STUDY GUIDE

The Live Arts reIGNITE Season 2021/22 launches with EVERY BRILLIANT THING, a gently humorous and uplifting solo show about depression and resilience where the audience becomes a part of the story.

“With EVERY BRILLIANT THING, I felt there should be a way to talk about depression and suicidal depression because it’s so common, but to talk about it in a way that is constructive and complex and nuanced and grown up and unflinching. But also accessible and funny.” --Duncan Macmillan, Playwright, on EVERY BRILLIANT THING

EVERY BRILLIANT THING by Duncan Macmillan with Jonny Donahoe runs October 15 through November 7, 2021 at Live Arts in the Gibson Theater. The show will run for approximately 75 minutes with no intermission.

Study Guide compiled for Live Arts by Administrative Intern Jenna Delgado with contributions from Director Clinton Johnson and Education Director Miller Susen
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Synopsis:

EVERY BRILLIANT THING is a play written by Duncan Macmillan and originally performed by Jonny Donahoe, a British comedic actor. Through the use of a single Narrator and audience participation, EVERY BRILLIANT THING navigates twenty years of the Narrator’s life as they explore their past and the effect of their mother’s suicide attempts through the Narrator’s adolescence and adulthood. As the Narrator utilizes the audience to play the role of various members of his life, the Narrator goes through a plethora of reasons, both simple and profound, that life is worth living in the wake of the Narrator’s suicidal mother battling depression. Following their mother’s death, the Narrator battles their own depression, stopping the list. However, after spending several years alone after being left by their partner, music brings the Narrator back to the list. This simultaneously hilarious and heart-breaking exploration of the Narrator’s life demonstrates the power of undying hope and self-reflection.

The Narrator is intentionally never named, as the role can be played by anyone, with the concept that these feelings and experiences are universal and could happen to anyone. Therefore, Live Arts created two different casts, with two different actors, which allows each actor to demonstrate a different, individualized retelling of EVERY BRILLIANT THING.

Rotating cast members (L to R) Chris Estey and Ray Nedzel. Photos by Will Kerner.
**Playwright Bios:**

**Duncan Macmillan** is a British playwright from England born in 1980. Macmillan has spent much of his life involved in the arts as he spent his adolescence watching classic plays and previously worked as a DJ. Macmillan is currently a music collector as well and his love for music plays a role in EVERY BRILLIANT THING through the Narrator’s father’s interest in music. Aside from EVERY BRILLIANT THING, Macmillan has also written PEOPLE, PLACES AND THINGS (2015-17 – National Theatre/Wyndham’s Theatre, West End / St Ann’s Warehouse, New York/UK Tour); 1984, adapt. George Orwell (2013-17 – Headlong / Nottingham Playhouse / West End / Broadway / international tours, co-adapted / co-directed with Rob Icke); CITY OF GLASS, adapt. Paul Auster (2017 – 59 Productions, HOME and Lyric Hammersmith), 2071, co-written with Chris Rapley (2014-15 - Royal Court Theatre / Hamburg Schauspielhaus); THE FORBIDDEN ZONE (2014-16 - Salzburg Festival and Schaubühne, Berlin); WUNSCHLOSES UNGLÜCK, adapt. Peter Handke (2014 - Burgtheater Vienna); REISE DURCH DIE NACHT, adapt. Friederike Mayröcker (2012-14 - Schauspielhaus Köln, Festival d’Avignon, Teatertreffen); LUNGS (2011-16 Paines Plough and Sheffield Theatres / Studio Theatre, Washington DC) and MONSTER (2006 - Royal Exchange).

Macmillan’s plays tend to explore socio-political topics such as suicide, mental health, addiction and recovery, and parenthood.

Born in Dublin, Ireland, **Jonny Donahoe** works in performing, writing and directing comedy. Additionally, Donahoe is a part of a comedy musical duo with Paddy Gervers titled Jonny and the Baptists. Donahoe co-wrote EVERY BRILLIANT THING with Macmillan and his performance in the work’s debut Donahoe has been nominated for a Drama Desk Award, Lucille Lortel Award and an Off-Broadway Alliance Award.

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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 Gerge’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 the things that have happened unexpectedly.

--Duncan Macmillan

Director’s Bio:

Clinton Johnston is a local theater artist who has worked with most area venues acting, directing, and doing whatever else he can get away with. He most recently appeared on the Live Arts stage in the 2018 production of THE LIAR. His last time directing for Live Arts was for a non-staged reading of local playwright Sean McCord’s play-in-process MOVING in 2016. Prior to that, Clinton directed the 2008 production of Suzan-Lori Parks’ IN THE BLOOD. He is pleased to have a small part in the next stage of Live Arts' grand journey to forge theater and community.
EVERY BRILLIANT THING Production History:

After rising in the playwriting scene in 2005 when Duncan Macmillan won two awards at the Bruntwood Playwriting Competition for his play Monster, the playwright was approached after the play’s closing in 2007 by the Miniaturists, a playwriting group, to produce something for the group. The play originally began as a fifteen minute monologue in 2007, titled “Sleeve Notes,” which was received well until it was further developed into a full play after receiving input from the community regarding brilliant reasons to live. EVERY BRILLIANT THING was then originally produced in Great Britain in 2013 during the Ludlow Fringe Festival at three different theatres until it played at the Edinburgh Fringe for three years. A year after its 2013 debut, EVERY BRILLIANT THING made its way to off Broadway, where it was then filmed and adapted by HBO.

Role of the Audience:

The audience is a key player in any theatrical performance. However, in this show, the audience plays an even more important role. EVERY BRILLIANT THING is highly interactive and audience members are not only asked to stand in for members of the Narrator’s life but also to speak up and list brilliant reasons to stay alive. The more the audience engages with the Narrator, the more dynamic and moving the show will be. We invite you to participate and enjoy!

Roles Played by Various Audience Members: Vet, Dad, Sock, Lecturer, Sam, Mrs. Peterson.

Discussion of Mental Health in EVERY BRILLIANT THING:

What exactly is Major Depressive Disorder (Clinical Depression)?

Depression is a serious mental illness which negatively affects how you feel, the way you think and how you act. Symptoms include: feeling sad or having a depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed, changes in appetite, trouble sleeping or sleeping too much, loss of energy or increased fatigue, increase in purposeless physical activity (e.g., inability to sit still, pacing, handwringing), difficulty thinking, concentrating or making decisions, or thoughts of death or suicide. To qualify as major depressive disorder, these symptoms must last for at least two weeks and present a change in your previous level of functioning. There are several different factors which can play a role in depression such as biochemistry, genetics, personality, and environmental factors. Depression can be treated with medication, psychotherapy (talk therapy), and Electroconvulsive Therapy in extreme cases. Additionally, doing things which you enjoy and spending time with loved ones can serve as self-help.
Reaching out for help is always important if you notice someone going through a hard time or notice yourself experiencing these symptoms\(^4\).

**How Common is Depression?**

According to the National Institute of Mental Health in 2019, nearly 1 in 5 American adults suffered from some sort of mental illness. They also found that the prevalence of mental illness was higher among females (24.5\%) than males (16.3\%) and that young adults aged 18-25 years had the highest prevalence mental illness (29.4\%) compared to adults aged 26-49 years (25.0\%) and aged 50 and older (14.1\%)\(^5\).

**Discussing Mental Health:**

First of all, it is always important to speak up if you are experiencing depressive or suicidal thoughts. It is not important how you speak up, just that you do.

Depression can be easier to detect in others however, it may be difficult to detect in yourself and can manifest itself in both mental and physical ways. Some examples are: change in your appetite, tiredness not related to physical exertion, restlessness or irritability, slowness of movement or speech, feeling depressed or withdrawn, loss of interest in things you once enjoyed, trouble with mental tasks such as remembering, concentrating or making decisions, trouble sleeping, headaches, stomachaches, or other aches and pains. Remember that getting better takes time and it can be useful to speak with a professional about the things you have going on in your life. Be with others, although it might be difficult, as isolation will only deepen these depressive feelings.

When speaking to a friend about mental illness it is important to listen carefully and let your friend know you care. Remain calm and be supportive. Additionally, make sure you are taking what they say seriously -- it is better to address something than to face future repercussions. Seek help and do not promise to keep your friends’ feelings a secret. It is oftentimes difficult to speak up about these feelings and requires a lot of courage so do not ignore what you are hearing. Everyone experiences things differently so having an open mind: let them lead the conversation\(^6\).

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Live Arts Talkback Information and Mental Health Resources:

Join Live Arts on OCTOBER 21, 2021 for our Post-Show Talkback/Panel Discussion in Conover Studio. Enjoy a drink and concessions from our terrace bar. Education Director Miller Susen will facilitate a conversation joined by the cast and representatives from the organizations listed below.

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS:

COUNSELING & PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES, UVA (CAPS):

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) works to facilitate the emotional, relational, and academic development and success of enrolled UVA students by providing culturally sensitive clinical services, outreach, consultation, and assistance with referrals.

How to Reach Them:
550 Brandon Avenue
P.O. Box 800760
Charlottesville, VA 22908-0760
PHONE: 434-924-5362
BUSINESS HOURS: (434)-924-5362
AFTER-HOURS: (434) 297-4261

NAMI, THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE ON MENTAL ILLNESS:

NAMI is dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness.

How to Reach Them:
In the Charlottesville area, call (434)260-8127 or email namiblueridge@gmail.com to learn about our free support groups and educational programs.

ON OUR OWN:

A peer recovery center and supportive community for adults who acknowledge that they are experiencing significant problems in their lives due to mental health and substance use challenges.
SOULFUL WELLNESS - Shea Graham, LCSW:

Soulful Wellness is a group of compassionate counselors who are ready to provide evidence-based, culturally competent care, providing online and in-person sessions.

How to Reach Them:
1 Boars Head Lane Suite B-3, Charlottesville, VA 22903
www.sheagrahamlcsww.com
www.soulfulwellnessva.com
(434) 202-4155

WOMEN’S INITIATIVE:

The mission of the Women’s Initiative is to provide women with effective counseling, social support and education so they can transform life challenges into positive change and growth. The Sister Circle Program, one of many services offered by the Women’s Initiative, aims to meet the unique needs of people from across the African diaspora who identify as women by providing a variety of services.

How to Reach Them:
434.872.0047; Se Habla Español: 434.328.1800
info@thewomensinitiative.org
Main Office: 1101 East High Street, Charlottesville, VA, 22902
Jefferson School City Center Office, 233 4th Street NW, Charlottesville, VA 22903

REGION TEN:

Region Ten Community Services Board is charged with providing affordable and accessible mental health services to the counties of Charlottesville, Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene, Louisa and Nelson. Region Ten also provides 24/7/365
mental health crisis services.

How to Reach Them:
Region Ten Community Services Board
500 Old Lynchburg Road, Suite 215
Charlottesville, VA 22903
434-972-1800
www.regionten.org

Additional Resources

MAXINE PLATZER LYNN WOMEN’S CENTER at the University of Virginia:

Mental health programming to UVA students and the Charlottesville community.

How to Reach Them:
https://womenscenter.virginia.edu

COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELLNESS COALITION:

The Community Mental Health and Wellness Coalition’s mission is collaborating to promote behavioral health and wellness through planning, advocacy, and access to effective service delivery for our region. The Coalition is a network of organizations in Charlottesville and the surrounding counties of Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene, Louisa, and Nelson working together to improve mental health and substance use service access and outcomes for our community.

How to Reach Them:
helphappenshere.org
Info/referral: 434-227-0641; Behavioral Health Emergency: 434-972-1800 or 911

National Hotlines:
- Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273 - TALK or (800) SUICIDE
- Text “NAMI” if you are having suicidal thoughts or urges
- Teen Line: open 9pm- 1am EST for calls from teens to other adolescents who have been trained in crisis response: (800)TLC-TEEN
- 211 Helpline: assistance for those who are in abusive relationships, are suicidal, are being bullied, have been sexually assaulted, or are thinking of running away: 211
- Your Life Counts: free, confidential services for people struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts: 1-877-968-8454
- The Trevor Helpline: Crisis intervention and suicide prevention for LGBTQ people ages 13-24 where you will have 24/7 access to a counselor: 866-488-7386

SAMARITANS MEDIA GUIDELINES

Samaritans Media Guidelines are referred to in EVERY BRILLIANT THING. The list is below. It is intended for journalists to support informed and safe coverage of suicide. You can learn more about Samaritans at https://samaritanshope.org/.

- Don’t provide technical details.
- Never suggest that a method is quick, easy, painless, or certain to result in death.
- Avoid dramatic headlines, terms like “suicide epidemic” or “hot spot.”
- Avoid sensationalist pictures or video.
- Avoid excessive detail.
- Avoid using the word “commit.”
- Don’t describe deaths by suicide as “successful.”
- Don’t publish suicide notes.
- Don’t publish on the front page.
- Don’t ignore the complex realities of suicide and its impacts on those left behind.
- Include references to support groups, such as the Samaritans.
- Don’t speculate on the reason. That’s crucial.
- Don’t supply simplistic reasons such as “he’d lost his job” or “she’d recently become bankrupt.”

WRITE YOUR OWN LIST!

"What makes life brilliant for you?"

Some answers from the Study Guide Compilers...

Contented rumbly kitty purrs
Hot chamomile tea at bedtime
Cracking a joke that cracks up my teens
When all the leaves change color and the air is brisk
Singing the Good ‘Ole Song at a UVA football game
Laughing so hard you start to cry
Reading a novel in a hot bath