

Dicing with Death: A Review of Everybody at the Burbage

Dying is a lonely pursuit, but what if you had the chance to invite a plus one on your journey to the afterlife? Would anyone come along for the ultimate one-way ride? They say you can't take it with you, but what exactly CAN you take?

Prolific contemporary playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *Everybody* takes a 15th century English morality play titled *The Somonyng of Everyman* [sic] (a play based on a Dutch play, which itself was based on a Buddhist fable) and brings it into the 21st century. It's no wonder this story has permeated across cultures and centuries given its universal (if heavy) subject of mortality, nor that Jacobs-Jenkins would be up to the challenge of tackling the subject, given the lofty themes of his previous plays. While the 15th century iteration existed to scare audiences into moral behavior as dictated by the church, Jacobs-Jenkins attempts to take a more lighthearted, if necessarily existential, approach: The former focuses more on death while the latter makes it about life.

Burbage Theater Company's production, directed by **Logan Serabian**, marks the first time *Everybody* has been performed in Rhode Island, as well as Burbage's first in-person production in 18 months.

The title *Everybody* highlights the simple fact that what the audience is witnessing will happen to each and every one of us - that death does in fact come for, well, everybody. This is further illustrated by randomizing the cast. Five members of the cast (**Tabi Baez-Bradway, Michael Greene, Jessie March, Mary Mullane** and **Michael Thibeault**) begin the show each night not knowing who they will be playing - a nightmare every actor has had at some point or another. Their roles are determined by a roll of the dice. One ends up playing Everybody, the sorry sap who will be shuffling off this mortal coil. The others are assigned multiple supporting roles along Everybody's journey. In total, there are 120 possible variations, so no two shows will be exactly the same. This means that each actor has done the equivalent of five actors' rehearsal, but in the performance we saw, they all seemed as secure in their parts as they would if not randomly assigned.

The show begins with your standard pre-show announcements from a charismatic and engaging usher (**James Lucey**) about silencing your phones and locating the fire exits. But in another moment, we realize that The Usher is more than just a mere mortal usher; this is actually God - an usher of sorts, given that he ushered in existence.

While not a vengeful God, he is a disappointed God. Looking to understand what went wrong with humanity, God sends his jaded, overworked assistant, Death (**Margaret Melozzi**), to get Everybody so they can answer for how they lived their life. And so it is that Death comes for Everybody. Everybody is, understandably, apprehensive about their situation and requests the chance to invite a companion to accompany them. Death agrees to give Everybody the chance to ask around while she gets changed for the journey, doubtful that they will be able to find anyone willing to tag along.

Sure enough, Everybody is forsaken by Friendship, Kinship and even their precious Stuff. In the end, it is Love (**Vey Taylor**) who, though miffed at having been forgotten for so long and requiring Everybody to abandon some dignity first, accompanies Everybody to the grave.

The show is weakest in the voiceover that weaves between scenes, providing a meta context for the rest of the show as a dying Everybody describes a dream to their friends. The voiceover breaks the allegorical nature of the play and isn't particularly engaging: the issues this monologue raises end up feeling like a footnote that most of the audience is bound to forget amidst the more prominent themes of the play.

There is something profoundly fitting about the timing of this production - a play about mortality on the heels of a pandemic. *Everybody* encourages its audience to reflect on their lives and evaluate what matters. In the final moments, the Usher poses the question of why, when we talk about death, we really end up talking about life. Perhaps it is because life is what gives death meaning, and, in turn, love is what gives life meaning. The meaning of life may be a question too big to be answered by one 90-minute play, but the answer proposed in *Everybody* seems like a lovely place to start.

Burbage Theatre Company's production of Everybody runs through Dec 5. For tickets, visit burbagetheatreco.org