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When you give a porch a show: The birth of Silk Moth Stage

By Rachel Petterson, contributor and Gracie Brogowski, contributor
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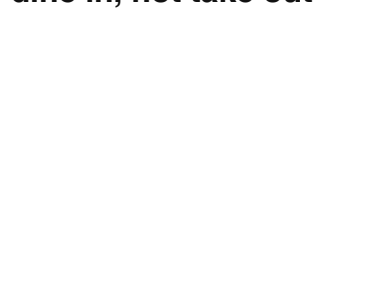
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Katie Downing rehearses on Silk Moth Stage for the one-person interactive show "Every Brilliant Thing" that will open Aug. 6. MaryBeth Killian, who is directing the play, is in the foreground. (Photo by Zia Faqir)

Article by Rachel Petterson and Gracie Brogowski with photos by Zia Faqir

Alli Huber has been regularly directing plays since she was 14, a passion that has taken her across the country. So when she was building a new porch on her house in west Rockingham County a little over a year ago, all those stages she had worked on seemed to manifest themselves in the porch's design.

The porch didn't come easy at first.

"I had been trying to figure out what I wanted it to look like forever and like looking at magazines and getting nowhere, and then I woke up one morning from a dead slumber and, like, drew this porch."

After unveiling her final draft, her son asked her: "Why are you building a Shakespeare stage on our house?"

Huber couldn't deny how much this structure, which she originally intended only as a porch, seemed like a fitting space to bring to life her existing connections with the local theater community. This was born a one-of-a-kind theater company in the Shenandoah Valley: Silk Moth Stage.

Months earlier, in the spring of 2020, Katie Downing and MaryBeth Killian were preparing to put on a senior theater production at Bridgewater College when the pandemic hit. Their plans for the production were suddenly impossible.

All that work — interpreting playwright Duncan Macmillan and Jonny Donahoe's one-person play "Every Brilliant Thing" and coordinating the performance — and nowhere to put it on and no audiences to perform it with.

Downing and Killian went on to graduate in May 2020, and that might have been it for their vision of "Every Brilliant Thing" ... had it not been for Huber's dramatic front porch.

Much more than a porch

Silk Moth Stage will focus heavily on local community and human connection. It does this through combining several elements that are important to Huber.

She defines Silk Moth Stage as "a place-based, professional theater company—professional meeting artists will be paid—that is focused on developing new classics, which we're mostly defining as 21st century plays."

Huber borrowed the definition of classics from a famous Massachusetts-based theater group, Shakespeare & Company.

"Their definition of the classics is the highest truths universally told with healing powers," she said.

Huber did her graduate work at the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, and the influence of the center lives on in Silk Moth Stage, with added nuance.

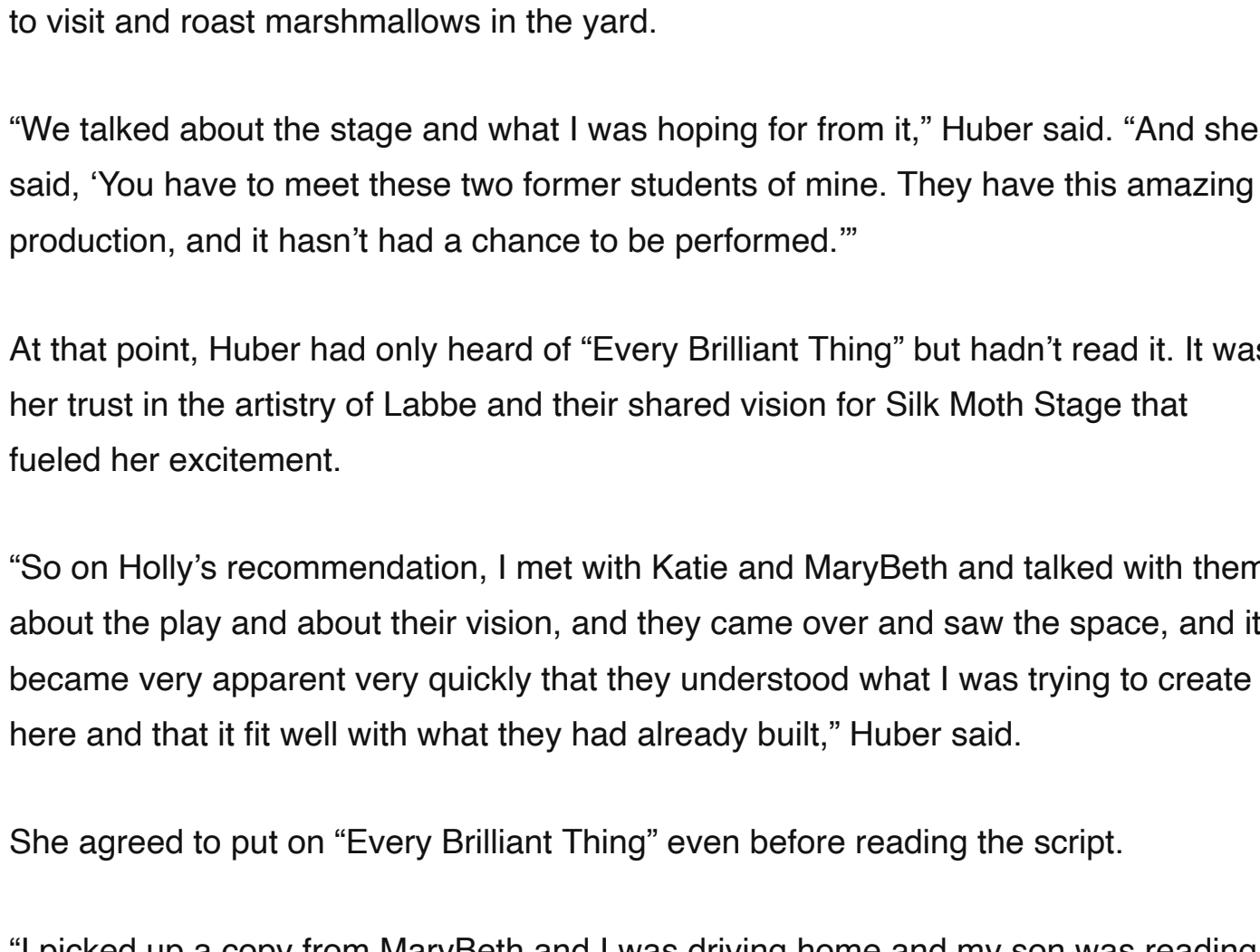
"A lot of the stuff that they do there I find really compelling as it applies to more modern plays, not just Shakespeare," she said. "So for example, if you go to a play at the Blackfriars, the actors will make eye contact with you and acknowledge that you're there and not pretend they don't see you."

Every aspect of the sensory experience caters to those ideals, including, as she put it, an "acoustic live-generated sort of sound aesthetic."

"There's a very strong, like, meta-theatrical thing where people are always saying, 'We know you're here to see a play and that's fine.' And so all of my work has been strongly influenced by those kinds of ideals," she said. "I always am trying to find ways for actors and audience to connect really authentically."

Beyond the intimacy that a front-porch stage provides, even the most foundational aspects of Silk Moth Stage contain elements of expansion.

"I think that that needs some interrogation, like, whether there is such a thing as universal telling is a really open question," she said. "But that's kind of the goal is to think about what kinds of storytelling can we do that deal with connecting us to our bigger selves and deal with healing our community?"



Katie Downing crosses Silk Moth Stage as she practices her lines. (Photo by Zia Faqir)

A connection is made

Huber first heard about Downing and Killian's planned production of "Every Brilliant Thing" through Holly Labbe, who is an adjunct professor at Bridgewater College and now the president of the board for Silk Moth.

In line with everything else Huber has described about the theater company, it just fell together. "Every Brilliant Thing," starting Aug. 6, will be the first major production at Silk Moth Stage thanks to a heavy dose of serendipity and Huber's son's intuition.

Huber had asked Labbe to come over to see the porch to get her advice. She told her, "I need you to come look at my porch. I think it wants to be a stage."

Labbe and her husband, Scott Cole, who is an associate professor in Bridgewater College's communications studies and theatre department, came over one evening to visit and roast marshmallows in the yard.

"We talked about the stage and what I was hoping for from it," Huber said. "And she said, 'You have to meet these two former students of mine. They have this amazing production, and it hasn't had a chance to be performed.'"

At that point, Huber had only heard of "Every Brilliant Thing" but hadn't read it. It was her trust in the artistry of Labbe and their shared vision for Silk Moth Stage that fueled her excitement.

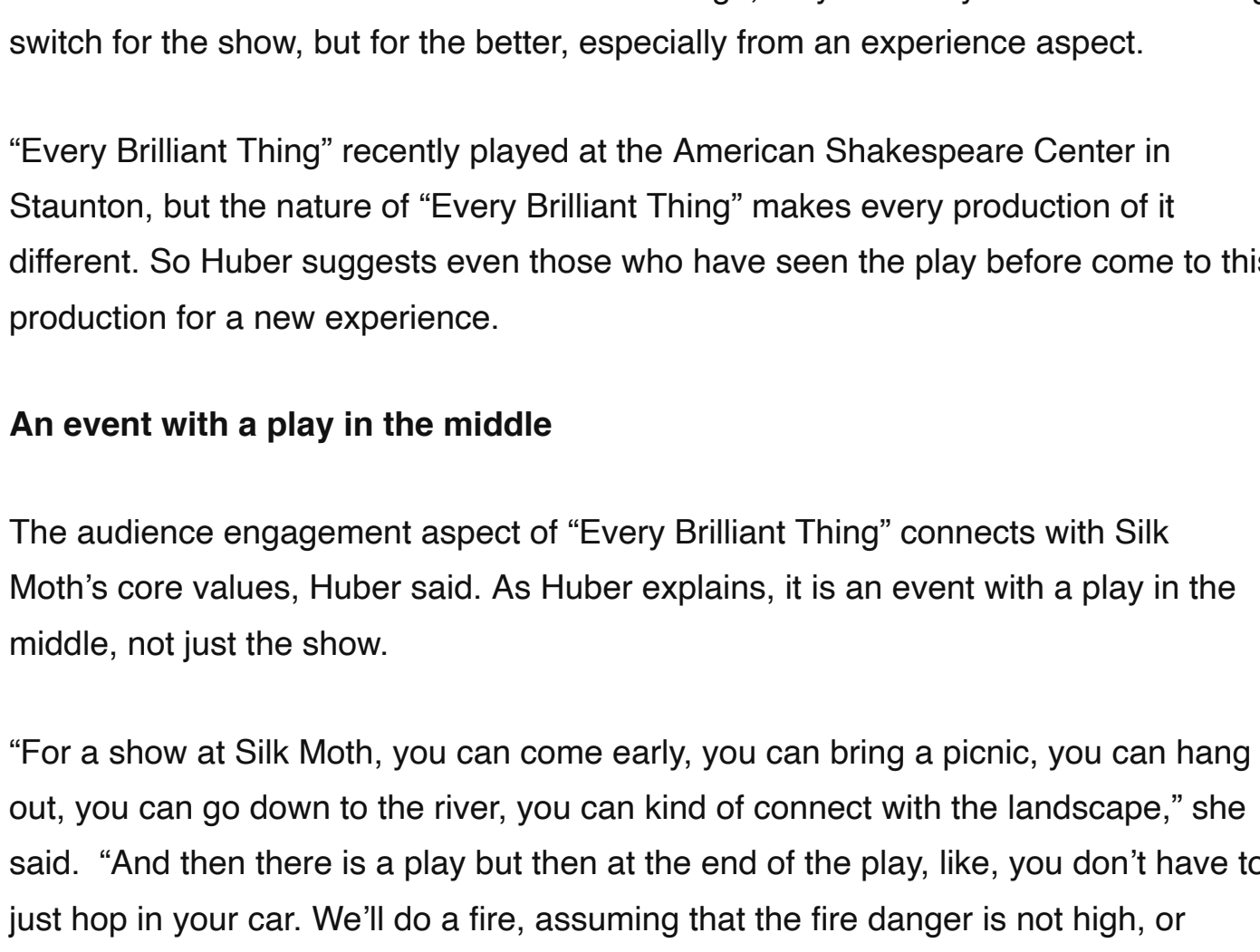
"So on Holly's recommendation, I met with Katie and MaryBeth and talked with them about the play and about their vision, and they came over and saw the space, and it became very apparent very quickly that they understood what I was trying to create here and that it fit well with what they had already built," Huber said.

She agreed to put on "Every Brilliant Thing" even before reading the script.

"I picked up a copy from MaryBeth and I was driving home and my son was reading it in the car and he was reading pieces of it to me," Huber said. "He's only 11, but he was like, 'Mom, this is the perfect play for Silk Moth.' And then I read it and I was like, 'Oh yes, this is absolutely exactly right.'"

Because Silk Moth Stage offers a theater experience unlike what many people might be used to, there is a learning curve when it comes to how to exist in that space. Huber said to her knowledge, there are no other theater companies quite like Silk Moth Stage in Virginia.

"Every Brilliant Thing" is like a perfect play to teach people how we need them to interact with our material," Huber added.



Silk Moth stage offers an intimate experience between actors and the audience, which actor Katie Downing plans to harness in the production of "Every Brilliant Thing." (Photo by Zia Faqir)

The journey of revisiting

Downing and Killian began planning their production in 2020 as Downing's senior capstone project at Bridgewater College. She said she wanted to put on a one-woman show as a way to challenge herself as an actress like never before. While reading different potential productions, she came across "Every Brilliant Thing" and thought it was perfect.

"I was just amazed by it," Downing said. "It is just this incredible show, and I love the improv aspect of it."

She then looped in Killian as the director and began rehearsing. But like most public productions in spring 2020, the covid-19 pandemic canceled it.

"Revisiting it has been a journey because we were so hyped to do this show about loving life and being excited, and then it has aspects [of] you are gonna have some down times and life is not always going to be perfect," Killian said. "And so with that in mind and then the whole pandemic hitting, that was harsh."

When they were starting to plan the show's release, Killian and Downing — a small space entirely painted black, often used for student productions. However, they said they believed Silk Moth Stage will offer more freedom to the audience as they watch the show and connect to it even more than in a theater.

"Every Brilliant Thing" is more of an interactive show and having an outdoor setting instead of an indoor theater was beneficial for Killian and Downing.

"You experience this thing together with people more so than in a more traditional theater style like we were planning on. And I think that that really is for strength of this show because it is something that is so real and so grounded and so dependent upon its audience and the community around it is what makes the show what it is," Downing said.

So when the two friends first saw Silk Moth Stage, they said they felt like it was a big switch for the show, but for the better, especially from an experience aspect.

"Every Brilliant Thing" recently played at the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, but the nature of "Every Brilliant Thing" makes every production of it different. So Huber suggests even those who have seen the play before come to this production for a new experience.

An event with a play in the middle

The audience engagement aspect of "Every Brilliant Thing" connects with Silk Moth's core values, Huber said. As Huber explains, it is an event with a play in the middle, not just the show.

"For a show at Silk Moth, you can come early, you can bring a picnic, you can hang out, you can go down to the river, you can kind of connect with the landscape," she said. "And then there is a play but then at the end of the fire, like, you don't have to just hop in your car. We'll do a fire, assuming that the fire danger is not high, or something. We'll just hang out. And people will have the opportunity to talk with actors and with the playwright sometimes, depending on what the play is."

The inspiration for this format comes both from historical ideas of theater, as well as her own experiences as an actress. In past centuries, she explains, theaters were a place to "see and be seen," not just a place to be a passive audience member. Into today, the theater experience often extends well beyond the building for those involved in putting it on, and Huber said she wanted to give a similar experience to audience members.

"One of the most fun things about ... working on a play is when you go out to the bar afterward with all the actors, and you have this really great conversation," she said. "And that's a conversation that people — that audience members — miss out on. It's not the same as, like, a Q&A or a talkback that a theater might arrange. So we're trying to make it a more integrated experience for the audience as a fuller participant in the art."

Huber said she strives to make the experience as inclusive as possible on all fronts, physically and financially, while working within a budget that allows for the artists to be paid.

"We're telling people if you can give us a week of notice, we can accommodate nearly anything," Huber said.

That would extend to accessible parking near the theater, having a portable toilet available or hiring American Sign Language interpreters, she said.

"We will make things as accessible as we possibly can. But these are things that we don't have the budget to just have available without some advanced warning from people," she said.

Silk Moth Stage also aims for financial accessibility by offering student tickets at a discounted price, as well as other opportunities for audience members, such as volunteering in some capacity in exchange for a ticket.

"And if people can't do that and just want to come and can't afford it, we're like, well please email us. We will figure something out," she said. "So we do want to try to make this as accessible as we can while still paying our artists, which is a tight balance."

"Every Brilliant Thing" will show at Silk Moth Stage at 7 p.m. on Aug. 6, 7, 12, and 13. Tickets, which will come with the exact address of the stage, are available at silkmothstage.com.

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