

What is on your list?

Review for the Lansing City Pulse By Tom Helma

An intimate confession; the use of light-hearted humor to shine a light into the darkest corners of one's despair.

"Every Brilliant Thing," now playing at Peppermint Creek, is a one-person play that invites the audience into the life of "the narrator," who describes the challenges of growing up in a family with an episodically despairing, suicidal mother.

Actor Spencer Smith is the narrator — a storyteller who spans the ages of 6 to young adulthood, explaining the coping device he uses as he ages to avoid being overwhelmed by traumatic circumstances, i.e. the use of a simple listing of good things in life of which to be appreciative.



Number one, for the 7-year-old, is ice cream. The list quickly expands: the color yellow, hugging, bubble wrap, old books, skinny dipping, chocolate, sunlight, friendly cats, old books, hammocks, Kung Fu movies, laughing so loud you shoot milk out your nose and construction cranes. You get the idea. Anything can be on the list.

Smith, as the narrator, engages the audience in this listing process by pre-assigning both numbers and specific "good things" to be announced by them.

On occasion, he invites audience members to play specific parts: his father, a girlfriend who proposes to him and becomes his wife and a kind elementary school teacher who talks to the child-version of him with a sock puppet.

As the narrator grows up, the list continues to grow with him. He loses the list, finds it, puts it away and brings it out again and again until it grows to a million brilliant things. He uses it to fall in love, to marry, to cope with a marital separation and more.

"Every Brilliant Thing," written by Duncan Macmillan with Jonny Donahoe, has a Ted Talk quality to it. It's an ongoing engaging conversation with the audience that shows a strategy of clever desperate denial that works until ultimately it does not.

The narrator has to face himself, seek therapy and finally address the profound sadness of losing a mother who has succeeded in ending her life.

Smith is perfect in this role, evoking both empathy and identification — especially for any in the audience who may have grown up in families where a parent was periodically hospitalized with emotional, suicidal issues.