

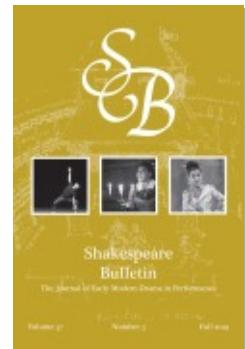


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Everybody by Artists Repertory Theatre (review)

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PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

Everybody

Presented by **Artists Repertory Theatre** at the **Alder Stage**, Portland, Oregon. November 25–December 30, 2018. By Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. Directed by Jessica Wallenfels and Dámaso Rodríguez. Scenic design by Tim Stapleton. Sound design by Phil Johnson. Props master and puppet design by Robert Amico. With Andrea Vernae (Somebody), Barbie Wu (Somebody), John San Nicolas (Somebody), Michael Mendelson (Somebody), Sara Hennessy (Somebody), Sarah Lucht (Usher/God/Understanding), Ted Rooney (Death), Falynn Burton (Love), Eva Rodríguez (Time), and Alex Blesi (Evil).

ELIZABETH E. TAVARES, *Pacific University*

How does one make a medieval English morality play relevant for 2018? By thematizing one of the oldest devices of actorly virtuosity, doubling, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's Pulitzer-nominated *Everybody* has found a way to access contemporary ideas about death in exploring the intersection with the identity politics of race. Advertising materials for the ninety-minute play promoted not its heritage, but the fact that every performance would be highly unique due to an embedded lottery device. As the Usher (Sarah Lucht) explained at the top of the show while doling out bingo balls from a cage, this was done in order to "themmatize the randomness of death while also destabilizing your [the audience's] preconceived notions about identity."

To achieve this effect, the play requires five of its actors to learn all of five distinct parts. Four of the parts, the Somebodies, were comprised of a range of small roles so that one night one might play Stuff and Beauty, while on another Cousin and Wisdom. Somebody playing the allegorical figure of Friendship would don the appropriately labeled overcoat with the name stitched on the back, while another playing Beauty would wear a wreath on their head made of plastic flowers and Maypole streamers. The individual who drew the black bingo ball from the lottery cage, however, played the protagonist, Everybody, for the evening. Such a structure posed a two-fold challenge, actor Michael Mendelsohn told me midway through the run: he had to memorize the large volume of lines that made up the many individual Somebody roles while also keep fresh in his mind



The clew board for *Everybody*, dir. Jessica Wallenfels and Dámaso Rodríguez. Artists Repertory Theatre, 2018. Photo by Jeff Hayes, courtesy of Artists Repertory Theatre.

the ability to distinguish between and recall the randomly allocated part live and in front of an audience with no time to reflect or prepare.

Having shifted to a repertory company model back in 2008 to better foster and protect its theater makers, who hail from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, the play was particularly well-suited to Artists Repertory Theatre (ART). To its local audiences all the cast members had been regular faces for at least three seasons or more; further, all of the actors had significant experience working both with the director and each other, which director Dámaso Rodríguez said established the necessary trust and familiarity with one another's working styles early on, making the most of a grueling rehearsal schedule.

To underscore the play's many metatheatrical tactics, ART set up a large chart outside the theatre with the performance dates running across the top. Each of the main characters was listed down the side, and each actor had a different colored ball of yarn. A pin was used to affix their thread to the part they received each night, creating a gradual EKG for the lifeline of each actor's experience—and by extension, rewarding returner audiences who could follow the variations every time they came back. As with Theseus wending his way through the labyrinth, each ac-

tor's clew materially traced the paths of their experience, dictated by the vagaries of Fate.

The play spoke to two sets of "knowing" audiences. Games wherein the script required the actors to "[insert theatre name here]" facilitated a sense of community for local audiences and season subscribers through humor. Across the four performances I attended, the quip from Friendship that "there's only so much time in the world and everyone knows multitasking leads to diminished quality of the overall work and honestly, like, maybe it's not all about you, Everybody?" never failed to get a laugh in drawing attention to the apparent difficulty of knowing all the parts of a play only to play one each night. The play also gestured toward those familiar with early English or liturgical drama in its loyalty to the source material, the medieval *Everyman*. This ranged from major beats of the plot down to a character claiming a stubbed toe in order to avoid the hereafter.

Seeing the show more than once opened up a series of new questions. For example, the character of Stuff was at the center of a particularly rich vignette in which he stood on a pedestal while wearing a see-through plastic coat built of pockets containing medicine bottles, newspapers, cookie cutters, and other bric-a-brac. The smart exchange about the human obsession with objects—and their inability to actually own those objects beyond the grave, and so perhaps never owning them at all—had a very different valence when played by the female-identifying actors of color than when by their white male counterparts. When on the platform and supported by a human-sized doll stand, Barbie Wu's performance as Stuff drew attention to racial fetishization for the mail-order porcelain bride, while Dre Verna underscored through movement her objectification as if on a slave sale auction block.

The play constantly drew attention to its own artifice in order to thematize the ways in which contemporary rhetoric around desert and salvation is racialized. Two small changes powerfully gestured to this larger implication. First, while Love (Falynn Burton) was a crucial character, she scoured Everybody herself rather than oversee his own self-flagellation. Cast intentionally as and performed by the same black woman at every performance, Love interrupted the action (having been seated in the audience all along) and nearly left the play altogether for being "misrepresented." It is only when Love exposed herself that Everybody saw a new opportunity and begged her to go on "the journey" (to die) with them.

In order to win Love's favor, Everybody was commanded to undress and then run around the stage perimeter, perform planks, and incant a mantra about their own self-loathing and resistance to change. This

culminated in a final breakdown into tears, cradled in the arms of Love. The zap of a defibrillator sounded and Everybody struck a *pieta* pose within a single beam of light before being subsumed by an enormous, disarticulated skeleton puppet for the *danse macabre*. Super-sized puppets, comprised of a skull and arms and hands controlled by two individuals each for each limb, were reminiscent of modern European civic parades. The effort to produce the non-narrative meditation on the experience of crossing over from life to death left me wanting much more of the sequence. While the *danse* served to cap an otherwise well-developed catharsis, it seems troubling for the larger Judeo-Christian context of the play that Everybody was not an agent in their own salvation.

The second change from the original likewise excused Everybody from taking responsibility for themselves. After the *danse*, Death returned in his travelling clothes to escort Everybody to the Other Side for his “presentation” or self-accounting. It was a delightful moment as all of the actors who had played roles that failed to accompany and support Everybody in their journey to death (Friendship, Kinship, Cousin, and Stuff) returned in new guises as Understanding, Strength, Mind, Beauty, and Five Senses to help. Upon a dirt hole crumbling open at the back of the stage, however, it was ultimately only Love and the late arrival, All-The-Shitty-Evil-Things-You’ve-Done-To-The-World-And-Other-People, that were willing to accompany Everybody. This version offered a stark contrast to Everyman’s inclusion of Good Deeds undertaking the journey with Everyman; while the medieval play presents hope in the form of an Angel showing off Everyman’s actual Book of Account as having passed God’s test, in this retelling, there was no surety as to where Everybody would end up.

If the play had a failing, it was in the bookends. The Usher character went on far too long at the start explaining the nature of a morality play and how we as modern audiences might approach it. While likely meant to be comic, the didactic quality of these speeches had the effect of patronizing audiences before the performance had barely begun. The Usher returned at the end, as Understanding, to coach audiences again through a series of empty platitudes that undermined the productive discomfort of Everybody’s irresolution. The frame device didn’t seem to know the moral of its own play, which was beautifully articulated by Everybody at a high-point of despair: “Love. My one true friend. The others have deserted me, every one; I loved them better than my Love alone.” Ultimately, the play’s general dramaturgy of free will—from the nightly clews and lottery structure to a maze painted on the boards of

the stage—compellingly stressed the distinctiveness of an individual's journey while simultaneously illuminating the fact that the solution to the labyrinth is the same for everybody.



The Tragedy of King Richard the Second

Presented by the **Almeida Theatre**, London. December 10, 2018–February 2, 2019. Directed by Joe Hill-Gibbins. Design by ULTZ. Light by James Farncombe. Sound by Peter Rice. Dramaturgy by Jeff James. With Simon Russell Beale (King Richard the Second), Leo Bill (Bolingbroke), Martins Imhangbe (Bagot/Aumerle), Natalie Klamar (Carlisle), John Mackay (York), Joseph Mydell (Gaunt/Willoughby), Saskia Reeves (Mowbray/Bushy/Green/Duchess of York), and Robin Weaver (Northumberland).

JAMES N. LOEHLIN, *The University of Texas at Austin*

Simon Russell Beale was born to play Richard II. His stage career, now in its fourth decade, has been populated by characters of high intelligence, intense self-regard, lyrical imagination, and crushing grief. His age and appearance, grizzled and stocky, don't match up with traditional conceptions of the elegant, feckless young king, but this quibble was easily overcome by the conceit of Joe Hill-Gibbins's stark and breathless production.

The whole play seemed to take place in a prison of the mind. Richard's tragic Passion remained central throughout, with the other characters often a flitting chorus on the periphery of the grimy grey set. The cast of eight, dressed in drab, monochromatic modern clothes, never left the bleak institutional enclosure for the ninety-five minutes of the play's relentless running time.

The prison metaphor was plainly central to the production; the program contained several essays from inmates about the stresses of solitary confinement. The performance started with Beale's Richard in a cold spotlight, performing an abbreviated version of Richard's act five prison speech, while the other actors faced the shadowy wall upstage. Even in his opening lines, Beale showed his characteristic ability to highlight moments of psychological insight through the strategic deployment of the pointed, not to say self-indulgent, pause. "I have been studying how I may compare / This prison—where I live—unto the world," he began, making the audience feel the weight of that realization, "*where I live.*" Incarceration is not a temporary ordeal but a permanent, even existential,