

Edinburgh Fringe 2015 Review: Every Brilliant Thing

Jonny Donahoe gets a deserved standing ovation in this one man play about finding joy in the darkest places

By [Chris Owen](#), Editor (2015/16)

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Rating: ★★★★★

Venue: Roundabout, Summerhall

To hold an audience's attention with any meaningful tautness is no easy feat for any lone actor. Add depression into the mix, and it's nigh-on impossible to create an atmosphere that anyone's really enjoying being a part of. Jonny Donahoe makes such a fraught mission statement look a breeze as he unpacks a sad, uplifting tale of a seven year old boy who starts a list of everything to live for as a gift to his suicidal mum.

Primarily, *Every Brilliant Thing* is a master-class in successful audience participation. Donahoe divides up his list in the audience and calls on them to contribute a positive thought, in a simple but supremely engaging device. Audience members also become his wife, father, teacher and vet (for which this reviewer had the pleasure) as he goes through life adding to his list and fighting his demons. When the crowd, sat in the round, becomes his support group, it's enough to tug even the most robust of heartstrings. The technique has a collaborative resonance which, along with the natural lighting that illuminates the audience as much as the stage, both grounds the drama and elevates reality by casting the assembly itself.

Donahoe has an extraordinary range and a rare capability to react both in and out of character simultaneously to an unexpected contribution from the audience – perhaps the quality is so rare because it's not often one called upon, in that it asks the actor to harness much of the skill of the improvising comic. He pitches his performance perfectly for the space and is as astute and nuanced in playing a seven year old as he is a grieving middle-aged man. A shade of the child's entertainer to his vocal delivery works here but could be a disaster in any other role, yet when he delivers the play's moral cornerstone

line (“If you lead a full life and get to the end of it without ever feeling crushingly depressed, you probably haven’t been paying attention”) it’s with the poignancy of an actor in complete mastery of one’s craft.

A theatrical experience that is warm yet not sickly, colourful yet subtle is a rare thing. Like the story’s central character, *Every Brilliant Thing* wears its heart on its sleeve and, when Jonny Donahoe wins his ovation on the 13th of a 19 date run of a production he’s played around the world and still looks visibly, tangibly moved, it’s clear to see why the marriage of this actor to this play is such an overwhelming success.



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