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## Here comes 'Everybody'

'Everybody' reimagines the classic medieval morality play in the FSU/Asolo Acting Conservatory's latest production.

By [Marty Fugate](#) | 11:47 a.m. October 22, 2021



"Love" (Evan Stevens) coaches "Everybody" (Sidney Story) in Asolo Conservatory's production. (Photo by Frank Atura)

ARTS + CULTURE

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Live theater doesn't obey the normal laws of time. Its history of plays goes back to civilization's dawn. But in a playwright's imagination, those plays are all happening now. A powerful imagination can put a play from the past through a sea change. And transform it into a play for the future. Which brings us to ...

"Everyman," a morality play from the 15th century. Its titular hero stood for the whole human race. This universal "Everyman" meets a series of allegorical figures (Love, Kindred, Fellowship, etc.) along his life's journey. (Spoiler alert: Everyman meets God and Death at the end.) That play was of its time — a blunt reminder to all-Christian audiences: *Clean up your act while you're still breathing, folks.* In our time, Brandan Jacobs-Jenkins took the play apart and put it back together. He reimagined it as "Everybody" — a 21st century allegory speaking to living audiences of all religious (or irreligious) flavors. The [FSU/Asolo Acting Conservatory](#) will be performing this play — in a student



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actor production directed by Greg Leaming. A bold choice, seeing that the takeaway is: “You’re all going to die.” What was he thinking? We wanted to know, so we asked.

### What drew you to “Everybody” in the first place?

I’ve wanted to stage “Everyman” for some time— it’s such a classic, historical text. I’ve also been drawn to directing one of Brandan Jacobs-Jenkins’ plays — he’s one of America’s most interesting living playwrights. He rethinks how theater works with every play he writes. “Everybody” lets me achieve both goals. I was so curious to find out what Jacobs-Jenkins did with the medieval material. So I read the script, and I wasn’t disappointed. He turns “Everyman” inside-out and make it utterly contemporary. But he still manages to tell a powerful story that doesn’t sugarcoat the core truth of the original.

### “We’re all going to die,” if I recall.

Basically. Jacobs-Jenkins repeats that reminder in “Everybody.” Then he suggests that we rethink the way we live. Not in terms of the next life, but this one. It’s a great message — especially now. After 18th months of Covid, we’ve all been facing our own mortality. The original playwright faced it in the 15th century. Jacobs-Jenkins does too — but he comes up with radically different answers that aren’t confined to any belief system. That choice sets “Everybody” apart from the original. “Everyman” was essentially a religious text. It was all about “Life is short. At the end you meet God.”

### Straighten up and fly right!

Pretty much. Jacobs-Jenkins goes far, far away from that — although God makes a brief appearance. But his key focus is the fact that we have to give everything up at the end of our lives. We *all* have to cross that line — with no idea of what’s on the other side.

### It’s the ultimate ticking clock.

Sure. The natural human tendency is to blot that out of your mind. “Everybody” suggests that it’s better to face that final deadline.

### Look it in the eye.

Yes. Have the courage to accept the end of your story. *Know* you’re going to die — then you’ll really start to live. It’s a great moral. It’s obviously not the original moral! But it’s what Jacobs-Jenkins is telling us.

**That reminds me of a line from Kazantzakis’ “Zorba the Greek.” It was something like... “Many people live like they’re never going to die. I live like I’m going to die any minute.”**

I think Jacobs-Jenkins would agree with Zorba.

**And a lot of folks have agreed with Zorba over the centuries. And he wasn’t the first to express that opinion. *Carpe diem*, and all that. It’s what “Everyman” was saying. The message is really timeless.**

I agree. But “Everybody” *isn’t* just “Everyman” retooled — I want to be clear about that. Jacobs-Jenkins rewrites and rethinks it entirely. He’s looking at the old allegory with a very, very contemporary eye. And what’s so fascinating

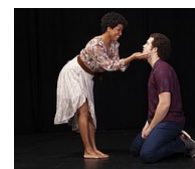
### If you go

**When:** Nov. 2 through 21

**Where:** FSU Center for the Performing Arts, 5555 N. Tamiami Trail

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to me — he also draws on medieval theatrical structure.



"Everybody" (Dreaa Baudy) tries to bring "Stuff" (Christian Douglass) on his journey in Asolo Conservatory's production. (Photo by Frank Atura)

### Structure in what sense?

The distance between actor and audience. Those early companies would tour to different villages in wagons and set up in the town square. They'd perform — and there'd be no fourth wall. You couldn't just sit back and watch the play. They'd engage the audience on a very deep level. Jacobs-Jenkins takes a similar approach. But there's no direct audience participation — let me say that right now.

### So, it's not like improv? Death doesn't grab you from your chair and drag you on stage?

No. Thank God. But "Everybody" *does* profoundly engage you in a totally new way. It's not the standard theatrical experience of: The lights go off; you watch the play; the lights come up; and then you go home. It's a very different animal.

### How does "Everybody" work as a teaching tool?

It works beautifully, on so many levels. The material, the methods — they're all perfectly suited to our company of second-year actors.

### "Everyman" had the typical medieval cast of allegorical stock characters. Did the playwright cast "Everybody" with his own set of symbolic entities?

He did — in his own brilliant way. Jacobs-Jenkins' characters are allegorical — but they're not the same.

### OK. So, method acting wouldn't work. Your actors need a different theatrical toolbox.

Not entirely. Jacobs-Jenkins characters *are* symbolic, but they're not two-dimensional. A broad, larger-than-life portrayal won't work for them. You have to give them life. That's the key to doing this play — as our students have discovered in rehearsals. You have to find the simple human truth at the heart of each character. That's especially true for "Everybody," the title character. He or she travels through life and realizes how much they'll be losing. That character is very funny, very dark, and very moving. "Everybody" has got to be real to make that work. If not, they're just a cartoon.



Second-year students Macaria Chaparro Martinez, Dreaa Baudy, Christian Douglass, Joe Ayers, Evan Stevens, and Erin O'Conner, stage the allegory of "Everybody". (Photo by Frank Atura.) .jpg

### Who plays the “Everybody” character?

Everybody.

### Huh?

Before each performance, the actor playing “Everybody” is drawn by a lottery, which takes place on stage. So, the lead actor could be different on any given night. After one actor is cast in the “Everybody” role, the other actors have to jump into all the roles they won't be playing. It's a logistical nightmare, but the students are having an awful lot of fun with it.

### Let's talk about stagecraft. Characterization aside, does “Everybody” teach any technical lessons?

It's packed with lessons. Jacobs-Jenkins throws a *huge* monkey wrench at our students with this play. There are interactions with recorded dialogue, scenes that go black, dance breaks, black lights, you name it.

### That sounds like a theatrical obstacle course.

That's exactly what it is. Our student actors get a real work out — and audiences will too. Jacobs-Jenkins rethinks and reimagines the possibilities of theater — and that makes for a very exciting evening. “Everybody” is so amazingly theatrical, so much fun, and so unpredictable. You never know where the scenes are going to go. I guarantee you've ever seen anything like it on stage.

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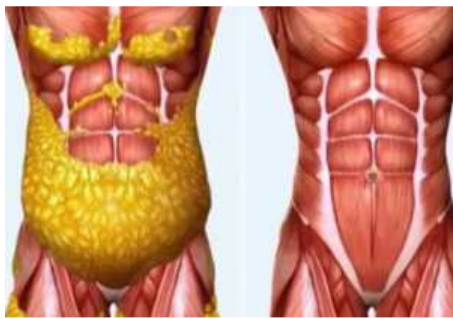


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