# Lenny Henry turns Every Brilliant Thing into communal therapy on the West End



Lenny Henry’s turn in Every Brilliant Thing at Soho Place turns a small, intimate experiment about depression into something like communal therapy — warm, witty and, crucially, insistently human. The one‑person piece, staged in the round, depends on a performer who can think on his feet and cajole an audience into honest, sometimes silly, participation; Henry, reviewers agree, supplies that rare combination of comic lightness and emotional attentiveness that keeps the evening from tipping either into mawkishness or glib cheeriness. According to a recent Guardian review, his warmth and improvisatory skill allow the production to sustain genuine tenderness even as it mines laughter.

At its heart the show is simple and literal: a seven‑year‑old starts a list of “brilliant things” — small pleasures worth living for — after his mother attempts suicide, and keeps adding to it as he grows up. That conceit, co‑created by Duncan Macmillan and Jonny Donahoe, becomes both structure and device: the performer calls out numbers and invites members of the audience to supply items from the list, from childlike pleasures such as ice‑cream to more adult, idiosyncratic entries mentioned in one critic’s account — the comic image of “Christopher Walken’s hair”, Prince’s splits, or the everyday comfort of a dog. The official production materials and press listings stress that the piece deliberately balances humour and hurt, using improvisation and music to make difficult material accessible rather than sentimental.

Practical details matter for a work so dependent on atmosphere. Soho Place’s listing and the show’s own website confirm a West End engagement running through early November, with performances staged in the round, an approximate running time of around 75 minutes and an age recommendation of 12+. The producers list a rotating one‑person cast for the residency — Henry alternates with co‑creator Jonny Donahoe and guest performers including Ambika Mod, Sue Perkins and Minnie Driver — a choice intended to keep each performance alive to the particular performer’s impulses. The official pages also carry standard content warnings about suicide and depression and set out accessibility and booking information for prospective audiences.

That West End transfer sits on a long pedigree. Macmillan’s original idea, born from his response to his mother’s struggle with clinical depression, was developed with Donahoe and has been performed around the world; producers note it has reached audiences in dozens of countries and earned a reputation for coaxing communal empathy from small theatres and festival crowds alike. Paines Plough and other producing partners frame the West End run as a continuation of that touring life rather than a reinvention: the show’s strength, they suggest, is its portability — a single performer, a bare framework and an invitation to the room to create something shared.

Audience participation is not a trivial gimmick but the play’s moral engine, and it occasionally produces memorable, unrepeatable moments. Longstanding viewers and commentators have recalled rituals that became part of the performance’s folklore — one critic recollected the comic creation of a “sock dog” between performer and audience member, exemplifying how small, improvised acts can unlock real tenderness and laughter. The current production leans into those mechanics while relying on the performer’s generosity to ensure that volunteers are celebrated rather than exposed.

Critical reaction to the West End staging has been broadly favourable but not uncritical. The Daily Mail’s reviewer praised the show as “life‑affirming” and enjoyed Henry’s charge of the room, while other critics have wondered whether a polished, larger West End setting blunts some of the original intimacy that made the piece so affecting in smaller venues. According to reviewers, those trade‑offs matter less when the performer can create immediacy; when they cannot, the show risks feeling tidy where it once felt raw.

What remains undeniable is the play’s ability to make audiences confront depression without reducing it to a lesson or a neat cure. Journalists and producers alike emphasise the work’s role in destigmatising suicidal illness by encouraging conversation and laughter in the same breath; the production carries clear warnings for people who may find the subject matter difficult and urges ticket‑buyers to consult the theatre for details. For those who can sit with its mix of wit and sorrow, Every Brilliant Thing offers a deliberately modest prescription: name the small things that make life worth living, invite others to join you in the list, and recognise that sharing sometimes does what private thinking cannot.

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* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-15014363/Standup-therapy-Brilliant-Thing-depression-Lenny-Henry-life-affirming.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/aug/08/every-brilliant-thing-review-lenny-henry)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://everybrilliantthing.com/), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/article/2024/aug/20/every-brilliant-thing-theatre-antidote-depression), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-15014363/Standup-therapy-Brilliant-Thing-depression-Lenny-Henry-life-affirming.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://sohoplace.org/shows/every-brilliant-thing/), [[2]](https://everybrilliantthing.com/), [[6]](https://painesplough.com/productions/every-brilliant-thing-west-end/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/article/2024/aug/20/every-brilliant-thing-theatre-antidote-depression), [[6]](https://painesplough.com/productions/every-brilliant-thing-west-end/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[7]](https://katewyver.wordpress.com/2015/10/09/every-brilliant-thing/), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-15014363/Standup-therapy-Brilliant-Thing-depression-Lenny-Henry-life-affirming.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-15014363/Standup-therapy-Brilliant-Thing-depression-Lenny-Henry-life-affirming.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/aug/08/every-brilliant-thing-review-lenny-henry)
* Paragraph 7 – [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/article/2024/aug/20/every-brilliant-thing-theatre-antidote-depression), [[6]](https://painesplough.com/productions/every-brilliant-thing-west-end/), [[3]](https://sohoplace.org/shows/every-brilliant-thing/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-15014363/Standup-therapy-Brilliant-Thing-depression-Lenny-Henry-life-affirming.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://everybrilliantthing.com/> - The official Every Brilliant Thing website describes Duncan Macmillan’s one-person play, co-created with Jonny Donahoe, and outlines the West End production at Soho Place. It explains the premise: a seven‑year‑old makes a list of things worth living for after his mother’s suicidal episode, and the list grows through his life. The page lists the rotating cast — Lenny Henry, Jonny Donahoe, Ambika Mod, Sue Perkins and Minnie Driver — and gives run dates, content warnings about suicide and depression, practical ticketing information, creative team credits and promotional quotes from critics. It emphasises audience participation and the show’s intimate format and legacy.
3. <https://sohoplace.org/shows/every-brilliant-thing/> - The Soho Place listing for Every Brilliant Thing advertises the West End season and provides production information. It confirms run dates from 1 August to 8 November, notes the approximate 75‑minute duration and gives an age recommendation of 12+. The page outlines the story — a child compiles a list of brilliant things after his mother’s suicide attempt — and warns of themes of suicide and depression. It highlights the rotating one‑person cast and names creatives including Duncan Macmillan and Jeremy Herrin, lists ticketing and accessibility details, critical endorsements and explains that performances are staged in the in‑the‑round Soho Place.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/article/2024/aug/20/every-brilliant-thing-theatre-antidote-depression> - Duncan Macmillan’s Every Brilliant Thing is examined in this Guardian feature, which traces the play’s origins to the author’s response to his mother’s struggle with depression and a suicide attempt. The article explains how a seven‑year‑old narrator’s list of life’s small pleasures was conceived as a way to support a parent, and how the simple conceit evolved into an interactive one‑person show. It notes the collaborative development with performer Jonny Donahoe, the play’s Edinburgh debut, international reach and its therapeutic resonance for audiences. The piece explores the balance between humour and trauma and the play’s role in destigmatising suicidal illness.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/aug/08/every-brilliant-thing-review-lenny-henry> - Reviewing Lenny Henry’s Every Brilliant Thing at Soho Place, this Guardian piece praises his warmth, quick comedic timing and capacity to hold an audience while addressing serious subjects. It describes the production as a one‑person show built around audience participation, with musical interludes and improvised exchanges that allow Henry to sparkle. The critic explores whether the West End’s polished staging slightly dilutes the play’s original intimacy but acknowledges moments of genuine emotion and humour. Overall, the review finds Henry’s performance engaging and affirms the play’s sustained ability to make audiences confront depression with laughter, compassion and shared humanity and hope.
6. <https://painesplough.com/productions/every-brilliant-thing-west-end/> - The Paines Plough production page details Every Brilliant Thing’s West End transfer, crediting Duncan Macmillan (writer) and Jonny Donahoe (co‑creator) and listing producers and partners. It confirms the @sohoplace engagement, production dates and the rotating, one‑person casting approach featuring Lenny Henry, Jonny Donahoe, Ambika Mod and Sue Perkins. The page underscores the play’s international success, noting performances in more than eighty countries and its reputation as an innovative interactive work about depression. It gives background on touring history, praises the show’s capacity to combine humour with pain, and provides booking links, credits and information about the creative team and organisations.
7. <https://katewyver.wordpress.com/2015/10/09/every-brilliant-thing/> - This personal review by critic Kate Wyver reflects on seeing Every Brilliant Thing and highlights the show’s emotional effect and participatory mechanics. She describes being moved to exuberance on leaving the theatre, with a desire to celebrate life’s small pleasures. The piece specifically recalls the audience being invited to create a 'sock dog' by removing a shoe and sock, naming it, and briefly performing with it — a comic ritual that exemplifies the play’s intimacy and improvisational reliance on spectators. Wyver praises the mixture of humour and tenderness, the memorable musical moments and the show’s capacity to foster communal catharsis.