

## THEATRE REVIEW

Andy Jones. *Don't Give Up on Me, Dad*. LSPU Hall, Summer 2023.

On February 14, 2014, Louis Jones Bernard, a 27-year-old with a long history of mental struggle, hanged himself in his apartment in downtown St. John's. His father, Andy Jones, was the one to discover Louis's body. Jones has now written a one-man play, *Don't Give Up on Me, Dad*, that relates his son's history and expresses his own enduring grief. The play is a loving portrait of a struggling child; a moving account of a parent's powerlessness to avert disaster; and a diagnosis of the state of mental health care in Newfoundland and Labrador that's all the more alarming, even outraging, for being so evenhanded. Directed by Charlie Tomlinson and performed by Jones himself, the play premiered in June at the LSPU Hall in St. John's. I saw it in rehearsal in late May: what follows is not a review of the production but a reading of the script as of May 23, 2023 (a published version is forthcoming from Breakwater Books).

The title quotes what Louis would say to his father in the heat of every crisis; Jones would always reply: "I will *never* give up on you, Louis" (28). But in the play, Jones is haunted by the fear that he came secretly to believe a disaster was inevitable, thereby disregarding Louis's imperative and breaking his own promise, all at once. I can't imagine how one could feel otherwise; I can't imagine how one could ever absolve oneself; and while Jones's fears of disaster couldn't help but grow more vivid as the years went by, I can't imagine that he ever actually did give up: the play itself is evidence of that. In *Don't Give Up on Me, Dad*, he tries to expiate his feelings of guilt only insofar as he expresses them publicly, and he tries to find some way of alleviating his grief.

At an early moment, the play announces its central mission: to extend, ever so slightly, our human capacity for empathy. Jones shares his belief that in the first 15 seconds after waking, our various social identities are all suspended. “You are neither man nor woman nor child,” he says; “for those first 15 seconds you are not a Christian or a Muslim; you are not black or white or brown; you are not old or young, conservative or liberal. None of that has kicked in yet. You are *purely* a human being — purely *just* a member of our species. You are everybody else” (9). In this pristine waking state, we’re effortlessly able to imagine and extend compassion to the Other. In Toni Morrison’s view, this imaginative faculty is “the soul of art and its bones” (91), so theatre is a good venue for Jones’s empathy work. The play aims to extend this purely human quarter minute by a single second. At the climax, it pretends to meet this goal and outdo it: Jones reaches the sixteenth second, then the seventeenth, and the eighteenth, and the nineteenth. “I’m still feeling it!” he says (47). He reaches the twentieth second as the play ends.

The play’s center of gravity is always the day of Louis’s death and the room where he died, but *Don’t Give Up on Me, Dad* is fascinatingly digressive, an arabesque rather than a conventionally structured chamber drama. It frequently protests that it’s not a play and instead “just a list of ideas a guy had for a play” (21). Only according to a particularly narrow definition of theatre would that be true. But the work is undeniably and appealingly idiosyncratic. The gap between presentation and representation is often narrow: sometimes, Jones speaks to us all but directly; sometimes he’s “Andy Jones,” a stage persona; and sometimes he’s a character — the Pope, or St. Dymphna, or Louis. This mutability, or rather polymorphousness, extends to the stage, too, which represents three spaces at once: the LSPU Hall, Louis’s apartment, and, at first perplexingly, the basement of “Bursey’s Grocery store on Goose-neck Island, a tiny, tiny island exactly halfway between Newfoundland and Labrador” (18). The Gooseneck Island setting reflects a further aspect of the work’s distinctiveness: in addition to the painstaking documentary project of retelling Louis’s life, it includes a fiction in which Jones is the caregiver of 28 child survivors of an apocalypse that has

wiped out the rest of the human race. The children appear offstage, and we hear them as voices; at the end of the play, Jones joins them. As all of this suggests, whether *Don't Give Up on Me, Dad* is a play or not, it's at the very least playful. Astonishingly so, given Jones's intensely personal relation to his subject. Daringly so, too: one of the corollaries of the Modernist suspicion of ornament has been an insistence that depictions of catastrophe should be spare, plainspoken, and restrained — onstage, the “minima of theatrical experience” (as Tom Stoppard once said of *Waiting for Godot* [qtd. in Powell 63]). But severity can be mannerist in its own way. Jones's approach to his family catastrophe is all the more affecting for being, in its way, expansive and antic, qualities that seem truer of his personality and art.

The work is in fact deeply theatrical. At the level of metaphor, to begin with, Jones compares Louis's struggle to Hamlet's swordfight with Laertes, whose sword is poisoned. “And the poison,” Jones says, “I always think of as *suicide* and for those with serious anguish, those who have been served by the ‘psychiatric world’ with words like ‘schizophrenia’ [and] ‘extreme OCD’... — this poisonous thought, once it enters the blood — it's hard to get rid of” (4). The play has a stroke of theatrical genius, too, in the presence onstage of four bankers boxes. They're unassuming at first; then they become terrifying. They contain Louis's medical records in their entirety, from early childhood to death — a sprawling archive of failed diagnoses. In total, the archive amounts to “1643 pages,” Jones tells us; “50 cents a page from Eastern Health. \$821.50” (23). My first response to these statistics was to wonder about the kind of extortionist that would charge grieving parents so much for traces of their son's life. My second was a sense of awe at the sheer scale of medical intervention. “These [boxes] are amazing,” Jones says:

there's like... 3 interviews each day by nurses with Louis for the 204 days he spent in psychiatric institutions; hundreds of reports from counsellors and psychiatrists; a thousand references to lab reports, medications, crucial blood tests for drugs with dangerous side effects. More than

350,000 words of analysis.... We depended on all the actors in all the dramas inside these boxes. The research scientists, psychiatric nurses, drug reps, personal care assistants, doctors (of pharmacology), lab technicians — legions of them — wow! they're all in there. (42)

Caryl Churchill says that Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* inspired her to write *Softcops* (3). *Don't Give Up on Me, Dad* might have been inspired by *History of Madness*. Foucault calls "the language of psychiatry... a monologue by reason *about* madness" (xxviii). In the case of Louis, the monologue was as long as *Anna Karenina*.

The ordeal documented in that 350,000-word archive amounts to a damning indictment of the psychiatry — its institutions, its practitioners, its therapeutic claims. Jones describes his bewilderment at the changing, often conflicting diagnoses of Louis's condition; his alarm at how cavalierly the doctors would prescribe new drugs with each new diagnosis; his dismay when these new prescriptions seemed to exacerbate Louis's symptoms; and his indignation when psychiatrists gave terrible, even cruel, advice. One of them, whom Jones calls "Dr. Ratsini," told Jones and his wife Mary-Lynn to stop cleaning their son's apartment, letting rats take over if need be in order to teach him a lesson about the importance of cleanliness. Another told Louis, in the presence of both his parents, "There is nothing wrong with you. You are doing this to hurt your parents" (24). Jones gives this reckless man the name "Dr. Cowboy." It's easy to dismiss these practitioners as merely incompetent, the kind of mediocrity that infiltrates institutions everywhere, their only talent that of surviving the scrutiny of search committees. But as the scale of the bankers-box archive makes clear, Louis's case confounded the mental-health profession as a whole. That profession is in the same boat as the rest of us: as Jones says, the human mind confounds us all. The play frequently invokes Dymphna, the Catholic saint of mental illness, to whom Jones's mother would pray to relieve her agoraphobia. Jones asks: "Just level with us, Dymphna. Taking everything into account, is there any hard evidence that Louis's

life was any better than it would have been in the old days when our only hope... was a prayer to you?" And in the voice of Dymphna, he replies: "We do not know" (37).

Ultimately, in the Gooseneck Island plot, Jones saves the abandoned children in a way he couldn't save Louis. Throughout the play, all we hear of these children are their recorded voices. When I saw the play in rehearsal, I didn't care for this element: the recorded voices struck me as untheatrical. But I've rethought it in retrospect and come to admire it as an alienation device. Those recordings make the children more tractable than Louis ever was, while their disembodiment underscores his absence. The artifice anticipates the fancifulness of the play's resolution. Jones extends the 15 seconds of perfect humanity indefinitely; he joins the children; there's a surge of good feeling that lingers. It all feels a bit like the miraculous resolution at the end of Brecht's *The Three-Penny Opera*, when at the last possible moment the Queen waives MacHeath's death sentence and gives him a peerage instead. "How nice and easy everything would be if you could always reckon with saviours on horseback," Mrs. Peachum says (in Ralph Manheim and John Willett's translation [79]).

But all this is to remind us, in case we should forget, that we're seeing a fantasy of restoration. *Don't Give Up on Me, Dad* is just a list of ideas for a play. We may never find the extra second of pure human solidarity, let alone sustain that solidarity indefinitely. We're unlikely ever fully to escape the rooms in which we grieve. But dreams of recovery are comforting precisely because we share them. As ideals, they provide us with a collective sense of direction.

The art historian Mitchell Merback has recently written a study of Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* that sees it as a "therapeutic image," a "special and possibly unique remedy for a special malaise — Renaissance misery" (30). It offers this remedy by "stimulat[ing] a certain kind of receptive process in [its] beholder" (28), its famous perplexities the very qualities that beguile the mind back to health. Merback's argument is appealing not least because it accounts for complexity as an artistic strategy: pat consolation is never consoling for long. *Don't Give*

*Up on Me, Dad* grapples with a terrible loss, and only pretends to win. But the fantastic character of the happy ending makes the play more satisfying in the long run. The ironic distance is a sure sign of the artist's wit — from which, I believe, any lasting consolation springs.

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