

# Washington Blade:

## Annapolis-based gay playwright launches '50s-set gay-themed dramedy

**'All Save One'**

Through Dec. 9

Washington Stage Guild

900 Massachusetts Ave., N.W.

\$50-60

240-582-0050

In out playwright Greg Jones Ellis' "**All Save One**," both the country and principal characters are having a mid-century moment. Set in Hollywood in 1950, the dramedy, now making its world premiere at Washington Stage Guild, gives a glimpse into the private lives of yesteryear's rich and famous gays.

Early in his career, closeted British writer Sims Glendenning (Bill Largets) garnered fame on both sides of the Atlantic penning groundbreakingly frank plays and novels. His heyday of success was the 1920s and though his star has dimmed, he remains busy writing plays and consulting for the movies.

Typically, Sims' moveable household is comprised of Basil (R. Scott Williams), a former lover turned acid-tongued factotum; sometimes his spouse of convenience Claire (Laura Giannarelli), an Oscar-winning character actress; and occasionally a handsome young man. They all know the deal; there is no illusion here.

While in Los Angeles, visitors to Sims' swank beachside abode include left-leaning movie producer John Grant (Lawrence Redmond) and Father Theodor (up-and-comer Danny Beason), a handsome young Catholic priest who administers to the faithful of Beverly Hills.

Into this cozy scene comes Sims' latest infatuation, an unseen, howling beach boy named Clay. An experienced blackmailer, Clay now has the goods on Sims and company. Their reputations are on the line and livelihoods could be lost.

"All Save One's" author Ellis is a student of '50s gay Hollywood. He's also an admirer of writer W. Somerset Maugham, composer Cole Porter and playwright/actor Noel Coward — all who, like Sims, became famous in the '20s, weren't unfamiliar with Hollywood and were never exactly openly gay. "These men, especially Maugham, are echoed in the play, but none are mentioned," Ellis says. "I bring to the script an understanding that people create fictions in different environments to avoid exploitation or worse. I have sympathy for the characters that younger audiences may not understand. I came of age in the '70s and early '80s. I was product of older parents. I'm typical of my generation in that my parents and I never had 'the talk.' They met my husband. He and I have been together since 1988 and we cohabited early on. They definitely got the deal. We just didn't talk about it."

In those days in Hollywood, homosexuality had to be kept a secret, he says. Sexuality was often an open secret in the movie colony, but the public was famously left in the dark. In some instances, LGBT people of that era were also homophobic.

"There was this sense of self-loathing that was perpetuated by society," Ellis says. "As a community we need to remember that prominent people desperately wanted not to be gay. Choreographer Jerome Robbins was in therapy for years unsuccessfully trying to turn himself straight."

"All Save One," makes a nice fit for Washington Stage Guild, Ellis says. "They've been around for over 30 years. Their niche is George Bernard Shaw whose works are marked by witty dialogue and thoughtful discourse. He makes you laugh and he makes you think. Actors at (the guild) have a real affinity for that kind of dialogue. I gave them long compound, complex sentences and brittle and epigrammatic dialogue, all of which they handle with ease."

Also, Ellis, who grew up in Bowie, Md., has a long connection to the guild. He attended Catholic University with both Largess and Giannarelli (both cast members and guild founding members). After leaving for New York City to pursue a career in theater at 21, Ellis kept in touch with his college classmates, particularly Largess.

While in New York, Ellis worked sporadically in theater, but as an increasingly successful copywriter and burgeoning playwright, he focused more and more on writing. Ellis and husband Eric Graber, a painter, returned to the area (Annapolis) four years ago. Once here, Ellis began workshopping his new play with guild aid. Over time, the work metamorphosed from a darker to a lighter piece, and then in 2017, the guild sponsored a reading of "All Save One" at the Kennedy Center's Page-to-Stage New Play Festival. In March, guild members surprised Ellis with the news that they were including a production of the play directed by Carl Randolph in their current season.

"I wanted to honor those people who were trying the best they could, if not entirely authentically, to live their lives," Ellis says. "Though it may be hard for younger audiences to understand, people sometimes live in untruths. It's important for me not to gloss that over."

**ALL SAVE ONE ALL SAVE ONE REVIEW BILL LARGESS DANNY BEASON GREG JONES**

**ELLIS LAURA GIANNARELLI LAWRENCE REDMOND R. SCOTT WILLIAM WASHINGTON STAGE GUILD**

**[Patrick Folliard](#)**