the space for the audience with a maximum 30 minutes between one show and the next.

So my initial design process is always to start with 'what does the play need', and play with that and ask for whatever it is you want or what is your best outcome for the play and then test that against practical, objective parameters - for example budget and timeline and what is achievable. There is no point designing a world that can't be realised.

So the first initial conversation with both directors is 'what is the floor' because

both actors are standing in the space on the floor. The seating is in the corner, or the round and the one constant thing that the audience will see is the actor standing on the floor. I asked each director to think about that and then come back with a colour, context and texture for the world they saw the play and the actor standing in,. My challenge was to guide those two slightly different worlds to a common meeting ground because I really felt that any changeover of the floor would be problematic for the technical team in switching from one play to the next.



COSTUMES DESIGN KATHRYN SPROUL PHOTO: JESS ZENG

SOUND DESIGN

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW HOWARD



Music is quite an integral part of the play, what is the playwright communicating to the audience through the music?

The script outlines what was used in the original production but then the playwright always says “or something like” which is saying that you don’t have to use those specific tracks but that is the vibe of what will work. I feel that the playwright uses the music in two ways. The first is as a narrative connection point between a father and son. This connection point is how the playwright uses the music as both implicit narrative device within the world of the play and as an external device for the audience with the lyrical themes. While the themes are there the music is mostly very short snippets.

The majority of the music already exists in a recorded form, did you have to compose anything for the work? If so, what and why?

There is no music or sound effects outside of the scripted material. It is quite straight forward and simple.

As sound designer, how do you work with the Director and stage manager to ensure the sound to the play helps the story?

Generally this varies greatly from show to show and Director to Director. Some Directors are very prescriptive in what they want and others allow the sound designers / composers to use their knowledge of the art form to aid in the story telling process. In that sense I like to work in the liminal space between those two options. I like some direction but also like to have a good amount of creative control over the sound design and compositional elements. The compositional elements are where I like to receive a decent amount of direction.

As far as working with the stage manager, the sound designers role is to give the stage managers clear and concise positions for the cues to come in and go out. Whether they are operating the playback or calling the cues to another operator the end goal is the same.

What next?

Think of the design process and the set, costume and lighting for this play. Taking into consideration the information above, create a palette for your own design.

If your life had a soundtrack what songs would there be? Why did you choose these particular songs?

How do we use music in society? Why is it important? How does it help the relationship between the son and the father?



STAGE MANAGEMENT

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIDGET SAMUEL



You can find a full interview with other SM related questions here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzjr-5FCr2M>

Can you talk to the additional complexity of performing in the round?

From a SM perspective you need to have clear language/names around the points of reference so everyone is on the same page. We got a plan and put sticky notes on it labelling upstage, downstage, and how we were naming the seating banks so that we are all using the same language.

When working in the round I need to make sure that any visual cues from the actor are super clear. They either need to be facing me for a subtle gesture or have a dramatic gesture like a hand up in the air if their back is to me so I don't miss the gesture to cue the sound/lighting.

From a SM perspective can you talk to the props management in this show.

There are over 60 list items that are handed out to the audience each night on the show. We need to make sure that the artistic integrity of the designer is upheld whilst still making it sustainable time wise for an ASM to manage. The lists are

supposed to look handwritten and if we had to write 60 items for 18 performances plus rehearsals we would get cramps in our hands (that and my writing is appalling). We have had to make master copies of the lists on paper and then we photocopy and cut/rip them out so that we have a fresh batch for each show as there's no guarantee that we will get all the slips of paper back from the audience participants. We have tried to minimise the things that will need to be hand written on -eg jar lids (that's referred to in the play) and bubble wrap so the work load is manageable. We also need to make sure that everything doesn't look the same as the list has been added to over the years. There are some props that Jimi has to pull out on stage so it's important that the box we put them in is always set the same way and that the lists used at different times can easily be differentiated. In the script the actor is supposed to take an audience members drink and have a sip. Due to covid we can't do that, so we have had to add a drink to the box that Jimi can use. We also had to try a few options for the chocolate bar that Jimi eats as it can't be too hard, or too chewy as he won't be able to talk (the best one so far is the milky way). The play also relies heavily on getting items from the audience. We have backups hidden in the box in case an audience member doesn't have an item. We also have the ability for the props to help jog Jimi's memory as there are a lot of crazy numbers for him to remember - so we can write numbers in a notepad for him to refer to if necessary.

Can you also talk about the additional responsibility of transitioning from EBT to Prima Facie? What are the logistics of this for you and the ASM and crew?

Because this is a double bill and time is limited between shows we have to be really mindful about starting the performance on time and not running over our running time. This is definitely going to be interesting as the audience participation moments could add extra time if they're not carefully managed. In my prompt copy I mark 30 second intervals on the side of the script so I can tell if a section is running longer than normal. This way I'm able to tell the actor if they're taking too long in a moment. We have a rough idea how long the audience interactions might take as we have had participants in the rehearsal room so we have factored that in to our running time. Jimi also has the ability to interrupt participants if they are taking too long or going on a tangent. When the show finishes, it will be important that FOH get the patrons out as soon as possible so we can get to the change over as quickly as possible. The crew will all need to pitch in and help to make sure that we get everything done in time. Everyone will have a set job and there will be set places that we strike items for consistency and efficiency so we're not getting in each others way. We will also need to work in a certain order - there's no point bringing the curtain in if the chairs haven't been struck as the curtain will just get tangled in them. We will also need to be doing a couple of things at once, so Jimi will be getting his mic on and checked whilst we are still setting the stage and the lighting checks will need to happen at the same time. Our checks are important to do as early as possible so if there's an issue we can fix it quickly without impacting the show start time.



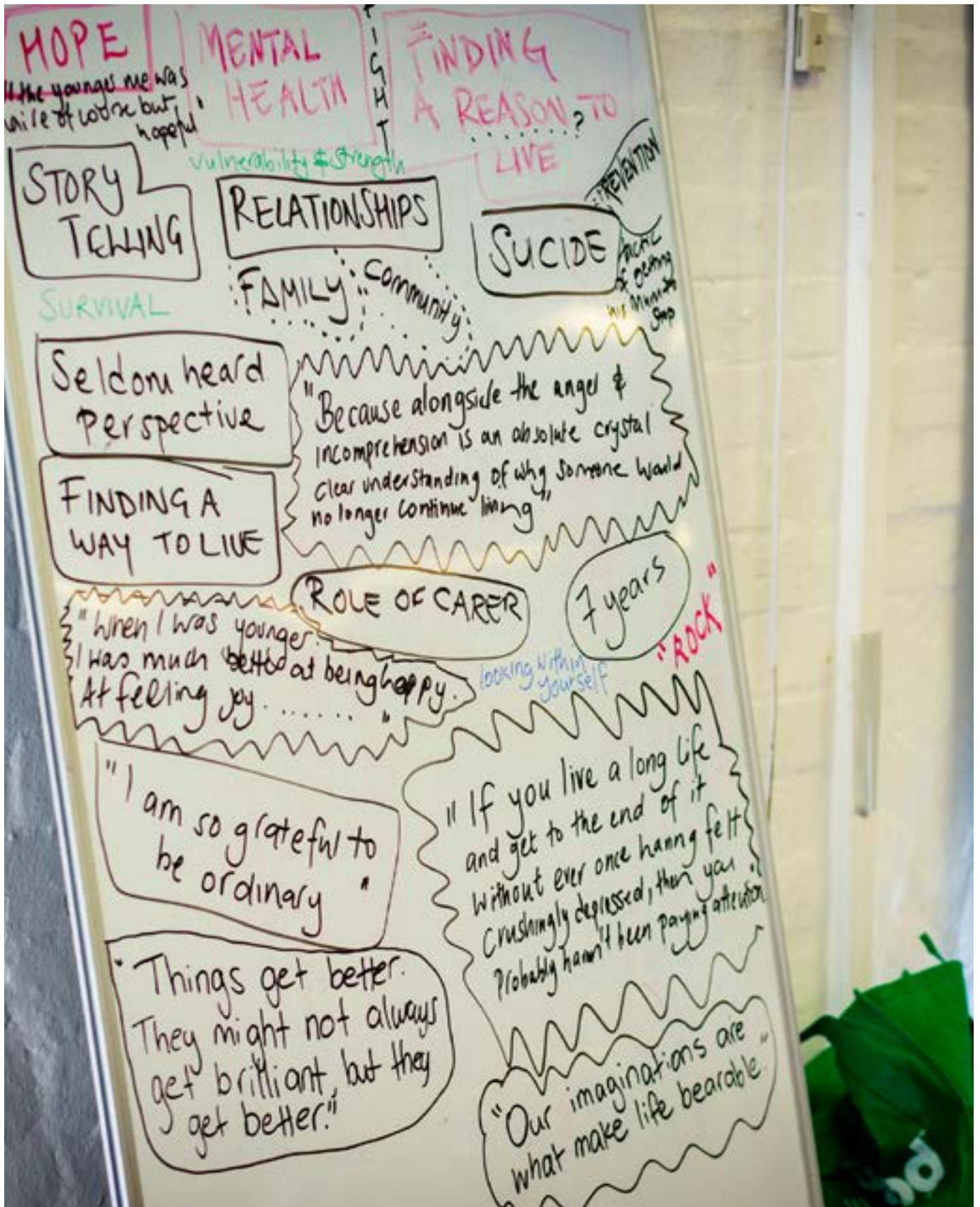
SEATING AND BLOCKING MAP; PHOTO JESS ZENG



BRIDGET SAMUEL AND ANDREW HOWARD: PHOTO JESS ZENG

THEMES & CONCEPTS

IN EVERY BRILLIANT THING BY DUNCAN MACMILLAN WITH JONNY DONAHOE



Living with mental health in the family

The play is about a young person who is dealing with a parent who attempts to take their own life. At age 7 the actor is taken from school to the hospital by his father with the words ‘Your mother has done something stupid’, at the hospital he is met by his mother with the words ‘not him’.

We see that throughout the play he must deal with this situation on his own. His father closes his door to the study on him, using music as a shield. His mother doesn’t voice her issues. He is met with silence, in fact apart from the use of music we get a sense of the silence in the house. The words that the young character hears are words that do not help him, do not offer him anything in the way of support. It is from here that he creates the list, in an attempt to offer reasons for his mother to live.

As with all traumatic events, the way in which kids are supported in processing their feelings about loss affects how successfully they will recover. Children are very resilient, and while a parent’s suicide attempt will never stop being an important event in their lives, ensuring the emotional health and wellbeing of the child going forward is paramount.

Connection is essential for us as humans, many websites about depression, suicide, and mental health have lists of what to do; “talk” and “listen” are on every list. It would seem hard to do either without words. Yet speaking words is fraught with ambiguity—what is meant, what is heard, various denotations, layers of connotation, history, context, not to mention tone and inflection. Creating simple statements, highlighting the beauty of small moments can help alleviate the pressure of speaking.

Connecting the audience and the actor helps create a sense of we are here, we can share with each other and we can support each other. The individual audience members reading of the list helps us feel that these are our moments, that we are there connecting with the actor, we hear him. We give him our own little brilliant thing.

In the breakdown of the marriage when Sam asks her self-isolating husband to seek help, he tells us, “That made me so angry. I knew what depression was and I knew I was fine” (in denial). So he ends up watching her leave with “that horrible feeling when something is broken and can’t ever be fixed” thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy; can we say that this is really true of their relationship - that it was destined this way?

The effects of living with someone with depression have a lasting impact. Finding a way to see the future is difficult and can often require external help.

“ I have some advice for anyone who has been contemplating suicide.... It’s this: Things get better, they might not get brilliant but they get better.”

By the time he has grown into manhood, he discovers that the continuously evolving list has become his own personal blueprint for a healthy life.

Survival

When the young narrator is faced with his mother's first attempt he starts a list. This is the first step he takes to managing his emotions, to managing the situation. He finds he has nowhere to turn, he tries his father, but he also closes off to him so he has to look to his own resources.

He begins a list, to remind his mother of all the things worth being here for, but this list is also a saviour for him. The list becomes more than just a way to ward off the depression that stalks him as it has his mother. As we follow the boy to manhood, watching him deal with school, death, another parental suicide attempt, and falling in and out of love, we see how the list becomes a touchstone that he returns to at trying (or triumphant) times in his life.

Just before he reports his mother's third suicide attempt, the performer states,

"If you live a long life and get to the end of it without ever once having felt crushingly depressed, then you probably haven't been paying attention."

This statement highlights that we can survive, in fact we most certainly should have experienced these moments of struggle in our lives. Whatever this comment reveals about his mother or himself, he understands and invites us to understand as well that life is not necessarily easy, smooth, or pleasant for everyone. It is how we respond, how we survive, that is the point.

Imagination

We are introduced early on to the theme of imagination.

In his memory of the first attempt, the performer says he invented a dialogue between himself and his father to fill the actual silence in the car, a series of "why?" questions. The imagined (or later recognized) answers offer us a window into this crucial issue.

"If you were able to know everything then life would be unlivable...we'd have no need to use our imaginations and our imaginations are what make life bearable."

Because in order to live in the present we have to be able to imagine a future that will be better than the past.

This imagined quote by the father helps us inside the mind of the young narrator. At age 7 he is able to access this imaginary world much easier than he is at age 17.

The entire play is built on celebrating the imagination. Macmillan specifies that the play is best presented in the round and with the house lights up throughout, leaving it all to our own imaginations.

Theoretically, such a situation without a set or costumes and with a constant view of the other audience members should make it more difficult for us to imagine the scenes the Narrator describes. Yet, in spite of this, such is the power of storytelling that we see and feel what the Narrator suggests. When the "vet" uses an ordinary pen to inject the coat that represents the Narrator's dog with the drug that will kill it, we wince. Each interaction with the audience requires us to

reach into our imagination, and this process has been made easier for us by the introduction of this early in the play by the narrator as a young child.

“At its best theatre is a workout for our imaginations and our compassion, and here it happens collectively which is increasingly rare and important.” Duncan Macmillan

Growing up

We meet the narrator at age 7, again at age 17, as a young adult in university, again as a man with experience of love and loss.

The Narrator chronicles his own falling in love at university, his wedding, his marriage and his breakup. As the audience we participate in the telling of this. We are with him in his first experience of death, we sit alongside him in the car as his father drives him to the hospital, we meet his love interest with him and we sit in a support group with him. He states after the second attempt

“As a little boy, I dealt with this so much better.”

Imagination and survival for a young person seem easier to access than as a young teenager. As a young teenager who has been living in that silent house we understand how accessing feelings and emotional connection would be difficult. The young boy connects with his teenage self by remembering the list. In fact he holds on to this list as he makes his way through life, referring to it at times, using it as a communication device with his new love and eventually as a tool to help lift and diagnose his own depression.



Hope

Ultimately we understand that the young narrator writes the list out of hope. Hope to help, to make things better for his mum. At this age it is for his mother, but as we progress we understand this list is for him. He maintains the optimism, despite her continued silence with him. The fact that she reads it, corrects his spelling and leaves it for him buoys him on.

When she leaves it neatly on his desk he hopes that maybe he has reached her, that maybe somewhere he will change her outlook. He needs this hope, like imagination if he doesn't hold on to this then he will fall deeper himself into the same pathway that his mother is on.

Each moment of interaction with the audience feels like a reaching out, a connection with someone, with the vet in a time of grief, with Mrs Paterson as he seeks help as a young child and then briefly again as a young man. These moments of reaching out indicate that he is hopeful of change, of positivity. Adding to his list gives him purpose, with each small moment he is finding a small light.

We are together as a team, travelling this with the narrator. We are part of the support group, by it's very nature there to help. To provide hope. The lines below tell us that the narrator has hope.

“I have some advice for anyone who has been contemplating suicide. It's really simple advice. It's this:

Don't do it.

Things get better.

They might not always get brilliant.

But they get better.”

What next?

What reason(s) would you give someone to keep living? Find ten reasons. Have you asked yourself what keeps you going?

What ways do you think you could offer to help someone experiencing difficulty?

How do we find use of our imagination every day? What can you come up with that highlights moments that we rely on it?

How much does the boy learn about others as he grows up? How much does he learn about himself?

SCRIPT EXCERPT

I read the book. The Sorrows of Young Werther. It was shit. Well, I didn't connect with it. I'd never been very interested in romance. Or at least, I hadn't been. Until I locked eyes with the only other person who was always in the library.

A hugely romantic song begins to swell and the Narrator locks eyes with an audience member. This is now Sam. The Narrator waves, blushing. The vocal starts and the song continues as the Narrator speaks.

For weeks we would sit opposite each other without speaking. Occasionally we'd make eye contact and then immediately look away as if blinded by the sun. For the first time in my life I understood the lyrics of pop songs. And then finally, after weeks, I summoned up the courage to say hello.

Slowly, bashfully, the Narrator walks towards Sam. On his way he asks the person who read out 517 to check his teeth for broccoli, then gives The Sorrows of Young Werther to some one else.

Can you just... deal with this?

As he is about to reach Sam, he suddenly turns to the person next to her.

Can I move you?

The Narrator gets the person next to Sam (usually their partner) to vacate their seat and move to the other side of the room. This is done very apologetically. Once relocated, the Narrator returns to Sam.

Is anyone sitting here?

(We used the Etta James' version of "At Last" for its immediately, iconically romantic strings and sentiment. There are many alternative songs you could use, so long as it's jazz or soul and isn't modern.)

Sam can be male or female. For the purpose of this draft, it's a woman.

SAM. Not anymore. NARRATOR. Oh good.

The Narrator sits down in the empty seat.

Hello.

SAM. Hello.

NARRATOR. What's your name?

The audience member says their name.

No, in real life her name was Sam. What's your name?

SAM. Sam.

NARRATOR. Hi Sam. Nice to meet you. What are you reading?

The Narrator addresses the audience.

Oh, I forgot, does anyone have a book? We're in the library so I need a couple of books.

The Narrator indicates The Sorrows of Young Werther.

Not that one.

The Narrator gets a couple of books from the audience and throws one into Sam's lap.

What are you reading?

Sam reads the title of the book.

What's it about?

Sam reads the back of the book.

Sounds really good.

The Narrator tells Sam what he's reading and tries to explain how great it is.

It's really good. In fact, why don't I lend it to you? And I could read (Says title of Sam's book.) and we could meet up and talk about them, perhaps get a coffee sometime or a cup of tea or an or an or an orange juice, maybe, perhaps, if you'd like to, if you think that would be...

Sam agrees.



JIMI BANI: PHOTO: JESS ZENG.

INTERESTING INFORMATION

The use of music in Every Brilliant Thing

Today everyone seems to live with a soundtrack to their lives and earbuds or headphones playing it 24/7—their very own soundscape and reality. So does the performer's dad years before iPods were ever invented, an aural path in which his son follows.

English playwright Duncan Macmillan calls music the means of communication between father and son:

Music is integral....I like the fact that it's American [music], predominantly black music, which is being listened to in rainy England by a white man and his son—in his incarnation of the play [the English premiere]. Two English men who don't necessarily express their emotions with much articulacy. Some of it is incredibly upbeat and sexy, and some of it is heartwrenchingly sad. It was a useful way of building a sense of the father and son's relationship and how they communicate to each other.

Consider the role of silence in the play? Who communicates, or talks? Do we see or hear dialogue? The feelings are there—the child's (imagined) questions, the college student's burgeoning love. But how do people communicate? Dad shuts the study door; and the romantic interest is shy, too. So we find the communication is through music or the list.

The boy knows the “rules” of dad's music, what each kind of music means about whether he can open the door or not. Music is used again when he goes off to college. Is this Dad's way of trying to communicate with his son? The narrator uses the album sleeve notes to fully make sense of the music. The sleeve notes help inform the listener as to the story the music tells.

The play does a similar thing in relation to depression and suicide. It helps to inform the audience, at least to how we might respond to it, or what it may look like.

Talking to a friend about depression

With the transition into adulthood, many teens and young adults begin to seek and rely on help from friends. When it comes to mental health matters, it is no different. If you think that a friend may be having thoughts of suicide, don't be afraid to say something. Talking about suicide does not increase the risk of it happening. Instead, it helps someone know that you care and are willing to listen.

There are many places you can look to for advice now. Websites that can help, and phone lines where advice can be given.

Talking to each other helps. Being gentle and kind with each other is important. Listening is super important, and sharing this with an adult you trust is also important. You do not need to keep this a secret, in fact it will not help a friend if you do. Don't judge or ignore your friends feelings. You can ask someone if they are thinking about suicide. This will not ‘convince’ someone to do it. It may actually help talk them through their feelings.

Ultimately the more we talk about this, the easier it becomes and the more we open up conversation and provide pathways to dealing with it.



**EVERY
BRILLIANT
THING**

BY
DUNCAN MACMILLAN
WITH JONNY DONAHOE

★

★
DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

WRITTEN RESPONSE

Think about the pages (and other methods) that the child and young man used to communicate with his mother. She never said a word, but there were other kinds of responses. Assess those responses and argue whether or not he is correct in believing “the list hadn’t stopped her. Hadn’t saved her. Of course it hadn’t.”

Prepare a written review of the production, noting the writing, directing and elements. What do you think the audience took away from the performance?

For guidelines on how to write a review, see our review writing resource linked in the dropdown menu for *Every Brilliant Thing* at statetheatrecompany.com.au/education-program

DISCUSSION & WRITTEN ACTIVITY

Analyze the difference between the way actors usually inhabit and perform characters in a play and the way the performer inhabits the character in this play. Is there a difference? What is it? Are they actually the same? If so, how so?

ACTIVITY

Pick a moment from your life and write “sleeve notes/liner notes” for it as if it were a CD or an album—using a literary approach, the “present at the creation” approach, the expert approach, or tangential approach (all common in liner notes).

PS - a liner note is a small piece of paper found in the inside of an album, or cd cover, that provides information about the recording, the lyrics, the intentions, or anything that the artist wishes to include or share.

Remember If you or anyone you know needs support, Lifeline offers a 24 hour counselling service and can be reached at 13 11 14.

Other services which may be of assistance include,

Beyond Blue (www.beyondblue.org.au, 1300 224 636),
youth mental health foundation, Headspace (www.headspace.org.au).



Government of South Australia
Arts South Australia