

# EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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## Everybody



*Photos by Jenny Graham*

### Antaeus Theatre Company

After seeing Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' wildly inventive and refreshingly entertaining morality tale *The Octoroon* debut at the Fountain last season, the announcement that the prolific Antaeus Theatre Company would be presenting the LA premiere of the playwright's 2018 Pulitzer finalist *Everybody* gave me yet another reason to not so patiently await Fall.

There's now no doubt whatsoever in my mind that Jacobs-Jenkins is a major artist to watch, someone who, as the *New York Times* referred to him, has become "one of our country's most original and illuminating writers."

Based on the classic medieval morality play *Everyman*, this is an imaginative new take on the famous allegorical quest as a simple man searches for the explanation of life and its transience, or the "Buddhist-ness at the heart of the story."

Everybody lobbies for a willing companion to join him on his journey to meet his demise at the wave of a riding crop from Death (played by formidable LA theatrical icon Anne Gee Byrd), something that could not be more timely for me personally at the moment. It's an unsettling reminder of how precious life is and how urgently important it is to appreciate every moment of it, but it's also so chockfull of clever absurdities and quirky inventiveness that it can also be bearable—if one hasn't lost a sense of humor about the subject by age (almost) 76.

Antaeus is known for presenting more traditional classics, but in the hands of this exceptional veteran ensemble cast under the leadership of director Jennifer Chang, Jacob-Jenkins' fascinating but challenging *Everybody* could not possibly be a tighter fit.

"Is this real or is this a dream?" a character asks, to which Death responds with an understood *duh*: "No, it's theatre."

As things slowly, painfully return to normal for stage companies everywhere after our globally debilitating pandemic, this has been the Year of the Ensemble Cast in LA. I have been juggling so many choices for that honor as my annual TicketHolder Awards build to conclusion for 2022, but that Antaeus and their production of *Everybody* has instantly made my decision for me—bar any eleventh-hour upsets—is purdy much a given.

Along with the actor cast as Death (the role now being played by the equally formidable Tony Amendolia with Byrd off to Toronto cast as Bob Odenkirk's mother in a new TV series), three others appear in traditional assigned roles, if you can call characters named Time, Understanding, and Love traditional. In those roles, Dawn Didiwick, Cherish Monique Duke, and Alberto Isaac, respectively, are all perfect.

Duke also has the responsibility of showing the audience to their seats as they enter, then gives a curtain speech that goes way beyond a reminder to turn off cellphones and pointing out exits, morphing directly into the play itself as our friendly usher does double duty as a decidedly ultra-cool Moms Mably-like God.

Then again, is this really God? Is God even real? "Doesn't that depend on your definition of real?" Jacob-Jenkins asks.

The five remaining actors, Lisa Sanaye Dring, Nicole Erb, Harry Groener, Antonio Jaramillo, and Gerald Joseph, are listed in the program only as playing "Somebody." That's because until each performance begins, the actors have no idea who they are playing. Beginning scattered surreptitiously among the unsuspecting audience, they are picked out and called onstage, the contrivance being they have been chosen at random as though they are attending a David Copperfield performance in Vegas.

Isaac as Love also at first appears to be a real audience member trying stealthily to walk out of play who when stopped begrudgingly admits he “usually enjoys everything they do here.”

The other steadfast five are each given a colored ball which, when placed in a lottery spinner, determines which character is theirs for that particular performance. That means this quartet of certifiably masochistic thespians must memorize and know the blocking for every character in the script besides those mentioned above and must be prepared to play any of those roles at any performance, resulting in 120 possible combinations.

With names such as Strength, Beauty, Senses, and Mind, these are the traveling companions of Everybody (the fifth actor) who pleads with them to join him or her on the road to that inevitable appointment with Death.

Of course, as willing to help as each trusty friend initially professes to be, eventually when they learn what the outcome will be, Strength runs out, Beauty fades, Senses get lost, and the Mind goes. You know, like life.

Even though two or three texts from my friend Dawn before I attended stated how terrified her husband Harry was (I call the team of Didiwick and Groener the contemporary Lunt and Fontanne of Los Angeles) before every performance about what part he'd be required to play, I honestly thought she was putting me on and keeping with the artifice of the lottery to see who plays what.

*Au contraire.* When the ball came up for Harry to play Everybody, just the quick wide-eyed look on his face as he caught his wife's eye in the audience (before her charming turn as a giggly little girl thrilled to be asked to participate), I instantly knew this was no scripted gimmick.

And lucky for us all seeing this particular performance, I am thrilled I was able to see Mr. Harry Groener in the demanding leading role. His was a tour-de-force performance in an incredibly demanding role and I am all the better for experiencing his take on... well... on me. On you. On *Everybody*.

Still with the amazing talent both onstage and as part of the Antaeus team of worldclass designers and theatremakers, the above-title wonder here is the skill and talent of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, who proves to be a genius at taking on an archaic 15-century morality play and making it blossom into totally watchable, highly enjoyable and relevant theatre for the 21st Century.

I kept thinking of the first time I saw a work by Charles Mee performed, how my head exploded at his welcome irreverence and how I couldn't wait to see more. I also kept conjuring the image of a playgoer in 1944 walking into the Playhouse Theatre in New York to see opening night of a new work called *The Glass Menagerie*, then scrambling through the playbill in the dark thinking, “Geebus, who the living heck wrote *this*?”

**THROUGH OCT. 17: Antaeus Theatre Company, 110 E. Broadway, Glendale.  
818.506.1983 or [Antaeus.org](http://Antaeus.org)**