



THE WHO & THE WHAT

BY AYAD AKHTAR



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The New York premiere of THE WHO & THE WHAT was presented by LCT3 at Lincoln Center Theater (Paige Evans, Artistic Director [LCT3]; André Bishop, Producing Artistic Director [Lincoln Center Theater]), in June 2014. It was directed by Kimberly Senior. The set design was by Jack Magaw; the costume design was by Emily Rebholz; the lighting design was by Japhy Weideman; and the sound design was by Jill BC Du Boff. The cast was as follows:

AFZAL Bernard White
ZARINA Nadine Malouf
MAHWISH Tala Ashe
ELI Greg Keller

CHARACTERS

AFZAL

ZARINA

MAHWISH

ELI

SETTING

Present day. Atlanta, GA.

NOTE

This play was written as a comedy. The events of the story may appear to take it into darker, more dramatic territory. Be that as it may, the need for comedic timing, tight pacing, and lightness of touch are central to the play's construction.

THE WHO & THE WHAT

ACT ONE

Scene 1

A kitchen. In it: Zarina, 32, of South Asian origin — gimlet-gazed, lovely, though her appearance is already lightly worn from worry. And ... Her younger sister, Mahwish, 25, light and carefree. Even lovelier. A real knockout. Both are American-born; both speak without any accent. Zarina's in an apron, chopping vegetables.

MAHWISH. Stop changing the subject.

ZARINA. There was a subject?

MAHWISH. Zarina, did you get that link I sent you or not?

ZARINA. 'Wish. There is no universe. In which I start. Online dating.

MAHWISH. Z ... if you don't start showing *some* interest, Dad is not gonna let me —

ZARINA. (*Cutting her off.*) You don't need me to get married for you and Haroon to get married. (*Beat.*)

MAHWISH. You're just *flouting* Dad.

ZARINA. *Flouting?*

MAHWISH. Because you can.

ZARINA. Do you even know what that word means?

MAHWISH. Yes, I know what it means. And I know it comes from a Dutch word that means "to hiss at in derision —"

ZARINA. (*Impressed, lightly sarcastic.*) Wow.

MAHWISH. (*Over.*) — Manuel says learning the words isn't enough. You have to learn where they come from.

ZARINA. Manuel. Your GRE teacher.

MAHWISH. Yeah?

ZARINA. With the muscles and the tank top.

MAHWISH. So Manuel's a stud? What does that have to do with —

ZARINA. Does Haroon know how you feel about Manuel?

MAHWISH. I don't *feel* anything. I just think he's hot —

ZARINA. — I think it's good. You're acknowledging your desire for someone other than Haroon.

MAHWISH. (*Over.*) I'm not *acknowledging* desire. I don't have any *desire* for Manuel.

ZARINA. (*Lightly taunting.*) Manuel. Manuel.

MAHWISH. (*Over.*) You're just trying to change the subject again. I can't get married before you do, Zarina.

ZARINA. That's absurd. This is not Pakistan.

MAHWISH. It's not what's done.

ZARINA. Neither is having anal sex with your prospective husband so that you can prove to his parents you're a virgin when you finally marry him ...

MAHWISH. I can't believe you just —

ZARINA. (*Over.*) — There has to be a better solution. Prick your finger. Bleed on the sheet —

MAHWISH. You're disgusting.

ZARINA. You're the one doing it.

MAHWISH. Here's what I know about you. Anything I tell you, sooner or later, you will use against me.

ZARINA. I'm a Scorpio.

MAHWISH. It's a character failing.

ZARINA. Shoot me.

MAHWISH. (*Suddenly.*) — Why are you cutting an avocado?

ZARINA. For the salad?

MAHWISH. We hate avocados.

ZARINA. *You* hate avocados.

MAHWISH. *Dad* hates avocados.

ZARINA. I love them.

MAHWISH. See? Flouting. (*Pause.*) I never told you this ... You know that book you have of the Prophet's sayings about sex. On your shelf ...

ZARINA. Yeah?

MAHWISH. One day I was in your room and, when I saw it there, I had this weird feeling like I should take it down and open

it. So I did. You know what I opened to? The Prophet saying that wives are like farms. That husbands could farm them any way they wanted. From the front or back. But not in the anus.

ZARINA. So the sin is on the farmer. Not the farm.

MAHWISH. Really?

ZARINA. 'Wish, I don't think any of us should be taking sex advice from the Prophet.

MAHWISH. Then why do you have the book?

ZARINA. If you're so worried, stop doing it.

MAHWISH. He's a man. If I don't do something with him, he'll find somebody else to do it with ... *(Beat.)* So you don't think I'm gonna go to *dozakh*?

ZARINA. 'Wish, you know I don't believe in hell.

MAHWISH. But what if you're wrong? Manuel said there was this philosopher guy —

ZARINA. You and Manuel were talking about a *philosopher*?

MAHWISH. — This guy named Pasta.

ZARINA. Pasta?

MAHWISH. Who said that he wasn't sure if there was a hell but it was better to believe in one just in case.

ZARINA. Pascal.

MAHWISH. Okay. Whatever.

ZARINA. And that's not actually what Pascal said.

MAHWISH. How are you not scared of hell?

ZARINA. I can't be scared of something I don't believe in.

MAHWISH. It's in the Quran.

ZARINA. It's a metaphor.

MAHWISH. For what?

ZARINA. For suffering. For the cycle of human suffering. *(Mahwish considers her sister.)*

MAHWISH. *(Impressed.)* See ... You're so smart. You're beautiful. You're young. But you behave ... like a ... *hurridian*.

ZARINA. A what?

MAHWISH. You know ... a bossy old woman.

ZARINA. *(Pronouncing it correctly.)* *Harridan*?

MAHWISH. Is that how you say it?

ZARINA. *Harridan*. Repeat after me. *Harridan* — *(Beat.)*

MAHWISH. You're like one of those compound wives on *Big Love*.

ZARINA. What in God's name are you —

MAHWISH. Too bad they canceled it. You'd be perfect. Married to me and Dad. I feel like you're my sister-wife.

ZARINA. You're truly insane.

MAHWISH. Dutiful. Despotic.

ZARINA. That was right.

MAHWISH. Thank you. Up and at 'em at six-thirty. Cooking breakfast.

ZARINA. For you and Dad.

MAHWISH. I never asked you to cook me breakfast.

ZARINA. You're an ungrateful brat.

MAHWISH. You wanna cook breakfast? You wanna clean? Fine. I'm just saying, there's better things for you to be doing.

ZARINA. Like cooking and cleaning and having babies with someone I don't love?

MAHWISH. I love Haroon.

ZARINA. I know you do. *(Mahwish's phone sounds with a text. She checks.)*

MAHWISH. Some new barista at Java on the Park recognized Dad from TV. Gave him a free cappuccino. *(Off another text, reading, perplexed.)* The eagle has landed.

ZARINA. The what? *(Another text.)*

MAHWISH. *(Reading, then to herself.)* God.

ZARINA. What now? *(Mahwish shows the text to Zarina.)* Dad's sticking his tongue out at you?

MAHWISH. He just discovered emoticons. It's so annoying. *(Typing into phone.)* Busy. *(Beat.)* You won't try online dating. You won't let me set you up with Yasmeen's brother —

ZARINA. My life is fine. Leaves me time and space to write.

MAHWISH. So you keep saying.

ZARINA. What is that supposed to mean?

MAHWISH. You never talk about what you're writing. You never show anybody anything —

ZARINA. Doesn't mean I don't write —

MAHWISH. Why don't you ever talk about it?

ZARINA. Because I don't want to.

MAHWISH. So you actually write when you go to the library? 'Cause that's not what the librarian said.

ZARINA. What librarian?

MAHWISH. The blonde. Stacy. She's in my yoga class. She says you stare out the window for hours.

ZARINA. I've had writer's block. That's why I've been staring out the window. *(Beat.)* And I don't just stare out the window. Sometimes I masturbate.

MAHWISH. You what?

ZARINA. Stacy didn't tell you that?

MAHWISH. In public?

ZARINA. The desk I sit at is in the corner.

MAHWISH. *(Intrigued.)* What's the book about?

ZARINA. This really hot guy who teaches me amazing words in my GRE class. It's called *Manuel*. *(Beat.)*

MAHWISH. Why can't you just tell me what it's about?

ZARINA. Gender politics.

MAHWISH. Hello? English?

ZARINA. Women and Islam. *(Beat.)*

MAHWISH. Like what, like bad stuff?

ZARINA. Not only.

MAHWISH. Well, I hope not. 'Cause everyone's always making a big deal about women in Islam. We're just fine.

ZARINA. Good to know.

MAHWISH. You don't actually do that, do you?

ZARINA. For me to know, and you and Stacy to find out ... *(Pause.)*

MAHWISH. You're hiding, Z. Behind the cooking and the cleaning and the "I'm working on gender politics ..." *(Beat.)* You have to put Ryan behind you. *(Pause.)*

ZARINA. He is.

MAHWISH. No, he's not. *(Beat.)* He's married —

ZARINA. *(Cutting her off.)* I know! *(She is suddenly emotional.)*

MAHWISH. I didn't want to tell you ... I found him on Facebook ... He's with his wife and they're holding a baby. *(Zarina is clearly affected at hearing this. Mahwish goes to comfort her. Zarina walks out. Lights out.)*

THE WHO & THE WHAT

by Ayad Akhtar

2M, 2W

Brilliant Pakistani-American writer Zarina is focused on finishing her novel about women and Islam. The only distraction is her father's insistence at setting her up on a date with Eli, a young convert who pleases both her father's conservative values and Zarina's modern, complicated Muslim identity. Everything seems to be going the way everyone wants, until Zarina finishes her book — a fictional accounting of the story in the Quran of the revelation of the veil. Zarina's novel portrays a very different version of the Prophet Muhammad than traditions allow, and the whole family is forced to confront who and what they believe in. A passionate and searing look at a family divided by faith, bonded by love, and searching for truth in contemporary America.

"THE WHO & THE WHAT explores intergenerational and interfaith conflicts with fluid eloquence and intelligence. Mr. Akhtar writes dialogue that, while often funny and always natural, crackles with ideas and continually reveals undercurrents of tension that ratchet up the emotional stakes."

—**The New York Times**

"THE WHO & THE WHAT is to be commended for tackling themes too rarely addressed in contemporary dramas. ... Akhtar is definitely a playwright whose work merits significant attention."

—**The Hollywood Reporter**

"Akhtar, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his 2012 play Disgraced, here switches his focus from work colleagues to families. But he maintains a firm hold on a recurring theme in his work: the crisis of identity and its eventual consequences. Like Zarina's messy, impassioned book, THE WHO & THE WHAT stirs the pot in unexpectedly dramatic ways."

—**Entertainment Weekly**

Also by Ayad Akhtar

DISGRACED

THE INVISIBLE HAND

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