

ASF Study Materials for

EVERY BRILLIANT THING

BY DUNCAN MACMILLAN

DIRECTED BY RICK DILDINE

Contact ASF: www.asf.net
1.800.841.4273



Study materials written by
Susan Willis, ASF Dramaturg
swillis@asf.net

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Characters

The Performer (whom the script does not give a name and explicitly requests that this figure never be called the narrator)

others we meet:

The Vet
Dad
Mrs. Patterson
The Sock
The Lecturer
Sam

Time: Now, though the action looks back on more than two decades

"We want it to be a conversation with the lights on.... You have to be able to see everyone respond to it.... The only way to deal with it is to be open about it."

—Duncan Macmillan
and Jonny Donahoe

About these study materials: discussion questions for analysis are in pale yellow boxes; a worksheet and activity/question pages are at the end.

Welcome to *Every Brilliant Thing*

What makes life worth living? Addressing that question fuels the struggle and the dynamic that the contemporary English play, *Every Brilliant Thing*, drops in our laps with its first line: "The list began after her first attempt." Such a spare line, but it gives us two characters—a 7-year-old and his mother—an action, and a reaction. We know this attempt is not to close a deal or bake a soufflé. It thrusts us into a situation involving real issues and primal human needs for security and understanding, for meaning and love and laughter and for a way to put all that into words.

One performer weaves this story *with* the audience, not *at* it. For instance, late in the action he mentions having gone to a support group, turns to the audience to take us there, beginning the support group's opening mantra: "Hello everyone" right to us, and we respond in kind. We are his support group and he is ours; we are in this together, and we have been since the pre-show. We know that all along. All of us are there for each other. That is the magic and power of this experience; we are really in it together, in life together, asking questions, getting stuck in emotional cul de sacs, falling in love, listening to music.

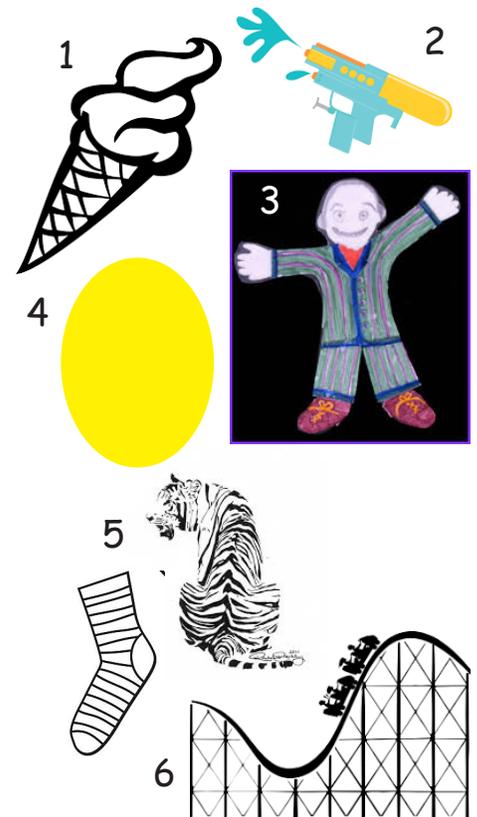
Duncan Macmillan accomplishes so much living and feeling in this spare, honest, open work. It shares the experience of a heart, mind, and soul engaging ours with the basic challenges of life: growing up, discovering love, understanding ourselves, and asking what it's all about and what it's worth.



Duncan Macmillan



Jonny Donahoe



Things Worth Living For—
to a 7-year-old

Meet the Authors

Because Jonny Donahoe's role as the first performer was so influential on the final shape of the script, Duncan Macmillan shares credit.

Duncan Macmillan is an English playwright and director. In his plays he addresses complex issues he finds not often being discussed in theatre, such as the environment, drug rehab, depression and suicide. This and his plays *Lungs*; *People, Places, Things*; and his recent adaptation of Orwell's *1984* (with Robert Ickes) have been seen internationally. He trained in film but got fascinated by playwriting, though his first love is music, as this play shows.

Jonny Donahoe is an Irish-born writer and comedian with years of stand-up and improv experience. He is part of a comedy band duo Jonny and the Baptists and premiered this play in 2014.

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Find the story "**Sleeve Notes**" online in this blog posting @ <https://www.atthekitchentable.com/sleeve-notes/>

"That's what drama is: watching a character make a decision ... seeing a recognisable character wrestling with something really difficult."

—Duncan Macmillan

Story Structure Outline

- attempt #1 and list
- attempt #2 and more list
- attempt #3 and typed list

Play Structure Outline

—attempt #1

- learning about death, dog
- Dad, hospital and old couple; starts list
- school counselor
- gives list to mother

—attempt #2

- re-discovers list
- about self-blame of child
- to college, lecture on *Sorrows of Young Werther*
- social contagions
- falls in love
- fear of ups and downs
- about studies of children with depressed mothers
- marriage and self-isolation
- list ends and thrown away; wife leaves
- finds her note much later
- counselor; support group
- we all know depression

—attempt #3; list didn't work

- types list, gives to dad
- "finishes" list

Thinking about the Structure of *Every Brilliant Thing*

The Short Story and the Play

First there was Duncan Macmillan's short story, "Sleeve Notes." You can read it; it's available online (URL at left). Then a decade of working to turn it into a play—readings of the story in theatres and clubs, drafts, discussion between author and director, and more new possibilities when Jonny Donahue joined as the performer. His stand-up and improv experience completed the theatrical technique Macmillan was seeking: "let's do everything together" with the audience.

The story focuses on the list, anchored as it is in the three suicide attempts that shape the plot. It is the narrator's ongoing authorship of the list for his mother and her repeated and wordless return of the list that drives the action, as well as how the list's contents morph as he grows and matures.

More Interactions, More Detail

All this action forms the spine of the play, but the play is richer, driven as much by the person who creates the list as it is by the list itself, fascinating as that is. His experience in dealing with his parents and later himself negotiates an often silent life. Words in the family are written and sometimes sung, but almost never voiced. We hear the words of the present, fewer of the past.

In the play we also meet a few other people who impact his life in these junctures: his school counselor, that shy girl in the university library. Additionally we hear what he learns about depression, which then filters his views and ours. We get internal and external information.

The play involves more than one conflict, more than one effort to make a difference. The major conflict is the performer's with depression—first his mother's, eventually his own, perhaps at the end his father's. The list serves as a beckoning, at times a clarion call, to come out, to join life, which suggests the psychological state being addressed is closed off, internal. How does that door get closed? How can it be opened?



Considering the Play's Structure

- The performer's growing up process occurs amid an apparently static situation at home: mom is depressed and occasionally suicidal, while dad withdraws into his study to work and listen to music. With his list the performer makes a continual effort to save her, to change her view of life, to give her a reason to live. How much do we (or does he) know about his parents and their relationship and circumstances? Why?
- Compare his relationship with his mom to his relationship with his dad.
- Will a list work—or is it only viable in the mind of a child and adolescent? Compare the child's reasons to live with the adolescent's and college student's reasons; with the adult's.
- The list lapses after the first attempt. After the second it adapts into a wooing device, and then that lapses, too. Compare the performer's responses to each attempt. What is his relationship to the list? What is it an attempt to do? What does his involvement with the list (or lack of) tell us about him or his state of mind and heart?
- How does the information he gains about depression affect or enlighten his and/or our view of the action?
- If he believes the list didn't work, why does he type it and then finish it?

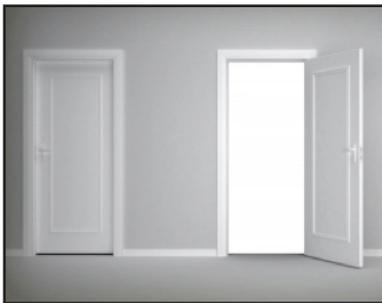
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Why don't you
Come on home
Oh yes so I won't
Be all alone...

—Ray Charles,
"Drown in My Own
Tears" (mentioned
in script as his
mother's song)



Thinking about Crises in *Every Brilliant Thing*

Depression and attempted suicide are topics that take us deep inside; the objective aspects are heavily filtered through the subjective, our inner state and values, perceptions and feelings.

In the aftermath of his mother's first suicide attempt, the performer as a 7-year-old gets one sentence and only one sentence from each parent. His father tells him, "Your mother's done something stupid," and when they arrive at the hospital, his mother sees him and says, "Not him." What do we make of these responses? What would a 7-year-old think?

Dialogue, Image, and Issue

The rest of the day his father does not talk to or with his child who needs contact; the phrasing is "I followed him...; I followed him..." eight times from hospital to home and all the way up the stairs to the study, where his father closes the door and puts on the music that means "I should leave him alone." So the child feeds himself, "a ham and mayo sandwich. Just without the ham"—a very apt image for the nurturance he's receiving. How many members of this family have an issue?

The door: rules of entry (rules of engagement), refused entry/able to enter—the closed door works as a potent image in the play for relationship, communication, and psychological state. Watch its use and permutations—how many literal and figurative doors are closed, stay closed, or cracked open a sliver. Do we see a door flung open? How is that done?

Silence and words: 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:

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

Why?

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 imagination and our imaginations are what make life bearable.

Why?

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

Why?

Because that's what hope is and without hope we couldn't go on. [italics added]

That's as profound an explanation as we will get for that felt state. No one explains it to him; he learns to understand on his own—because he, too, comes to feel it.

The National Institute for Mental Health states that

depression is one of the most common mental disorders in the U.S. Current research suggests that depression is caused by a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors.

Depression can happen at any age, but often begins in adulthood. ...Many chronic mood and anxiety disorders in adults begin as high levels of anxiety in children.

But depression, even severe depression, can be treated, and doctors agree that the sooner it is addressed with medications and/or psychotherapy, the better.

But 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" [this is called denial]. So he ends up watching her leave with "that horrible feeling when something is broken and can't ever be fixed" [self-fulfilling prophecy; is that really true of their relationship?].

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More Phrases and Images to Consider

- Compare the description of pentobarbital working on the dog—make it unconscious, depress brain, breathing, and circulation, put him to sleep forever—to the working of depression as experienced in the play
- The script calls his dog Sherlock Bones, though other name options are offered in the stage directions. If "Sherlock Bones" is used, the name engages us with the famous sleuth, the man who listened, examined and considered detail, and found the solution. Does the performer operate as a bit of a sleuth in his approach? Does he learn details (and include us in that learning)? Does he "solve" it? Do we operate as sleuths during the performance, taking in detail and considering the implications and meaning?



Thinking about Crises in *Every Brilliant Thing* 2

More Dialogue, Image, and Issue

Werther: Suicide attempts are mentioned four times, three attempts by his mother and once in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*—the Romantic era's early mega-hit and provocation for many copycat suicides in the 1770s. Being assigned the novella prompts the performer to learn about social contagions, that the copycat phenomenon is present and active—especially, researchers now say, in children of parents who have attempted suicide.

The rollercoaster: Why is the rollercoaster an early prominent item on the list? The performer comments that his mom had wild ups and downs (and bipolar condition can match severe depression in its downs) and his own later happiness scares him because it is followed by the down. But is he seeing the family link? He has a creeping concern, a warning light he tries to ignore but cannot. Nor does his research into children with depressed mothers allay his concern. Scientists say the children's brains change, and the performer is apprehensive because he might "[understand] why someone would no longer want to continue living."

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." Examine the tone of this statement. Is it gentle or edgy? What are the implications of the choice? 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. The play asks how we then respond.

Dialogue to Consider

These examples occur near the end of the play. Consider their place in the arc of the story, the performer's character development, and their significance in the context of issues and images:

- "I'm really sad and I don't know how to change that."
- "I've resisted doing this..." [attending a support group—and remember who that support group is in the theatre]
- "There was a pad and pencil on the passenger seat but she hadn't written anything."
- "I told him that sentimentality didn't suit him." [how might tone affect the meaning of that response?]

The Shape of the Whole

- What journey(s) has the performer undergone? Where has he arrived? Does he "know the place for the first time," that is, see it anew, understand something? Do we?
- Why is the play anchored in the three attempts? What purpose do they serve for the structure and the character?
- Do we think the list has "ended" at the end? What are the implications of that answer?
- Consider the role of language in the play. The performer meets Sam in a library—a place full of books and words (and now lots of media as well), but what words do they have? How do they use them? Where else and how else is language important in the play?

Look at one more quotation:

- "I now realize it's important to talk about things. Particularly the things that are the hardest to talk about."

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"You're not alone, you're not weird, you will get through it, and you've just got to hold on. That's a very uncool, unfashionable thing for someone to say, but I really mean it."

—Duncan Macmillan



Statistics: Numbers are People Who Need a Hand

ALABAMA 2018 SUICIDE FACTS AND FIGURES (based on 2016 CDC data)

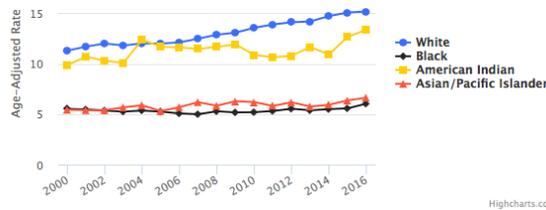
SUICIDE is:

- the 11th leading cause of death in Alabama
- the 3rd leading cause of death for ages 15-24
- the 4th leading cause of death for ages 25-44
- the 6th leading cause of death for ages 45-54
- the 10th leading cause of death for ages 55-64
- the 16th leading cause of death for ages 65+

Nearly two times as many people die by suicide in Alabama annually than by homicide.

On average, one person dies by suicide every 11 hours in Alabama.

U.S. Statistics: Suicide Rates by Ethnicity from 2000 to 2016



State statistics from American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) @ www.afsp.org

Other Statistics from AFSP:

Many people have some of the risk factors but do not attempt suicide. It is important to note that suicide is not a normal response to stress. Suicidal thoughts or actions are a sign of extreme distress, not a harmless bid for attention, and should not be ignored.

• Do gender and age affect suicide risk?

Men are more likely to die by suicide than women, but women are more likely to attempt suicide. Men are more likely to use deadlier methods, such as firearms or suffocation. Women are more likely than men to attempt suicide by poisoning. The most recent figures released by the CDC show that the highest

rate of suicide deaths among women is found between ages 45 and 64, while the highest rate for men occurs at ages 75+ [other sites report 45-59]. Children and young adults also are at risk for suicide. Nationwide, suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 34.

• What about different racial/ethnic groups?

The CDC reports that among racial and ethnic groups, non-Hispanic Whites, American Indians and Alaska Natives tend to have the higher rates of suicides. African Americans tend to have the lowest suicide rate; Hispanics, the second lowest rate.

Where Help Is:

- National Suicide Prevention Hotline has a 24/7 number: 1-800-273-8255 and its website @ suicidepreventionlifeline.org has specific help for youths, veterans, attempt survivors, LBGTQ+, and more
- So does American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, <https://afsp.org> plus "find support," "I've lost someone," "I'm worried someone might be at risk," "I've made an attempt," "my loved one has made an attempt"—no one is alone

Risk factors (nimh.nih.gov) are

- complex, but be aware of:
- depression, other mental or substance abuse disorders
- chronic pain
- a prior attempt or a family history of or exposure to suicide by others
- family violence (physical, sexual abuse)

What to Do for Someone in Pain:

- ask directly
- keep the person safe
- be there for the person
- help him or her connect
- stay connected

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"We wanted to take the stigma out of talking about your feelings."

—Duncan Macmillan

Thinking about Music in the Play

- The boy knows the "rules" of dad's music, what each kind of music means about whether he can open the door or not. What effect does that communication have?
- The family sings at times; what do they sing? They sing when they meet Sam. What do they sing? Are those just facts or also suggestive of more?
- The father communicates with music. When his son goes to college, he gives him records. The son grows or learns (which?) to share his father's hobby or habit (which?). Are those just facts or suggestive of more?
- What roles does music play?
- How do we use music in our society? How do you use music?

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 this 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 heart-wrenchingly sad. **It was a useful way of building a sense of the father and son's relationship and how they communicate to each other.** [bold added]

Communication: Reality and Stereotypes

So British chaps don't talk about emotions. It's not "proper" to discuss emotion; it "isn't done" in public or sometimes ever. They have emotions, but they stay locked up. At least in England. That's the stereotype, of course, but comedian Jonny Donahoe who premiered the show told an American interviewer that when the show transferred to New York he discovered "that New Yorkers are more buttoned-up than Brits. This idea that the British are very withheld is sometimes true but actually it's more true here."

We text and tweet and message all the time; what does he mean we don't talk? Guys talk and obsess about cars or sports or music or video games or all of these, but feelings? They're implicit in the shared activities. I can play you a song or show you a video, but articulate it in my own words?

Expressing emotion means recognizing what it is, naming it, owning it, and speaking it aloud where someone else can hear. Something in our cultural software too often defaults to silence equals strength, that "strong, silent type."

Consider the role of silence in the play, who needs to talk or who needs someone to talk to him or her. Does it happen? The feelings are there—the child's questions, the college student's burgeoning love. But how do people communicate? Dad shuts the study door; she's shy, too. So it's music or the list.

How many of us find ourselves in moments saying only "there just aren't words." Often it's when someone, even oneself, is in pain or grief or conflicted or confused or traumatized or lost. It's a scramble, but speaking implies clarity and precision. Or because what seems to be there can't be looked at, now or perhaps ever, we think. There might be words, but words have consequences.

All the 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. Better to use music?

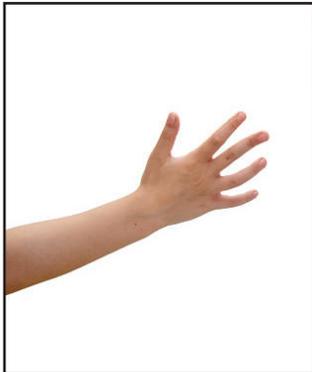
Music *is* emotion in sound. It "provides a means by which people can share emotions, intentions, and meanings even though their spoken languages may be mutually incomprehensible." We can communicate without words! We use someone else's tune and words for our own; we can slipstream, sharing without crafting. Some scholars believe that "we enjoy music because it represents, in crystallized form, the basic processes of human social life.... As we listen to a performance, we are exposed to the distilled essence of sociality."

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Liner note quotations from Dean L. Birch, "Writing and Music: Album Liner Notes," available @ <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/article/viewFile/1682/2443>



What Kind of Play Is This?

In drama the choices of genre traditionally fall into either tragedy or comedy. The topics and issues of *Every Brilliant Thing* are not comic, but the original performer was a comic using techniques he mastered in stand-up and improv work. So what is it?

Theatre early on began stretching the boundaries of these two genres, with satire edging into serious commentary in outrageous ways and tragicomedy engaging each genre but landing in neither camp, instead melding into a strange, occasionally uneasy amalgam. Some comedy pushes toward ideas; some toward farce and physicality. Some tragedy one can observe and lament; some leaves one with entrails eviscerated.

This play tells a story; that's what plays do. Now *how* does it tell that story? The *how* may help us with the *what*.

We clearly have a protagonist—and we have ourselves. That and the story constitute the theatrical event—it is plainly and potently about interaction. That is far from unknown in theatre, but usually we see and hear; we don't say lines or pat a dying dog or take our shoe and sock off as part of the action.

Then again, there is no set, no real "costume"; the performer is dressed like us. There are lights and sound, but not stage lighting, just general lighting—we are all visible to one another. So we are all part of what takes place.

Thus the boundaries of our expectations get nudged and expanded; our definition of what "theatre" is softens and morphs. Why, when our lives are filled with interactive computer screens and interactive games and interactive learning platforms, do we expect to sit quietly in the dark and peer through that "fourth wall" in a theatre? That's so 19th century. Contemporary theatre will meet us where we live. If we expect someone to ACT in a theatre, then he can INTERACT. We're there, too. We can think and feel together about this. That's why we came, isn't it?

Actually the best indicators to what this play is may be analogies rather than genre definition. In structure and content it is very like a support group session—personal information, commentary, and in fact it folds a group session into the action near the end (self-referentiality being very postmodern). In an interview Macmillan calls theatre "interventionist."

The short story's title—"Sleeve Notes"—offers another analogy. This play is to the reality of depression and attempted suicide what sleeve notes or liner notes are to a record album or CD. It is not the actual music, not the depression, but it may know a lot about it. It can express its perspective in its own art form—here dramatic. The "language" may be different than the original—as we see, depression may be essentially without words—and, interestingly, in the world of liner notes, saying nothing is an option.

If an essay appears, it may present expert or scholarly views. It may offer biographical insight. It may be written by someone actually involved in the process. In all, its presence offers us another way in, perhaps another way of listening and experiencing. The feeling is in the "music," but listeners and audience may be interested in detail or explanation. For instance, in one such liner note in 1982, Brian Eno said of one song: "We feel affinities not only with the past, but also with futures that didn't materialise, and with the other variations of the present that we suspect run parallel to the one we have agreed to live in"—a comment that resonates with *Every Brilliant Thing* over 30 years later.

Sleeve notes also often look back, seeking patterns or searching for meaning, for trends, for "family traits," as does this play as it relates or offers the experiences that are its heartbeat and unheard, unvoiced wail. Miles Davis's 1970 album *Bitches Brew* so affected Ralph Gleason, who wrote its liner notes, that he said, "if I could I would write a novel about it, full of life and scenes and people and blood and sweat and love." Or write a play?

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Post-Show In a Nutshell

Here's how various reviews describe the play. Given your experience in the theatre, which do you think is most accurate and why?

- "Brilliant pits reasons to live against the urge not to." (*New York Times*)
- It's a "not-exactly one-man show about suicide and depression, life and death...." (*Los Angeles Times*)
- "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." (*Variety*)
- "...the heart-wrenching yet humorous presentation about depression and the lengths we will go to for those we love." (HBO)
- "One of the funniest plays you'll ever see about depression ... [a] life-affirming piece of theatre." (*The Guardian* [London])
- His major works "all interrogate ideas of personal responsibility"—responsibility, blame, complicity, can it be helped. (Melbourne theatre program)
- or...? Write your own short statement of its subject.

Worksheet for *Every Brilliant Thing*

PRE-SHOW

1. One topic of the play is depression. What do you know or what have you heard about depression? Is it a genuine issue, a real problem?

How would you respond if you found out someone you knew or loved was severely depressed or tried to kill him/herself?

2. What reason(s) would you give someone to keep living? Find ten reasons. Have you asked yourself what keeps you going?
3. Does everyone process problems the same way? Is everyone equally expressive, pro-active, equally willing to seek help? Why or why not?

POST-SHOW

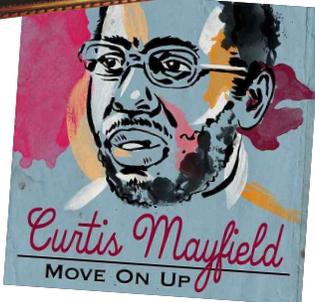
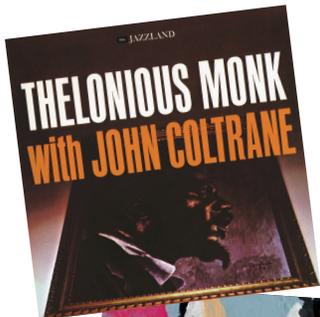
4. What should entry #1,000,001 be on the list? Why?
5. How much does the boy learn about others as he grows up? How much does he learn about himself?
6. Compare the boy's relationship with his mother to his relationship with his father throughout the action; then compare the family dynamic to his marriage.
7. Is making a list an effective way of communicating in this case? How creative is the boy/young man in making his list? What does that suggest? Does it change?
8. What elements and images seemed most meaningful? (The dog? the sock puppet? the music? the closed door and rules? items on the list? others?) Explain why.
9. Do you score your life with music? Why? What does music do for you? Does it work the same way in the play? How would you score this play?

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"At its best [theatre is] a workout for our imaginations and our compassion, and it happens collectively which is increasingly rare and important."

—Duncan Macmillan



"I realized how much the list had changed the way I see the world."

—from the play

Activities and Questions for *Every Brilliant Thing*

These prompts can be useful as post-show personal or analytical response topics, as further research mini-topics, as group work, or as blog prompts. Adapt them to your and your class's needs and interests.

PAGE TO STAGE

- Read the short story "Sleeve Notes" @ <https://www.atthekitchentable.com/sleeve-notes/> and compare the story to the experience of the play. What effect do the added materials have? What effect do the different medium and technique have (page vs. live? private vs. interactive?). Are they the "same"?
- Why isn't the performer given a name?
- 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 response. 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."
- What does the performer mean when he says, "After the service, ... I realized how much the list had changed the way I see the world"? Has it? So it's worked in some way?
- In an interview, playwright Duncan Macmillan said the core of the play is when the performer says: "I have some advice for anyone who has been contemplating suicide.... It's this: Don't do it. Things get better. They might not always get brilliant. But they get better." Is that true in the moment in the play or in general? Would the mother agree?

ISSUES: DEPRESSION, SUICIDE, DEATH, EFFECT on CHILDREN

- The play brims with hot-button topics regarding socio-psychological issues. In a group or individually pick one, research it—especially how to get help and how to respond to someone dealing with it—and write, present, or post your findings. How important is recognizing symptoms and responding?
Check the advice for journalists in how to write about suicide @ afsp.com.
- How do children deal with the impact of depression, suicide, or death? How do teens and adults? What is involved in understanding and coping oneself? In helping another cope?
- In the play, we are told how the performer first learns about death. Compare that account to how you learned about mortality and death.

LISTS

- The performer says the list "changed the way I see the world." When and how did it change it? What differences do we see? Are they permanent?
- In our world there are online Lists of Lists (and probably Lists of Lists of Lists), advice on how to make lists, how to complete lists, and 10 Ways to... do anything.
What lists do you make or deal with in your life? Has a list ever been helpful? What lists do you ignore? Why?
- If you were to make a list for someone else, who would it be for and what would it list? why?



EVERY BRILLIANT THING

BY DUNCAN MACMILLAN



Liner Notes Loudon
Wainwright III On
Parents & Children,
Exes & Excess,
Death & Decay, &
a Few of My Other
Favorite Things



"Theatre and art in general are an opportunity to get in the head of someone who isn't you. It's a healthy thing to try and imagine the world from someone else's perspective."

—Duncan Macmillan

Activities and Questions for *Every Brilliant Thing*/ 2

MUSIC (and Sleeve Notes)

- Make your own musical playlist equivalent to the list in the play—music that expresses "everything worth living for." (You don't have to have 1,000,000 entries.)
- The play uses jazz, soul, and rhythm-and-blues. What is the effect? Is there a special appeal to that kind of music?
- Do you read liner notes/sleeve notes? If so, what set has particularly interested or engaged you or enhanced your experience? What is the value of talking about music? Can we apply that as an analogy to the play?

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

If you'd like to see some samples, one website archive of liner notes is @ http://albumlinernotes.com/Home_Page.html

- If you write music and/or lyrics, what does music communicate? How does it communicate? What is it important for music to say?

THEATRE / STORYTELLING

- Tell a short story or short play (your own or one you're reading) using the technique of this play. How can "they" (reader/audience) become the story, too?
- 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?
- Some reviewers of the stage version have compared it to *Our Town* and a reviewer of the televised version compared it to *It's a Wonderful Life*. How valid are these comparisons? What other play or film would you compare it to and why?

THE VALUE OF THE ARTS

- Playwright Duncan Macmillan states:
It's easy to think we're much more connected to people, we have much more of a global scope and we are much more open to everything that's happening. Actually, it's possible that we're becoming more polarised in our opinions because we filter our friends, we filter on Twitter, Google filters our searches. When you put people with other like-minded people then these people become even more extreme in their views. The more you collect and gather in your tribes, the thinner the slice you're getting. I'm really interested in that and the theatre being one of the few domains where you can have nuance and argument and debate and contradiction and complexity.
Does he have a point? Is "tribalism" real, evident in our society? Does art reach out broadly across perspectives; does it open us? Which art forms?

EVERY BRILLIANT THING

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