

**THE HAPPIEST
SONG PLAYS LAST**
BY QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

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*For Virginia and Sedo Sanchez (Mom and Pop)
who blasted Ramito way too early in the morning.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am marrow-deep grateful to Elliot Ruiz — my cousin, my muse, my inspiration. When he returned from Iraq that boyish sparkle in his eye had changed, ever so slightly. As his life story continued to unfold I continued to write, and Elliot gave me his blessing and took my creative license in stride.

Yaz's press conference statement is based on a speech written by Roger Zepernick. With his permission I have adapted it here.

Though fictional, this play is inspired by two real events: Joaquin Rivera's experience at the Aria Health Clinic in Philadelphia in 2009 and the filming of the movie *Battle for Haditha*.

The following people gave of their spirit and stories in interviews: Nelson Gonzalez on the history and essence of the music, and Nilda Ruiz and Maria Quiñones Sanchez with tales of Joaquín the guidance counselor and neighbor. Danielle Allen, Ryan Shams, Rohina Malik, Kareem Fahim, Amy Herzog, and Najla Said shared candid points of view.

Five actors gathered at New Dramatists as this play was born: Andrea Burns, Demosthenes Chrysan, Mateo Gomez, Armando Riesco, and Najla Said. The family grew at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center: Eddie Torres, Zabryna Guevara, Jaime Tirelli, Kevin Geer. Ruben Santiago-Hudson brought the play home, leading an outstanding cast: Armando Riesco, Lauren Vélez, Annapurna Sriram, Tony Plana, Dariush Kashani, Anthony Chisholm, Nelson González, Johnny Rivera, and Nelson Jaime.

Gratitude to Tanya Palmer, the entire Goodman Theatre, the Joyce Foundation. Carole Rothman and Second Stage Theatre. John Beinecke and Page 73 Productions.

Finally, gratitude to my family. In particular, my aunt Linda Hudes; my mother, Virginia Sanchez; and my children, Cecilia and Julian Beauchamp. The warmest thanks of all to my husband, my friend, my most candid and knowing dramaturg, Ray Beauchamp.

THE HAPPIEST SONG PLAYS LAST received its world premiere at the Goodman Theatre (Robert Falls, Artistic Director; Roche Schulfert, Executive Director) in Chicago, Illinois, on April 22, 2013. It was directed by Edward Torres; the set design was by Collette Pollard; the costume design was by Christine Pascual; the lighting design was by Jesse Klug; the sound design was by Ray Nardelli and Joshua Horvath; the original music was by Nelson González; the projection design was by John Boesche; the dramaturg was Tanya Palmer; and the production stage manager was Kimberly Osgood. The cast was as follows:

ELLIOT Armando Riesco
YAZ Sandra Marquez
SHAR Fawzia Mirza
AGUSTÍN Jaime Tirelli
ALI Demetrios Troy
LEFTY James Harms
MUSICIAN Nelson González

THE HAPPIEST SONG PLAYS LAST received its New York premiere at Second Stage Theatre (Carole Rothman, Artistic Director; Casey Reitz, Executive Director) in New York City, opening on March 3, 2014. It was directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson; the set design was by Michael Carnahan; the costume design was by Karen Perry; the lighting design was by Rui Rita; the sound design was by Leon Rothenberg; the music director and composer was Nelson González; and the production stage manager was Amanda Michaels. The cast was as follows:

ELLIOT Armando Riesco
YAZ Lauren Vélez
SHAR Annapurna Sriram
AGUSTÍN Tony Plana
ALI Dariush Kashani
LEFTY Anthony Chisholm
MUSICIANS Nelson González, Nelson Jaime, John Rodriguez

CHARACTERS

ELLIOT — 20s, Latino.

YAZ — 30s, Latina, Elliot's cousin.

SHAR — short for Shahrnush, 20s, Arab-American,
emphasis on the American.

AGUSTÍN — 60s, Latino.

ALI — 40s, Arab, thick accent.

LEFTY — 40s–70s, any ethnicity — he's a cultural outsider
to the Puerto Rican community, but they have accepted
him as one of their own.

PLACE

Philadelphia and various locations in Jordan.

TIME

January – February 2011, then a year later.

MUSIC

The cuatro is Puerto Rico's national instrument; it is much like the guitar but with a metallic twang. This play will benefit from a trio of live musicians: a guitar player, a cuatro player, and bongo/güiro player, at least one of whom should sing. The cuatro player might also learn to play oud, or adapt oud repertoire on the cuatro. If three musicians are not possible, a single live guitarist/vocalist will still have strong impact. If no live music is possible, please research recordings of Puerto Rican classics, Ramito being my personal favorite.

“There have been great changes in the face of [Philadelphia,] in its levels and contour, and in the direction and beds of its water-courses since the days of the Swedes and the early Quakers. Some streams have disappeared, some have changed their direction, nearly all have been reduced in volume and depth ... in the building of a great city.”

—J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott,
History of Philadelphia

THE HAPPIEST SONG PLAYS LAST

ACT ONE

Prologue

In darkness, sounds from many protests throughout history:

PROTESTOR VOICES. Si se puede! Si se puede! Si se puede! The people united can never be defeated! The people united can never be defeated! Hosni has gone mad! Hosni has gone mad! El pueblo unido jamas será vencido! Condoleezza, Condoleezza! Help Mubarak find a visa! Condoleezza, Condoleezza! Help Mubarak find a visa! What do we want? New sewers! When do we want them? Now! What do we want? New sewers! When do we want — Hurriya! Hurriya! Hurriya! *(Lights rise to a huge protest. Yaz addresses the crowd.)*

YAZ. Good morning, Arizona! Citizens. Non-citizens. Americans. Chicago has already arrived, Cleveland and Boston just pulled in, New York got a flat tire about two miles away and are actually *walking* here as we speak, and Orlando is parking. But I'm here to let you know, Philly's in the house! And we brought the music. We brought the man with the guitar. Agustín Moreno, ven aca! *(Agustín enters with his cuatro.)*

AGUSTÍN. Wow, meng. A lot of people were telling me, "Agustín, what the hell are you doing taking a bus to Arizona? ¿Tú estás loco? You're Puerto Rican, you're a citizen! Let los Mexicanos fight their fights, let us fight ours!" I said, "Oye, that sentiment is not coming from a Puerto Rican heart." So I'm here to sing some jíbaro music, some Boricua songs, for my Arizona brothers and sisters. Oye, the

songs are pretty, but make no mistake. Each song is a revolutionary song. Each song is a protest. An affirmation of what is truly ours. “We are Puerto Rican. Period.” Today, “Somos Americanos. Punto.” (*Plays. Music — and protest — swells, as one.*)

Scene 1

January 2011. Azraq, Jordan. The film set of Haditha on Fire.

A violent explosion. The sound of debris landing in the explosion's wake. Shar, in a traditional abaya, lies on the ground. She is harnessed for flying.

SHAR. Oh shit ... Ow ... Uhhhh ... (*Elliot enters in combat gear and fake blood.*)

ELLIOT. Yoooooo! You flew! You fucking trampolined! You okay? Shar? Shar! You good?

SHAR. Aw ... That hurt. Ow.

ELLIOT. Who are you where are you?

SHAR. I'm Shar. I'm in Jordan filming a movie.

ELLIOT. (*Holding up fingers.*) Count.

SHAR. Three. I think I'm okay ... Ugh ...

ELLIOT. Breathe, dude. Get up slowly.

SHAR. What happened?

ELLIOT. The second they said “action,” this gust of wind came up, you could literally see the air moving. That thing detonated sixty degrees to the left! Even Nigel was running 'cuz he was like, “Protect the cameras! Protect the film!”

SHAR. (*Spitting.*) I have a mouthful of pebbles.

ELLIOT. Shit looked tight.

SHAR. Yeah?

ELLIOT. You trampolined like twenty feet off the ground! (*Shar has made it to her feet. He removes the harness from her.*)

SHAR. I hope he got what he needs.

ELLIOT. Don't worry, he doesn't have another bomb. I told that hard head of his. This is the desert. This ain't no soundstage. You

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4M, 2W

In a barrio living room in North Philly, an activist-turned-music-professor moonlights as the local soup kitchen queen, cooking free rice and beans for any hungry neighbor. Halfway around the world, her cousin relives his military trauma on the set of a docudrama that's filming in Jordan. With the Egyptian revolution booming in the distance, these two young adults try to sing a defiant song of legacy and love in the face of local and global unrest.

"Intensely engaging new drama. Hudes' story not only comes with the unmistakable whiff of authenticity but conveys how none of our lives are entirely ordinary, and how small stuff actually connects to all kinds of big stuff, be it matters of global import, community progress or the clichés of Hollywood representation. Hudes is a very accomplished storyteller, a playwright with an emergent, fulsome American narrative."

—**Chicago Tribune**

"As ever, Hudes' writing is poetic but wry, full of swagger and poetry. Oh, how the lines sing."

—**Time Out New York**

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ISBN: 978-0-8222-3179-0



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