

# World Premiere of “Act 39:” Welcoming Joy and Accepting Loss

By  
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-  
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The cast of “Act 39” poses for a photograph at Goddard College’s Haybarn Theater. Seated in front is J.T. Turner, who plays Rob, one of the two leads. Standing behind him are Maren Langdon Spillane, Dominic Spillane, and Donny Osman. Langdon, Spillane, and Spillane each play several roles. Osman, who is also the producer of this Pushcart Productions show, plays Bill, the second major character. Photo by Monica Callan.

“Act 39,” the Pushcart Productions play currently running at Goddard College’s Haybarn Theater, opens with Rob, one of the two main characters, blowing a bubble and then bursting it with the swing of a wooden baseball bat, as he notes its brief, fragile existence. That moment captures two sides of this excellent new autobiographical work by playwright Rob Mermin:

taking a joyful, playful, and adventurous approach to life, while facing its fragility and human mortality.

The title itself, a reference to Vermont's 2013 Patient Choice and Control at the End of Life Act, indicates that this is not a comedy; however, this is a life-affirming play that celebrates fun and friendship, even as it deals with end-of-life decisions. It is not until almost an hour in, near the end of the first act, that the audience learns that Bill, the second main character, is facing a terminal illness. The story is told from Rob's perspective, with dream and memory scenes that bring Hercules, Sigmund Freud, and others to the stage.

Mermin, the founder of Circus Smirkus and a well-known mime, ran off to join the circus at age 19, touring with circuses throughout Europe and the Soviet Union and training with Marcel Marceau, one of the world's greatest mimes. He founded Circus Smirkus, Vermont's touring summer circus for youths, in 1987.

Mermin was neighbors and best friends with Bill Morancy, a projectionist at Montpelier's Savoy Theater and a film expert, who with fellow film expert Rick Winston had presented more than 200 "Talking About Movies" programs on ORCA community television. In 2015, when he discovered he had stage four pancreatic cancer, Morancy asked Mermin to help him through the final months of his life. Rob, himself, had learned that he had Parkinson's Disease the year before, a factor that adds greater poignancy to the story. The real-life Rob and Bill became the characters with the same names in the play.

Act 39 was still new, and like most Vermonters, at the start, neither Rob nor Bill knew anything about it. The play clearly explains the process that potentially allows terminally ill patients to end their life, with characters effectively arguing for and against doing so. But before getting that heavy, the play offers lots of fun — including Rob and Bill playing catch on stage, a Western-style duel with squirt guns, dowsing for cash, and lots of on-stage tricks (that you can do at home). Plus, ongoing jokes and witty banter run throughout the play.

Veteran actor and associate producer J.T. Turner plays Rob, and Donny Osman, who plays Bill, has worn too many Vermont hats to list them all (although they include actor, state legislator, and director of the Governor's Institute for the Arts). Both have a strong, comfortable, on-stage rapport. While Rob believes in the paranormal and that his visions are real, Bill is a practical realist with an extensive knowledge of films, history, and more. Bill's quotes, stories, and trivia are endlessly entertaining, as are Rob's stories and the tricks he teaches Bill.

When Rob asks Bill if he believes in an afterlife, Bill quotes playwright George Bernard Shaw's answer: "No, but I like surprises." The play is filled with snappy lines and pithy stories.

While Turner and Osman have the main roles and bring the play to life, Maren Langdon Spillane and Dominic Spillane take on multiple crucial roles as Actor 1 and Actor 2. Versatile actors who usually play lead roles, they shift personae to present the distinctly different

characters. In dreamlike scenes, Dominic convincingly becomes Hercules, Sigmund Freud, Samuel Morse, a pharmacist, and others. Among Maren's roles, she plays Mistress Death in a climactic scene in which she debates with Rob and others about whether Act 39 is good.

"This is not death with dignity; it's death on demand," she argues, claiming that death should get to control when people die, people shouldn't. In rapid sequence, she runs through a range of moods — from anger to coquettishness — and almost steals the scene, one of the most important ones in the play.

In the midst of the tumult, Bill jumps up from the couch on which he is going to die and yells, "Don't bring goddam religion into this. Damn it. This is not some hypothetical debate. I'm dying." Bill's central argument is that under medical treatment, he is in a fog of drugs that cause him to lose interest in what he cares about and makes it impossible for him to be himself. "If I have to go, I want to go on my own terms."

Director Monica Callan had both a strong cast and crew to work with. Composer Johnnie Day Durand wrote the music score and soundscape, ensuring smooth transitions through 13 scenes. Set and lighting designer Cavan Meese's multi-level set enables the cast to easily shift locations. Jessica Della Pepa Clayton is the stage manager. With a 15-minute intermission, the June 22 dress rehearsal ran two hours, 20 minutes.

Soon after receiving his terminal diagnosis, Bill tells Rob, "It hurts me when I laugh," and Rob responds, "It hurts me when you don't laugh." They are best friends to the end, and the importance of laughter and friendship dominate this engaging, heartwarming play.

*"Act 39" plays at Goddard College's Haybarn Theater, 123 Pitkin Road, Plainfield, through July 2. Remaining performances are June 29 and 30 and July 1 at 7 p.m., and July 2 at 2 p.m. Tickets are available at [sevendaystickets.com](http://sevendaystickets.com), and at the door. Admission is by donation, with a suggested amount of \$20.*