

Greg Jones Ellis' "All Save One," a Play About Artists at Risk in Middle Age, Gets DC World Premiere

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Laura Giannarelli and Bill Largess at the first read-through of the world premiere of Washington Stage Guild's "All Save One."

Creative people whose heyday was yesteryear struggle with desires, secrets and their very existence as they reach middle age in ***All Save One***, a new award-winning comedy-drama by **Greg Jones Ellis**, getting a world premiere run by **Washington Stage Guild** Nov. 15-Dec. 9. Accomplished and shiny in the early part of the 20th century, the acclaimed and closeted author Sims Glendenning and his wife, actress Claire Morgan, face new threats to their relevance in mid-century.

Here's how Washington Stage Guild bills the play by Annapolis playwright Ellis: "Set in Hollywood 1950, this witty comedy-drama reveals what goes on behind closed doors when a world-famous writer, his actress wife and his longtime 'secretary' arrive from England, only to have their comfortable household disrupted by the arrival of a handsome young priest and a film producer with a secret of his own. Add a malicious young blackmailer, and this glimpse into how Hollywood dealt with private lives is by turns darkly funny and emotionally powerful."



“It takes place in October 1950, just a hair after the absolute mid-century mark,” Ellis told me. “Let’s just say that all five characters have secrets that, if exposed, will be disastrous. Oh, but lest it sound heavy, it’s largely a comedy. Until it isn’t.”

The setting would seem to recall the kind of hermetic bohemian world that Noel Coward once wrote about in plays like *Hay Fever* and *Present Laughter*. I asked Ellis if the characters have real-life analogs, such as Coward or more closeted bisexual literary figures like Evelyn Waugh.

“The two you point out certainly floated around in my consciousness when I was writing it,” Ellis explained. “Ditto Charles Laughton, Cole Porter, Somerset Maugham. Aside from the fact that each hid their sexual orientations from the public, all were extremely witty. The dialogue, particularly between the three principals, relies on witty banter between them, which was both a sign of their great talent but also a masterful way to deflect peoples’ attention away from anything more personal. As the play progresses and the secrets come out, I hope audiences notice that the witticisms are fewer and farther between.”

[Carl Randolph](#) directs a cast that features WSG artistic director Bill Largess as Sims, [Laura Giannarelli](#) as Claire, Lawrence Redmond as producer John Grant, [Danny Beason](#) as Father Theodor and [R. Scott Williams](#) as Basil, Sims’ former lover and current secretary.



Bill Largess will play polymath British author Sims Glendenning in "All Save One."

The *All Save One* production team includes scenic designers Carl Gudenius, Kirk Kristlibas and Jingwei Dai; costume designer Reema Al-Bawardy; sound designer Frank DiSalvo, Jr., and lighting designer Marianne Meadows.

[Greg Jones Ellis](#) was awarded a 2017 Julie Harris Playwriting Award from the Beverly Hills Theatre Guild for *All Save One*. Other plays include *Divinity Place*, a comedy set during World War II based on his parents' wedding, [which I wrote about previously](#), and the comedy *Culver City Fever*, performed in the 2018 Kennedy Center Page-to-Stage New Plays Festival.

[Get \*All Save One\* ticket information here](#). Learn more about [WSG's 2018-19 season](#). (WSG gave my play *Alabama Story* its DC premiere in spring 2018.)

Ellis answered a slew of my questions about *All Save One* in the days leading up to opening night.

### **Sims is a poet and a playwright, correct?**

Greg Jones Ellis: Sims is one of those wonderful 20th century phenoms who had success in many genres. In the play we see that he has written fiction, poetry and plays. This was not uncommon: Maugham wrote in

all three genres, for instance. Coward wrote short fiction, plays and, of course, songs. First-rank authors like D.H. Lawrence and Henry James (both with interesting erotic lives) also wrote in both prose and verse. Sims' generation of writers was the first to enjoy an unexpected boon: movies. The wonderful benefit for writers in Sims' heyday, the 1920s and 1930s, of course, was Hollywood's hunger for stories. The major studios were cranking out dozens of films each year. And anything that had a marquee title — a Broadway hit, a best-selling novel — was snapped up by producers. Sims has been “at it” since the dawn of talkies, and has made a fortune from the sale of virtually all his works to the movies.

**In the play, we're in the world of show business and in the time of the communist witch hunt. What sort of research or reading did you do to inform your writing process?**

Greg Jones Ellis: I mostly researched the first-hand accounts and biographies of people in show business who were affected by it. Lee Grant's book “I Said Yes to Everything” was very helpful. So was “A Difficult Woman” by Alice Kessler-Harris about Lillian Hellman (much less self-aggrandizing than Hellman's own “Scoundrel Time”). I also found “Dance with Demons” by Greg Lawrence (about Jerome Robbins) an insight both into someone who “named names” during the Red Scare but who also hid his sexuality to an almost pathological degree.

**Fear is a big element in the play. Can you point to some of the ways fear surfaces?**

Greg Jones Ellis: The primary fear driving the play is fear of public exposure. But we also touch on some other pretty universal fears. For example, Sims fears becoming as he says, “a quaint old auntie” in the literary world. Newcomers like Tennessee Williams are skyrocketing to fame, while Sims' latest plays have been panned as old-fashioned. This, by the way, happened to Coward. His latter plays were seen as still using the same tired tropes that were the rage decades earlier.

I also think that the play touches on shame. For example, it was important to me to remind the audience that the self-hatred that many gay men (and women) had ingrained at that time was partly due to their own sense that there was something wrong, or sinful about them. This is certainly true of the young priest, who can't reconcile what is going on around him with the teachings of the church. And, I think there is something analogous in the guilt that some people felt during the Red Scare. Once the sheen of communism wore off from its fashionable place in the early part of the century, and the Stalinist era showed the worst extremes of

communism, there was a shame that led so many to fear exposure. Shame and fear: a pretty fearful combination.

Since all but the priest are in their 50s, there is also one more recognizable [element to the play]: age. Age brings all sorts of insidious new fears: loss of physical appeal, mental acuity, energy... These are hard on anyone, but most especially for actresses like Claire and writers like Sims.

**Was the idea of fear there from the beginning, or did that theme reveal itself as you continued to write it?**

Greg Jones Ellis: The first few drafts were actually quite a bit darker than the current production would indicate. In fact, one of my beloved characters got killed off in Draft 3! So, yes, the fears that motivate the characters were always there. But so was the desire to amuse. I want to honor those wonderful people who shared a love of the bon mot. Getting off a good line is a pleasure each can indulge in without a trace of fear. It takes the edge off the knowledge of an ever-present menace.

**What was the first inspiration you had for the play? How did this idea come to you?**

Greg Jones Ellis: Believe it or not, the first idea was a one-person show that perhaps I could write for myself. As an actor as well as a writer, I thought that perhaps I should create a producible evening with a juicy part for myself! I'd always loved playing roles written by Wilde and Coward and the like and I seemed to get cast in these kinds of roles. But as I developed the character of Sims, I realized several humbling things. First, I couldn't (and can't) write with myself in mind. It limits where the character wants to go. Second, I really wanted to get to know the satellite figures in Sims' life. So, on I went, and away went that juicy one-man play. Now I couldn't possibly imagine my playing Sims. He's got a full life of his own, particularly as played in this production by the very talented Bill Largess.

Once I knew that this was a play and not a one-man showcase, I was free. I'm sure most writers feel this way, but I really fell in love with all five of these folks as they started to speak to each other and I "transcribed." Each one has a kind of nobility.

Each one gets to show his or her vulnerability under all that sparkling repartee. And I loved giving them fun remarks to toss off.

However, without revealing too much, I will say that my priest character gave me the most trouble. He can't rely on comic lines; he's rather an innocent in some ways. And it took me what seemed like forever to fill him

in. I'll also admit that a rather crucial monologue by the secretary character, Basil, took a long time to gestate. Basil has many of the play's sassiest barbs, but I was afraid that I wasn't giving him a side for the audience to empathize with. Then one night, I decided to "be" Basil and to talk to my very patient cat in Basil's character. I just told my cat everything I was feeling, and presto! Basil had his monologue, almost verbatim. I tried it out at an "open mike" during the Writers Conference in Southampton, New York. Even out of context, it seemed to work. The next morning, someone I didn't know stopped me in the breakfast room and said it had moved him. In it went! And R. Scott Williams is delivering it in this production with such lovely shading and nuance.

**Sims seeks the advice of a handsome young priest for the purposes of research — his new play is about a character wishing to convert to Catholicism. Sims' own possible real-life conversion, in spite of his history of sinful desire, is part the story. Sims' motivation here is complex, right?**

Greg Jones Ellis: Yes. It was not uncommon for closeted people to search for a way to "absolve" themselves of what society told them was wrong. Religion was one way. For some who have been told even today that they are "wrong," it still is. I chose Catholicism as Sims' route to conversion because it more explicitly describes contrition, penance and forgiveness than other religions. In addition, Sims finds in young Father Theodor someone who truly wants to help him, perhaps because Father Theodor has immersed himself in his vocation to avoid some painful truths in his own life. Naturally, the bond between them is misconstrued by others. Or is it?

**There are multiple love stories in the play.**

Greg Jones Ellis: The most interesting to me is the one involving Claire. As she came to life in my mind, I wondered what it must be like to be married to someone who, through no fault of his own, is not physically attracted to you. Claire has a great deal of insecurity about her own appeal, and suddenly in middle age is pursued by a man who desires her. [the producer John Grant]. I loved exploring all of the emotions that she must feel: confusion, mistrust, discomfort, awakening desire, elation. Without divulging too much, everyone else in the play has had some pretty bad experiences, ending in divorce or violence or death. Again, their chance at happiness and true love comes unexpectedly for...um...all save one.





Laura Giannarelli plays stage and screen star Claire Morgan in "All Save One."

**You've had a long history with Washington Stage Guild and its leadership. Can you share some of that? What makes you trust your play to them?**

Greg Jones Ellis: I left DC after graduating from Catholic University at the age of 21. I only returned to this area four years ago. In those intervening decades, I had always remained in touch with my college friends, in particular Bill Largess, who is the artistic director of WSG, and Laura Giannarelli, one of its founding members. When I came back to the area, Bill invited me to perform in some of their wonderful staged readings. Then, another company member, Vincent Clark, invited me to assist him with a show he had written that was to be performed at the Kennedy Center's Page-to-Stage Festival. In the interim, I had written the first draft of *All Save One*. Vinnie Clark suggested that I ask the folks at WSG if they would sponsor a reading of it at the following year's Page-to-Stage Festival. Not only did they say yes, but they supplied me with actors, two of whom are still in the world premiere! Four or five drafts followed.

While I didn't write it specifically for WSG, they have told me that it struck them as, to quote one WSG staffer, "a bespoke play for us." WSG has a unique niche in the DC theater area. Its 30-plus year history has

been particularly distinguished by their productions of Shaw plays. They have a particular reverence for the spoken word and, I think, for plays that rely heavily on thought and discourse. That's beginning to sound pretentious, which they're not. Neither, I would argue, is Shaw. And he's pretty funny, too. The company WSG usually assembles for productions give intelligence a front seat and generally look for wit over just plain comedy. Since my play is very dependent on dialogue and a particular style, that's what makes it a good fit.