

REVIEW

DESPITE OUR FRAILTIES AND FOIBLES ...

‘EVERY BRILLIANT THING’ DECLARES LIFE CAN TRIUMPH



Front Row

Harriet Howard Heithaus

Every Brilliant Thing is a work about a not-so-brilliant subject: us.

The one-act, one-actor play that christened the Struthers Studio Theatre seats the audience around The Storyteller, who could be male or female, as that character fights to save a suicide-prone mother and, at times, his or her own soul.

The Duncan MacMillan play, with script input by Jonny Donahoe, is going to be frankly painful for some people. If you deal with manic-depressive conditions in your own family, you will recognize the frustration, the unrealized potential of your loved one, the pall it casts over family life in general.

“Happiness scared me,” our Storyteller recalls. “It was usually followed by — you know.”

Jeffrey Binder, former associate artistic director of Gulfshore Playhouse, returns for at least one production a year, and luckily for us he is the Storyteller here. Even when some of the play leaves story gaps, it works because Binder has you convinced he’s living through a deteriorating marriage with causes that aren’t credibly explained by the playwright. Binder punches perfect holes in the fourth wall to bring in audience members as his foils, teasing them during their ad libs and cheering their breakout lines.

He may need a month’s vacation after the sparse set — primarily two rolling chairs and a trunk of record albums and books — is struck. Binder is onstage even before the lights dim, handing out slips of paper to theatergoers who, when he reads their number, must



Jeffrey Binder matures from preteen years to his adult life adding to, and learning from, his list of brilliant things in *Every Brilliant Thing* at Gulfshore Playhouse. Photo courtesy Gulfshore Playhouse

call out the brilliant thing written on it:

The even-numbered episodes of “Star Trek.”

Ice cream.

Knowing someone well enough to ask them to check your teeth for broccoli.

He is also likely sizing up the audience for the five people he’ll call on to improvise several lines as the veterinarian, his father, the school counselor, a college professor, even Samantha “Sam” — his wife-to-be. Binder is all over the stage, producing books for them to lecture from, or propelling them around it for car trip scenes via two linked chairs that Binder subtly paddles in a circle with his feet. (To their credit, the actor recruits lived up to the roles thrust on them at the Nov. 14 show, includ-

SEEING ‘EVERY BRILLIANT THING’

What: Gulfshore Playhouse production of the Duncan MacMillan-Jonny Donahoe play
Where: Struthers Studio at Gulfshore Playhouse, 100 Goodlette-Frank Road, Naples
When: Now through Dec. 15; 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays
Tickets: \$39-\$84; specials rates for students and educators; buy at gulfshoreplayhouse.org, the box office or 239.261.7529
Good to know: Dates for audience talkback and discussion are on the website

ing the “father” who deftly riffed a speech to his Storyteller son at a crucial time in his life.)

The Storyteller has to be in tears over the feeling he is powerless to keep his dog, Sherlock Bones, alive;

and much worse, his mother wants to die. Not long after he’ll immerse himself in a sugar-rush dance to a pop tune of his formative years, with snips of songs from Marvin Gaye and Etta James working as emotional hypodermics. Binder is the seasoned actor who can do the handsprings needed for those psychic hurdles.

He has a good stage to work with in the Struthers Studio, the theater that will serve as the black box for most dramatic productions in the new Gulfshore Playhouse complex that opened in October. It is a sort of theater in the square, four tiered sets of seven-seat rows that can be rolled back for cabaret-style productions.

Every Brilliant Thing is also malleable in that the playwright encourages the producing company to substitute his references to pop culture with its own. Thus, “ice cream” might become “sticky toffee pudding” in a British production, and the music would reflect that nation’s own Top 40. Here it’s thoroughly American, down to pronouncing the phenomenon of copycat suicides, the Werther effect, in a way that will make opera lovers cringe.

Although the play’s framework is the young Storyteller’s idea of creating a list of brilliant things to lift his mother’s spirits, it is not the sole source of salvation for him. Sparks are useless without firewood, and we begin to see there is a milieu of love that keeps the flame burning: his father’s gruff dependability, the school psychologist’s sock puppet, a partner who cares even from afar.

It may not have worked for his mother. But for our Storyteller hero, that love is the most brilliant thing of all.

Harriet Howard Heithaus covers arts and entertainment for The Naples Press. [N](#)