

Duncan
Macmillan

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2016

People, Places and Things

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People, Places and Things

Emma was having the time of her life. Now she's in rehab. Her first step is to admit that she has a problem. But the problem isn't with Emma, it's with everything else. She needs to tell the truth. But she's smart enough to know that there's no such thing. When intoxication feels like the only way to survive the modern world, how can she ever sober up?

People, Places & Things premiered at the National Theatre in 2015 before transferring to London's West End and St. Ann's Warehouse in New York.

Published for the first time in Methuen Drama's Modern Classics series, this edition features a brand new introduction by Naomi Obeng.

'Macmillan doesn't shy away from difficult questions about addiction and recovery and, rightly, doesn't answer them . . . this is a bold, timely and searching play' *Financial Times*

'Generous-spirited, with a strong streak of irreverent, darkly humane humour, the play . . . has a thoughtful, shifting ambivalence that

suits a problem where the solutions can only ever be provisional and the amends inadequate' *Independent*

Duncan Macmillan's work has been performed throughout the world, including at the National Theatre, Royal Court, Almeida, Barbican, St Ann's Warehouse, Melbourne Theatre Company, Berliner Ensemble, Hamburg Schauspielhaus, Schauspielhaus Köln, Burgtheater Vienna, Vesturport, Kansallisteatteri, Nationaltheatret Oslo and in the repertory of the Schaubühne Berlin, as well as the Edinburgh Festival, the Manchester International Festival, Salzburg Festival, Festival d'Avignon and Theatertreffen, in the West End and on Broadway.

His plays include *Lungs*; *People, Places and Things*; *Every Brilliant Thing*; *Rosmersholm* (adapt. Henrik Ibsen); *1984* (adapt. George Orwell, co-written and co-directed with Robert Icke); *City Of Glass* (adapt. Paul Auster) and *2071* (co-written with Chris Rapley). Other plays include *The Forbidden Zone*; *Wunschloses Unglück* (adapt. Peter Handke); *Reise Durch die Nacht* (adapt. Friederike Mayröcker). Both *1984* and *People, Places and Things* were nominated for Best New Play at the Olivier Awards. *Rosmersholm* was nominated for Best Revival.

People, Places and Things

Duncan Macmillan

With an introduction by Naomi Obeng

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Introduction

This is a play about a woman, her drug and alcohol addiction, and her journey through rehabilitation and recovery. Well, that's the blurb anyway.

Like the best classics, *People, Places & Things* does not operate solely within the strict confines of its premise. It becomes, as it speeds, slows and lurches forwards, a play about all of life. Loss, love and faith. Questions of personality, purpose and relating to other people. Relating to yourself. Performance. Belief. Control. Acceptance. Persistence. Failure. Vulnerability and, despite the honest and heartbreaking note on which the play leaves us – and *it* does leave *us*, distinctly a play that reaches out to its audience, rather than one that its audience has to lean in to access – it's also about hope.

I'm sure there are many theories as to why those plays that persist through time often feel whole in this way, but to my mind it comes down to their ability to articulate truth. Theatre is a medium of truth telling. Actors must be believable in their artifice or the magic is broken. Plays built on emotional and experiential truths try to express how it feels to be in the world, to be a person – in all its complexities. It's those truthful complexities, fragile and delicate as they are to recreate, that read as vivid, affecting and challenging on stage. They submerge audiences in a kind of shared epiphany, a tuning fork setting us all to resonate at a fundamental frequency, one that continues to resonate far into the future. And so it is with this play which, from the macro to the micro, is woven of the truthful fabric of being human. Darkly humorous as well as profound. Which speaks truthfully to the complexity of life too.

People, Places & Things premiered on the National Theatre's Dorfman stage in 2015. That production transferred to the West End, toured the UK then ran at St Ann's Warehouse in New York. It has since been produced around the world. Audiences who've seen it over the years have found it an unforgettable piece, a play in which addicts and those close to them felt seen and understood. And that was its intention. When Duncan Macmillan told me that he wrote *People, Places & Things* in part as a response to the meagre portraits

of addicts in theatre, so often plot-serving tragic or comic characters with little complexity and nuance, I was not at all surprised. Not because I'm a playwright mind-reader, though that would be fun (and useful for a critic!), but because nuanced and empathetic truth-telling seems evident at pretty much every level of this play's construction. It's a difficult and serious subject matter, written with empathy, and to provoke it.

The form, or vessel, of the play reflects its contents: the huge physical and psychological journey of rehabilitation and recovery. It's split into two acts, the second an answer to the first. Each act begins with Emma checking into the rehab centre, a repetition that feels true to the ever-present possibility of relapse, which unlike what's suggested by the Hollywood film-style endings that this play beautifully subverts, persists for the rest of an addict's life. The central question we'll ask throughout the play is 'Will Emma recover?', and for most of the first act, it seems likely that she won't. But as events repeat and are mirrored in the second act, we become attuned to the small changes in Emma's outlook and behaviour over time. Emma's interactions with the Group, her attitude towards Paul and Mark, the role-played conversation with her parents, the corporate advertisement – all repeated and shifted, sometimes slightly, but significantly. The play's final image, Emma's audition – the 'Everest' that she doubts, at her lowest point, she'll be able to climb – also circles back to the first image, her breakdown during a performance of *The Seagull*. The ending is not a yes/no answer to the central question of Emma's recovery, it's an echo. An ending that's also a potential beginning. It feels fitting. The future she can hope for is one of hope, without a definitive answer. As in real life, any decision not to use can be undone by the next. The whole play sets us up to accept this final uncertainty, a powerful, truthful one.

Another aspect of the play that speaks to its empathy and truthfulness may be one of the most distinctive: its subjective point of view. First person subjective storytelling is rare in theatre. And it's hard to do. Taking the perspective of only one character means that they must be constantly present, and the audience can only experience the events that character witnesses, nothing else. But the trade-off allows an audience to get much closer to the character's mind. I would

call the theatrical effects delightful if it weren't for the sheer exhausting intensity of experiencing everything Emma does (bar the interval's short respite). But that's the point. Emma's is a particularly challenging exhaustion, and when we feel it vividly, we're better equipped to understand her decisions and struggles. The text is filled with moments of subjectivity, glints of expressionism, which is also rare in contemporary British playwriting. 'For a moment, the lights in the room glow brighter, the music on the radio slows down and all other sounds cease, then everything speeds up to catch up to reality', as the drug high hits, and 'EMMA looks at the door to the outside world. The EXIT light seems to have grown impossibly large.' as she decides whether to leave or stay for treatment. These directions place us definitively within Emma's perception. They lean into the theatre as a metaphorical space, and they're the kind of thing that excites a production team with creative possibilities. The text is full of them. 'EMMA sits on the bed. Snow falls onto her.' Fresh clarity like a cool drink on a hot summer's day. Purposeful and precise.

Perhaps the most startling theatrical expressions of subjectivity are the group of Emmas, who seem to emerge as features of the space, flowing as essential and ungraspable as water. Of course, the Emmas *are* features of the space. The space in *People, Places & Things* is a psychological one. We are in Emma's mind. The Emmas are the kind of surprising and satisfying theatrical gesture that pings the lights on in your brain. They embody the painful withdrawal symptoms, but their simultaneous presence also conflates contiguous states of being in way that's overwhelming and disorientating. We're seeing the eerie sense of alienation Emma has from her own existence. Seeing her experience dissociation, we are drawn closer to her. The Emmas also recall the presence of her understudy as Nina, dressed exactly like her, in the opening scene of the play. But where that double points to Emma's replaceability as an actor, a question mark around her personal identity, the five Emmas speak of a psychological disruption. She is confronted with herself, but how painful is it to look? And how essential to her recovery?

The dissociation that Emma feels for much of the first act is also embedded into the play's physics, its space-time. With Emma's experience as the framework, there are no scene breaks and events melt in and out of each other. Time squashes as it speeds, stretches as

it slows. At times Emma says she isn't ready for what comes next, but the play moves on anyway. Her lack of control and disorientation is the play's language, because it is her mind's too. The end of Act One is a beautiful example. She moves almost as if out of time in a supercut of her decline that goes from exhilarating to terrifying and back. Chronologically distinct scenes hinting at a road accident, all intercut, seemingly stacked impossibly on top of each other in time. The symptom of her memory loss ('Like time travel or a skipping CD.'), plays into the plasticity of time in this play too. The audience is inside the head-spin of intoxication, both the highs and the lows. The pleasurable aspects of being drunk or high aren't to be overlooked, they're essential to understanding why substances are addictive in the first place and they put into context the lows.

Of course, bringing us closer to Emma in these ways wouldn't be so affecting if she were uncomplicated. But she's richly drawn and flawed, and friction quickly accumulates in our relationship with her. In our first proper introduction she calls someone the c-word over the phone, then we realise she's talking to her mother, asking her to get rid of all her drugs at home while she's getting high in the reception of the rehab centre. Not immediately forgivable, or easily understandable. Maybe even more shocking, quite a feat, are the final pages of the play, another Act Two mirror of Act One, when Mum calls Emma 'Lucy'. If any part of this play distills the difficulty of a relationship with an addict it's probably this one. Thinking you've got somewhere, built up trust, spent time trying to understand, and realising the emptiness of reciprocity. It feels like a betrayal. Duncan says that this final moment is one of the most satisfying audience reactions he's had from his writing. Audiences gasp at the revelation of Emma's name. She's already lied about it twice, and it's still thrillingly unexpected. It feels personal and when we think we're on an upward trajectory, we start to doubt that anything she's said was true at all. The play's success is in getting us to sit in the discomfort, and to still be invested in Emma's recovery. We're zoomed far into the subjective experience of a woman who pushes everyone away. How much empathy can we offer? How much hope for change?

The doctor and therapist who look like her mother hint at the importance of Emma's relationship with her mother, a thread that will lead towards their heartbreaking conversation in her childhood

bedroom. Pointing out the repetition of the same actor in different roles is also a meta-theatrical nod, giving us a sense that Emma is actually aware of the conceit of this fiction. Her self-awareness almost makes her behaviour even more challenging for the audience. She's smart enough to see the rules and question them, and, or maybe 'so' is a more appropriate conjunction, she is her own obstacle. You see this in the way that she lies to others and to herself. A spiral that we can trace our fingers across as the lies loosen and tighten, from the comically enlarging list of drugs she gives Foster when he asks if she's been using recently, to her eventual belittling of the group and of Mark's graduation from the programme. But we're led to understand the decisions she makes, whatever we think of them, from the inside out. From the feeling to the thought. The detail and proximity we have to her experience makes it hard for judgment of her addiction to creep in. For me, that's the best place to be as an audience member, in a state of openness, being pushed and pulled by a character going through a life-changing experience in a morally ambiguous world.

Duncan is certainly a writer who thrives on staging difficult questions about morality, human nature and its contradictions. Questions with no clear answer, but with depth of meaning and feeling to be found. In his first play *Monster*, he examines nature versus nurture in relation to those who commit acts of violence. In *Lungs* he explores the moral imperative not to have children in our world of climate breakdown. *Every Brilliant Thing* looks at the edges of life in another way, through a character making a list of everything worth staying alive for. The questions posed at the beginning are tested by the trials of the character. When Duncan told me that he wrote the first draft of this play at a time when he'd given up writing, I was (this time) very surprised. He was frustrated with theatre at the time and after being offered a seed commission to develop a new play, he started to write about postmodernism and the difficulty a non-spiritual person like him would have with the spiritual belief required by the Twelve Step approach to recovery.

The Twelve Step programme began in the US in the 1930s. Its manifesto, which Emma takes issue with very unambiguously (!) in the play, outlines an account of what those who developed the Twelve Steps discovered on their journey to sobriety. Step Two

states ‘We came to be aware that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity’ – it’s written from a Christian perspective. But as Duncan researched the play, spending time with addicts in recovery, as well as their families, doctors and psychiatrists, and hearing people’s stories in group therapy (one of the hallmarks of the Twelve Step programme – Alcoholics Anonymous is the most well-known iteration), he became more open to the power of spiritual belief in recovery, and saw the huge value of the communal group sharing experience. As Mark says in the play, ‘Listening and being listened to. Being seen. It’s saving my life’. The play he was drafting shifted focus as a result, leaning into the analogous communal sharing of theatre, and the powerful experience it is to see yourself truly represented, seen and understood on stage.

Emma goes on a similar journey. Her worldview is rational and sceptical, in direct opposition to any kind of spiritual belief. She cites postmodern philosophers who wrote about a world where the dogma of society led by religion had broken down. There is no God. There is no meaning. There is no single truth and there is no reason for anything. So what is there to cling to?

EMMA: Drugs and alcohol have *never* let me down. They have always *loved* me. There are substances I can put into my bloodstream that make the world *perfect*. That is the only absolute truth in the universe.

I’m writing in a world where the seemingly impossible seems to have pushed the boundary into the real. A global pandemic confining us to our homes for months. Brexit. Donald Trump as president. The terrifying consequences of climate change. Everywhere, fragmentation of truth and the breakdown of absolutes. Emma’s insistence on independent thinking and acceptance of the world’s complexities are qualities to be admired – ‘wouldn’t that all just be a massive simplification of the complexity of just being a human fucking person?’ she tells the doctor, in the midst of a series of lies about her past and the locus of her addiction. And I mean . . . yeah. It is too simple to expect there to be one underlying cause that makes us the way we are. That’s the kind of thing that exists in fiction, not in real life. ‘It’s not lying, it’s admitting there’s no truth to begin

with', she says. But one of the abundantly clear truths that gets under your skin so effectively in this play, one that Emma doesn't encounter in word but in deed, is that being right doesn't necessarily mean that we are helping ourselves.

Details of faith accumulate, and when Emma doesn't refuse to 'press' Amen to Paul's serenity prayer, it feels huge. Believing in something bigger than yourself, not necessarily God, might provide, paradoxically, a sense of control.

EMMA: . . . It's the same with the programme. With everything, really. Language. Politics. Money. Religion. Law. At some level we all know it's all bullshit. A magical group delusion.

Emma's disruption and lack of belief in the process negatively affects everyone in the Group. Like actors in a play, they all must believe and work towards this shared purpose, otherwise the spell is broken. Rereading the play, I was struck by how many times others showed her kindness, and how she never recognises it as such. Foster knows she's scared and coaches her through what to expect, as does Mark, who sees through her lies. It's only when she stops thinking of herself as above those in the Group, whose vulnerable stories she distances herself from, that its alchemical process starts to work. She leans into community, and she's able to be seen and to see herself, through the lies and denial she's built up so high around her.

There are certainly as many ways of reading a play as there are people, so this is, of course, just one way to see *People, Places & Things*. What's undeniably universal about it, though, is its envious ability to render complex ideas with absolute clarity. You know a play does its job when no amount of explaining it or dissecting it could express it better than the play does itself.

You hear the R word (relevant) in theatre a lot, particularly among critics and in the press. I've often found it grating. Surely what's most relevant of all is that which transcends time. Which is about being and existing more than about here and now. This play can only ever be relevant, because it is empathetic and it is true. It stands up to the deep questions it chews over and continues to reveal

itself upon re-reading, shining as an example of that most amorphous and ungraspable term ‘theatrical’. A play that could only be a play. Any other medium would flatten its edges, smooth its spikes, muffle its heartbeat. It’s a remarkable piece of writing to feel reaching out towards you as you turn its pages.

Naomi Obeng
November 2020

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