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*Everybody* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

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Assistant Directing *Everybody*

Finding its origins in the religious, medieval morality play *Everyman*, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' piece *Everybody* explores the mental and emotional condition of mankind as they travel the journey from life to death. This piece exists to encourage deep thought in the audience as well as the company, and to bring to light the negatives and positives of the fleeting, everyday relationships with other people.

I accepted the opportunity to assistant direct this show for multiple reasons, one of them being the desire to gain experience as a director in a more professional setting. Although the productions we do here are not exactly "professional," the focus and desire that I have experienced to create meaningful art here at Missouri State is lightyears beyond what I have experienced at previous institutions and schools. *Everybody* aimed to rustle something within the audience; to encourage them to reflect on past, present and future actions and relationships with others. Not only was I looking to gain directing experience but having taken a medieval theatre class of Kyle's in the past, I wanted to learn how to approach such an open ended and bare-bone piece of text and turn it into the impactful art that it is supposed to be. I have read *Everyman* in my past, and at the time was indeed confused at such a talked-about work with so little within it. Upon the first couple initial read-throughs of *Everyman*, I felt myself struggling to grasp certain parts of it, such as the transitions back and forth between the allegory scenes and the A/B/C/D/Everybody scenes and the Danse Macabre. Upon entering rehearsals and seeing the

actors experiment with the text, as well as working with the actors and the text myself, I learned that medieval-type theatre is meant to be put up on its feet and performed in order for the work's true potential to come together in a performable fashion.

*Everybody's* lack of scripted direction allowed for the actors to go down multiple different paths of character and relationship exploration, and Kyle's decision to incorporate the use of gesture and exercises based around Japanese Noh Theatre's "Jo-Ha-Kyu" technique resulted in the actors learning to utilize tempo and gesture in meaningful ways. Learning about the principle of gesture, that it is "not a story, but an interaction," and that it should provide an insightful "shape for the action," was not only important for the actors to learn, but for me as well. It would not have been possible to give constructive notes or ask the actors the occasional thought-provoking question if I had not fully understood the goal of using gesture in the show, such as the chorus scenes. Included in the ambiguity of *Everybody*, the allegorical characters were each developed according to the actor's interpretation as well as how the actor assumed the audience interprets their allegory. Death, for example, has endless different meanings for different people. Everyone has their own interactions with death on a widely diverse scale, but there are at the same time universal things about death that are experienced by everybody. The actor playing Death had to take into account how to deliver her dialogue in such a way that it would reach specifically the ensemble, but likewise the audience. For example, once *Everybody* has travelled to the grave, Understanding wonders aloud, perhaps on *Everybody's* behalf, if knowing a few more details about dying before it comes would make them a better person, and Death retorts, "I don't know, would it?" This line was impactful, especially for me. Seeing it in person and feeling the weight of this rhetorical question in the air was a great example of how

the allegorical characters are meant to provoke meaningful thought in both the actors and the audience.

The most basic, yet maybe one of the most helpful things an assistant director can do is take notes during rehearsals. Notes for the actors are extremely helpful in narrowing down acting choices, playing with character and delivery, blocking, and endless other things. Every night that I was at rehearsal, I took diligent notes to deliver to the actors once the rehearsal or the run was wrapped up. Typically, my director, Kyle, would give his notes first, and anything that he did not mention that I also had written down that seemed helpful or important was told to the actors. I would take notes on blocking, beats, choices that I thought were good or could be afforded to be lost, and I would occasionally ask actors a question that I had about their character that I thought answering could, in turn, benefit them. Every now and then, in rehearsal, I would have a blocking or directorial idea and would approach our director and see what he thought of the idea. Sometimes we would try them and like them, and others we would not. If I had to pick a favorite moment where I suggested something, it would be the crawling that happened in the chorus scene after the Friendship scene. At a certain point in the cacophony of voices playing, two of the Somebodies exit, and the two remaining onstage were to slowly “melt” where they stood and then crawl offstage like a wounded, unknown creature. I had the idea of the two melting Somebodies to take the fabric set dressing piece, drape it over themselves, and *then* crawl offstage. I believed that this would only add to the illusion of alien-like, wounded, amorphous blobs abandoning Everybody alone with their critical thoughts. Upon trying it, it looked awesome, and we kept the choice. Even though the moment was seemingly small in the grand scheme of the show, I am proud that my idea was liked and included in the final production.

As assistant director, I had many different tasks, with one of them being utilizing our understudies. Throughout the rehearsal experience, I was given the occasional task of working an allegory scene while the main company was occupied. I was incredibly thankful to have such willing and creative understudies to work with because without them, the Danse Macabre scene and its preceding scene would not have been staged and fleshed out in time enough for the performances. Early on in the rehearsal process, I took aside one of our understudies and Love to block the build up to the Danse and to establish what type or what level of emotional and mental connection that Love and Everybody would need to be on in order for the actors as well as the audience truly go on a journey with Love. The chunk of repetitive dialogue leading up to the Danse was a wonderful challenge to take on with Love and an understudy/Everybody because it seems very basic and over-with on paper. In order to establish the emotional journey that Everybody goes on even just within the repetitive dialogue, I went almost back-and-forth between having Love and an understudy find different ways to move around the space and take up the whole room with their words and using Meisner-like activities while physically still in order to focus all the energy into what they were saying. I asked for feedback from the actors that I was working with after each exercise and the information they would give me would be crucial in deciding what steps to take next in the scene's process. In the script, Everybody gets actually nude on stage while Love tells them what to say and do. Due to the current circumstances, we could not have our actors actually do that, but instead have them strip down into their base layer of blacks. Through the work that I did with Love, the understudies, and the Everybodies, when Love demands that Everybody take off their clothes, the actor's base clothing layer was, in every sense, them being nude - to both them and the audience.

Once the scene leading up to the Danse Macabre was solidified, I was tasked with staging the Danse itself. The idea of this task was incredibly daunting, seeing as I am not a dancer, not to mention a choreographer. But the more I wallowed in the different ideas I had for this climactic scene while in rehearsal, the more came to mind. Knowing that there was not going to be any music played during this meant that I had to either create some kind of weird, vocal soundtrack of my own, or I had to work with the actors on *them* creating some kind of acapella soundtrack. The entirety of the Danse scene was going to get each of the actors out of their physical and vocal comfort zones even if by only a little. I approached the actors and explained that we would need to build the accompaniment from the ground up, starting with a base beat. They quickly put that together and then we needed the vocals. This whole scene needed to accomplish the illustration of an emotional journey - Everybody is dying but they just so happen to be learning about the essence of Love while hoping the whole time that they will not be alone by the end of the Danse. I wanted the vocals to have layers, and to occasionally drop to be flat to snap the audience back into remembering the grim truth behind the beautiful performance before them. The dance needed to be trance-like with purposeful movements and an emotional definition to them. Love's leading Everybody to the centerstage block and rotating them to see the audience, the visceral reaction that Everybody has to falling back into shame in front of the audience, the encouragement that Love wordlessly offers in order to bring Everybody all the way back around to acceptance; this journey resulted in a somewhat-interpretive partner dance that wordlessly told an entire story. I had a wonderful teaching and learning experience working alongside the understudies on this scene and the one before it. Without the willing collaboration of the understudies, these important scenes would not have come together into the art piece that they evolved into.

Towards the end of the rehearsal process, it became my turn to finally run a night of rehearsal on my own. I decided that I wanted the actors to do a speed-through of the show while I also shouted out different nights to switch to which correlated to character changes. In my personal experience, speed-throughs are helpful in having a new kind of fun with a show that you have been doing the same for weeks on end. The addition of quick and chaotic energy to a show like this can reignite character fires and even help the actors discover new things about blocking or line delivery. The calling out and changing of nights at random points during the speed-through was done with the purpose of keeping the actors on their toes and letting the dialogue that they had memorized come naturally while their energy was to be focused on the fun within the character relationships. During the speed-through, the notes I took were a majority of things I enjoyed, or thought were funny, but ultimately the energy boost was extremely helpful that far into the process. Once the speed-through was finished, we took a break, and proceeded to a normal run-through. After the run was finished, I gave my notes, and then rehearsal was finished! At that point in the rehearsal process, I was thankful that the actors had such a solid grasp on the material because it made facilitating a rehearsal much easier.

Being based on such an old piece of theatrical literature, it raises the question of importance and relevance of being produced today, in 2021. With the dramatic change in social culture due to the world's recent pandemic, many elements of social interaction have changed dramatically or have been lost completely. The simple concept of travelling a couple of hours to visit family for a birthday has been unacceptable for over a year until the recent development of vaccines, thus allowing for more social freedom. But the social, mental, and emotional damage that physical lockdowns have taken on mankind has not been forgiving. Many people have genuinely lost some of their social skills and have developed fears or biases against other people

that they have no choice but to share this Earth with. *Everybody* was important to present in today's climate because its goal was to remind people that we are all still human, despite whatever happens in our lives or the world around us. It reminds us to think through your relationships with other people every once and a while, and that people may look past imperfections in exchange for not being alone, which can be both a good and a bad thing. Understanding's monologue at the end of the show leaves the audience explicitly with the message, "maybe let's just all be a little better about recycling. Also really really listening to each other, and maybe being a little less judgmental and more forgiving, but, also, owning up to our mistakes and being open to changing our own minds. Lead with our Understanding. You know: just being nice to each other," which I believe perfectly sums up the seemingly complex story of *Everybody*. This show was important to put on because it reminded the audience and those involved with the process that we are all human, and even though that truth has obvious downsides, such as dying, it also has positives such as family, friendship, and love.