

ARTS

# Vermont play 'Act 39' asks 'What do you do when best friend asks you to help him die?'



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PLAINFIELD – Rob Mermin’s new play “Act 39” asks one simple, yet very complicated, question:

“What do you do,” Mermin said, “when your best friend asks you to help him die?”

He faced that conundrum when his friend Bill Morancy was diagnosed with a fast-moving, terminal form of cancer. That came less than a year after Mermin’s own life-changing health news: The Montpelier resident and mime who founded the youth-oriented Circus Smirkus, who built his life and career on physical movement, was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, which slowly robs people of their ability to control their bodies.

“Act 39,” which premieres Thursday, June 22 in Plainfield, addresses Mermin’s compromised physical health as he helps Morancy on his journey toward death by using Vermont’s medical-aid-in-dying law that gives the play its title. “Act 39,” according to the producer, delivers those monumental issues with intelligence, humor and heart.

“It is not depressing. It can be sad,” said Donny Osman, the Plainfield resident who’s producing “Act 39” and portrays the Bill character in the play. Like the Mitch Albom book “Tuesdays with Morrie,” Osman said “Act 39” tackles death with a positive spirit.

“It is uplifting,” he said.



### **‘A death sentence’**

Mermin and Morancy, a projectionist at The Savoy Theater in Montpelier, lived in the same building on School Street in Vermont’s capital city. “Over the years, we became fast friends,” Mermin recalled of the man with whom he played baseball and tennis and had riveting conversations about life and literature.

Mermin was diagnosed with Parkinson’s in late 2014. Morancy – a 70-year-old paragon of health who had never spent a night in a hospital – would shuttle Mermin back and forth to his medical appointments.

Less than a year after Mermin’s diagnosis, Morancy experienced pain in his stomach and chest a day after playing tennis, and collapsed. A doctor gave him a grim diagnosis – pancreatic cancer, stage four.

“I know what that means,” Mermin quoted Morancy as saying. “It’s a death sentence.”



Morancy’s oncology nurse told him his options. He could enter hospice, receive palliative care or avail himself of Vermont’s medical-aid-in-dying law, Act 39. Vermont in 2013 became the fourth state in the nation to pass such a law, which protects doctors from liability when prescribing life-ending drugs to patients who seek the prescription and have a prognosis of death within six months.

Morancy opted for Act 39. Mermin hesitated at helping his friend die. He wanted to make sure Morancy was certain. He was there in case his friend needed help to change his mind.

Mermin said Morancy made it clear that he wanted to seek medical help in dying.

“From that moment on,” Mermin said, “I was there to support Bill.”



### **‘Let’s make it happen’**

Morancy died in December 2015, three months after his diagnosis. A hospice nurse asked Mermin if he would talk about his experience with families facing similar situations. Mermin did that, and the more he told Morancy’s story the more he realized it was a story that needed to be told more broadly.

That led Mermin to begin the tentative stages of writing the play that would become “Act 39.” He had never written a play, but said the performances he created for Circus Smirkus were designed like little plays.

“I’ve always told stories in one form or another as a performer,” Mermin said.

Osman, 75, has been friends with Mermin, 73, for decades. A former state legislator, Osman helped Mermin start Circus Smirkus in Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom in 1987 and served as the organization’s first clown coach. He knew Mermin was working on a play about his experiences with Morancy.



“Rob, you wrote this play,” Osman recalled saying to Mermin. “What is it doing?” Sitting on a shelf, Mermin replied. He wasn’t happy with it. He was conflicted about whether to make the story just about Morancy or if he should

infuse it with his own frame of mind. He didn't want the play to preach to the audience one way or the other on the topic of medical aid in dying.

In the last couple of months of Morancy's life, according to Mermin, the two men had especially profound conversations about the circus world, about film, about life. The conversations were so deep and wonderful, Mermin said, that he would go home and take notes to remember the topics they covered. Those conversations found their way into "Act 39."

Osman kept pushing Mermin to complete the play. He said "Act 39" is the rare play that showcases emotionally healthy, male, platonic relationships.

"It just was the complete package. I said, 'Rob, this play has to happen,'" according to Osman. "This year to my shock he said, 'Yeah, let's make it happen.'"



## **‘Belongs on Broadway’**

At a rehearsal June 13 at Goddard College in Plainfield, J.T. Turner of Morgan portrayed the character named Rob, a trained mime and circus performer who’s showing off some of his tricks to his friend Bill, played by Osman. “If I didn’t know,” Bill says to Rob, “I couldn’t tell that you had Parkinson’s disease.”

Rob tells Bill that his training in mime came in handy. (In real life, Mermin studied under renowned mime performer Marcel Marceau.) “To me,” Rob tells Bill in the play, “Parkinson’s is like doing mime all day.” Rob says he has to analyze the motion he needs to go through before throwing a baseball to Bill. “Some irony I have to think about every movement as I’m doing it.”

The play, which also features Northfield actors Maren Langdon Spillane and Dominic Spillane in a variety of roles, turns to the topic of death, more from Rob’s perspective than Bill’s. Rob had a serious car accident the year before his Parkinson’s diagnosis and tells Bill the details of the accident only with prodding from Bill.

“You’ve had some close encounters of the fatal kind,” Bill says to Rob, telling him he’s courting “Mistress Death.”



An esoteric film Rob, Bill and others watch addresses the topic of death, and their often humor-filled analysis of that film leads to further intense conversations. They ponder whether the actual moment of death is hard and what it would be like to choose the timing of one's own death. This all takes place prior to Bill's diagnosis, giving "Act 39" a strong sense of foreshadowing.

Mermin said it's emotional for him watching performers act out scenes from his life, addressing his own Parkinson's diagnosis as well as his grappling with Morancy's terminal cancer. His goal with the play, he said, is that viewers ask what they would do in a similar situation. He's looking forward to talk-back sessions with the audience that will include representatives of Patient Choices Vermont after some of the productions.

"Rob says he thinks the whole play is in his perspective. I play Bill. With my ego I think it's in Bill's perspective," according to Osman, as Morancy is the



one going through the most-monumental change in the play. “It’s happening to Rob, too, because it’s affecting his attitude.”

Osman hopes the Plainfield productions are just the beginning for “Act 39.” Monica Callan of Waterbury Center, the play’s director, said she has invited professional theater companies from Vermont and Massachusetts to attend the production in hopes that they might be interested in bringing “Act 39” to the next level.

“This whole thing is so there is a next chapter,” Osman said. “I think it belongs on Broadway.”



