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'Everybody' - a must see for everyone at Cal Shakes

By *Sophie Braccini*

The five Somebodies-Sarita Ocen (left foreground), Lance Gardner (left rear), Jenny Nelson, Jomar Tagatac (second from right), and Stacy Ross (far right) getting their roles assigned by a nightly lottery conducted by Victor Talmadge (Death). Photo Alessandra Mello / mellophoto.com

and how all that has surrounded Everybody all her/his life will now respond to her/his plea as she/he faces the ultimate test.

The direction by Nataki Garrett is remarkable. She explained that she is a friend of the playwright and has been following Jacobs-Jenkins' work for years. She also said that he does not give a lot of cues to directors on how to set his plays up. Garrett and the CalShakes creative team have created a set and scenic movements to give the audience the feel that the characters are just one of them. It would not be fair to future audiences to share too much about how the play is delivered. But the audience really gets an almost unsettling feeling that it is one of them who will face God that night. It is of course purposeful; we will all be alone within our mortal envelope when Death comes.

The set, the sounds, the lights, all participate in the creation of the theatrical illusion under the stars. Rarely has it felt that a play was made for the outside setting of the Bruns amphitheater as much as "Everybody." Often the backdrop there recreates the illusion of an indoor traditional theater. But here the mythical dimension of the tale, its timeless and universal reach feels as if it was made for this immense outdoors.

Something has to be said about the actors. Every night only God and Death are already cast, all the other characters are chosen through a lottery, a simple and wonderful way to remind us of the uncontrollable randomness of life. Garrett explained that she cast a group of actors that would resemble the audience at Cal Shakes. She scrutinized tens of shots where the audience was present. All the actors are some of the best in the Bay Area and deliver superbly. The night this reporter saw the play, Stacy Ross was playing Everybody, rendering a very convincing performance. She is a beautiful actress in every sense of the word, digging deep into our humanity, and creating a touching and highly loveable character. Britney Frazier who conducts the opening by channeling God is superb.

There are several spectacular moments in the play. Spectators will love the esthetics and creativity of the dance of the bones. The last scene has surprises and delivers the ultimate lesson. When the play ended after 90 minutes, this reporter found herself wanting more.

We have the privilege of having this beautiful setting in our Lamorinda community, this play there is a summer must-see. There is some use of offensive words in the play, but no blasphemy, and someone underdresses, to swim suit level. Parents will decide whether or not the play is appropriate for young children.

Featured in The New York Times as "one of this country's most original and illuminating writers," Jacobs-Jenkins' play "Everybody" was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in the drama category in 2017. His other plays include "War," "Gloria" (Pulitzer Prize-finalist), "Appropriate," "An Octoroon" and "Neighbors."

California Shakespeare Theater's production of "Everybody" runs at the Bruns Amphitheater in Orinda until Aug. 5. For tickets, visit www.calshakes.org.

It is said that theater is a place to examine the human condition's most essential questions, and "Everybody," the new play that opened at Cal Shakes on July 21, has fulfilled that mission. Based on ancient mythological tales that endure, this play strips human reality to the bone. In doing so it holds some of the moralistic and deep universal accents of old myths. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, the writer who reformulated the play, gave it contemporary relevance and humor, taking everybody on a most memorable and relevant theatrical journey.

Yes, the play is about death, and it is also full of humor - dark humor, at times, of course. The story is simple, God is not happy with his creation and asks Death to bring him everybody to explain to their creator what they have done wrong and what they have done right. Death calls everybody. One person embodies that concept and takes on the moniker of Everybody.

Everybody is terrified and, as Everybody knows there is no saying no to death, he/she asks to at least bring someone along not to have to face the unknowable alone. Death agrees and tells her/him that if Everybody can find someone to join her/ him, then Everybody can bring that person along.

The play shows the reaction of friends, next of kin,

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