



DRAW THE CIRCLE

BY MASHUQ
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DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



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And God said to me,
How could I not love you?
And for a long time I didn't understand.

And then I did.

For God, who never left.

Sunday, January 14th, 2007

To my dearly beloved mother,

Sometimes I think you hate me. I have somehow single-handedly stolen away your dreams and left you with old age and despair. Every time you and Dad leave the country now for your three-month trips to India, your three-month sabbaticals in Florida, I have this sense that you're running away from me.

(You are, aren't you?)

You are the U.S. matriarch of our family: You are the one everyone fears the most, the strongest willed of all your siblings, the most successful, the one with the most money, the one who has made everyone cry at some point...a pillar really. And yet, I think there are those who see you as fragile, as if to tell you the truth would somehow shatter your delicate sense of the world. It is not unlike the way you treat Nunima. Is this, then, the culture I come from? One of secrecy and fear; a china shop and I am the bull that must stay outside?

Ironic.

You are a woman who survived seven siblings, medical school, the death of your father, marriage to a stranger (who, luckily, was Dad), a transcontinental move to England, living apart from Dad—the one other person in the whole country that you knew—a brutal residency, racism, having a baby all alone, and then the loss of that baby as he was shuttled to India to be brought up with the extended family while you continued to toil in this foreign, white land, full of boiled, bland food and gray days. Then another transcontinental move to the United States, the culture shock of New York City, another brutal residency, and then you gave birth to me. That is not the history of a fragile woman.

And yet when I came to you, weary from the weight of secrets, and asked you to listen, to hear my pain and hear my struggle and please, just love me anyway, even if it's not the dream you had for me, even if your fantasies are like clothes too tight that I shrug off, even if the future is unimaginable, just love me anyway. Hold me like you did when I was a child, in your lap, your fingers absently scratching my back, your voice gentle and happy, your hand in mine.

(Remember how, when I was in first grade, you would get me out of school early so we could go to McDonald's, just the two of us?)

When did we stop holding hands? When did you stop being happy? Sometimes I think it was when F— was taken from you, but there was a delayed reaction. Did I hurt you so much by growing up and becoming my own person? Did you fear you would lose me and so you clutched me so tight to your breast that I almost suffocated to death? You pulled, I pushed, and the battle lines were drawn, lines that would last decades. I think both Dad and F— have been at various times caught in our crossfire.

Mine was a struggle to survive. I shaved my head and you were ashamed of me. I told you I was bisexual and you were ashamed of me. I spent a year in a mental hospital trying desperately to find the will to live, and you were ashamed of me. And now, a decade later, I beg you to understand that I cannot fight this anymore. I beg you to understand that I do not do this to hurt you. But I cannot be anyone other than who I am if I am to live a life of Truth. And any other life is not worth living.

(But please, Mom, can't you love me anyway?)

You won't even look at me.

When I see you a year later, my voice deep and resonant, my goatee neatly trimmed, you look at me with such disgust. It is a look I have grown used to. It is a look that no longer infuriates me, but instead makes me tired and sad. You do not talk to me, do not look at my face; you leave the room when I enter, sit alone in front of your small space heater and cry to yourself. And all over again I am fourteen, nineteen, twenty-one years old, and want desperately to slit my own throat.

Do you wish you had stayed in India, in those moments? Do you think that America has done this to me? That I would be normal, be your long-haired feminine daughter had you brought me up in India?

(Would you really have sent me away from you?)

I don't think you could have done that, not really. And yet you did it for half my life and are still doing it. Five feet away from you, and the walls between us are so high and thick that it is as if we are lifetimes apart.

I know you hate that I was in therapy, you see it as something to be embarrassed by. Yet years of therapy have taught me a few things. First, that I love you, and I cannot not love you, though I have tried over the years. I have tried to not care about what you think, to not be affected when you take your love away and silence fills the space between us, thick and empty. Second, that you love me, and you cannot not love me, no matter how much you pull away, run away, shut me out. And third, that I want to live, but not for you. (You may have shut me out, but God did not.)

You are the matriarch of our family. People fear your wrath. But I am your child, truly, and I am also feared in our family. People fear my Love. They imagine that the two of us at war would result in catastrophic explosions, the fallout of which would surely fall on them.

We are not equals, in this struggle. You are my mom and I will always be wounded by your love. I come into the arena with a broken heart. But I think, truly, you also have a broken heart. I see your walls and defenses and your tense brow and all the counterattacks that you prepare to defend yourself against me. But I will not fight you, Mom. I will not surrender, but I will not fight you.

I will do only this:

I will whisper "I love you" quietly, over and over again, that it might be carried on the breeze above your battlements, through your defenses, and with luck, perhaps it will lodge in your heart. If I say it enough, gently, unarmed and still, perhaps someday your heart will be healed.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

Can you hear my whispers? Mom? Do you know that I love you? Do you think that someday we might hold hands again?

DRAW THE CIRCLE had its world premiere production at Play-Makers Repertory Company (Vivienne Benesch, Producing Artistic Director; Justin Haslett, Managing Director), Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in August 2016. It was directed by Chay Yew and performed by Mashuq Mushtaq Deen.

The Off-Broadway premiere of DRAW THE CIRCLE was produced by Rattlestick Playwrights Theater (Daniella Topol, Artistic Director) in January 2018. It was directed by Chay Yew and performed by Mashuq Mushtaq Deen.

DRAW THE CIRCLE had its first workshop production at InterAct Theatre Company (Seth Rozin, Artistic Director), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in April 2012. It was directed by Chay Yew and performed by Mashuq Mushtaq Deen.

DRAW THE CIRCLE was developed primarily at the Public Theater (Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director; Patrick Willingham, Executive Director).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many people were kind to me along the way and deserve a thank you. I know already that I will not be able to thank everyone who deserves it—there’s not enough room—and I can only hope those kind people will forgive me.

First, I want to thank my dear friend Satya Rai Nagpaul, who showed me what a man could be, and that I already was one. Though I have changed most names in the play, I have not changed his because he blazed trails for so many other trans men who would come after him, and he deserves the credit.

That this play is in your hands right now is due to the helping hands of so many: Laura Maria Censabella who told me I had to write this play; Liz Frankel and the Public Theater for believing in me and giving me my first big break, and my EWG colleagues who supported me through the writing of *Draw the Circle* (and my dear friends KCS and BK who thought I meant “trans-Atlantic,” which will make me laugh until the end of time); Jim Nicola, Linda Chapman, and New York Theatre Workshop for continued development; Seth Rozin and InterAct Theatre who gave me my first workshop production; Viv Benesch and PlayMakers Rep who not only gave us the world premiere but who cared so very deeply while doing it; Daniella Topol and Rattlestick Playwrights Theater for the NYC premiere (which is about to begin as I write this); Alba Quezada who talked me down from many a vocal cliff over many, many years; Lynne Rosenberg for also talking me down from performance cliffs; the immensely talented Joseph Moran who in the early years gave me free publicity photos for the show; Quinn Corbin who was the first agent to ever believe in me, and Susan Gurman who is both agent and friend and dear one on this journey with me now; New Dramatists where I first experimented with a multi-character version; and especially the MacDowell Colony where I worked on this text version during my residency in 2015.

And a special thank you to Haleh Roshan Stilwell at DPS for her patience and support throughout the process. This is an incredibly

difficult play for me to perform, and it is also a very difficult script for me to revisit—though wounds heal over with scar tissue, they still sometimes *ache*.

And then two people most of all deserve my undying gratitude:

My director Chay Yew, for being on this very long journey with me, for making it look beautiful, for pushing me and letting me push back, and most of all for believing in the story.

And then finally my partner, Elizabeth, for so many things, but mostly for weaving her life together with mine.

CHARACTERS

(Please see “Casting Requirements” on page 62.)

MOLLY

Deen’s partner, a white cisgender woman

FATHER

Deen’s father, an Indian cisgender man

MOTHER

Deen’s mother, an Indian cisgender woman

NICK

A friend from high school, cisgender

RABIA

Deen’s six-year-old niece, an Indian-American cisgender girl

JEN

A friend from high school, cisgender

DR. ERIKSON

A therapist at the Stockbridge Treatment Center, cisgender

LUCIA

A Latina cisgender woman, housekeeper

ALONSO

A man living in Costa Rica, cisgender

SAM

A classmate from grad school, cisgender

KOKILA

A trans woman living in India

SATYA

A trans man living in India

JACK

A trans man in his fifties

MATT

Deen's brother-in-law, a white cisgender man

JOSH

A young trans man

VANESSA

Human resources specialist, a cisgender woman

STEPHEN

A cisgender man in his forties

BEVERLY

A nurse, cisgender

DEEN

ON TRANSITIONS

The transitions are instantaneous, there are no pauses between characters, no breaks, no chances for the audience to catch up, it should feel like a roller-coaster ride. When Deen performed the play, slides were used for characters' names.

ON FOOTNOTES

You will see that the script that follows is footnoted. These footnotes are not meant to be part of the performance, but are an addition to this published version of the text. The script can be read in two ways—either all the way through without referencing the footnotes at all until the end—which would be the closest approximation to the play performed live—or reading the footnotes as you go. It's up to you.

Most of the names in the play were changed, and they remained changed in the footnotes. There are a few exceptions, which will be noted. Along those lines, the stage script is a *mostly autobiographical* version of real events. Artistic license has (occasionally) been taken for the sake of structure and story arc. The footnotes are all true to the best of my knowledge.

*He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!*

—Edwin Markham

DRAW THE CIRCLE

A young woman enters, talking and packing. Slide: Molly.¹

MOLLY. (*To Deen.*) You know, we don't have to tell them about the surgery this weekend—we can just wait and see how it goes. Are we staying the night? Well, what did your dad say? Well, where's the email?!

“Dear Shireen, You can arrive on Thursday morning. It's a long trip, check your tires and oil before starting. Dad.” That doesn't tell me anything! Is it warm? Cold? Do I bring PJs?!—Do you think I need to dress up for Thanksgiving?

We haven't seen them in two years. It's like I've got to prove myself all over again—yes, I'm white—no, I'm not Muslim—yes, I'm a girl... Fuck, all my good clothes are in the laundry!

An older Indian man who has been living in this country for many years.

Slide: Father.

FATHER. You want to hear a joke? Okay, this is very funny: An elderly Indian man, he calls his son in New York and says, “I hate to ruin your day, but I have to tell you that your mother and I are divorcing—forty-five years of misery is enough!” Very worried, the son says, “Dad, what are you talking about?” The father says, “We can't stand the sight of each other any longer, we're sick of each other and I'm sick of talking about this so you call and tell your sister in Chicago!” Frantic, the son calls his sister, who is furious. “Like hell they're getting divorced,” she

¹ Molly's real name is Elizabeth. I'm in the habit of using the name *Molly* when I write about her, but here in these footnotes, I am reverting to her actual name with her permission. To write the character of Molly, Elizabeth allowed me to read her journals from that time. Much of what Molly says is taken from these journals.

shouts. She immediately calls her father and screams at him, “You are NOT getting a divorce. Don’t do a single thing until I get there. I’m calling brother back and we’ll both be there tomorrow. Until then, DON’T DO A THING!” And hangs up. Then the old man, he turns to his wife and says, “Oh they’re coming for Thanksgiving and paying their own travel fare!” ...Very funny, no?

Holidays are good, they make you clean the house, tip to top.²

An older Indian woman who has been living in this country for many years.

A vacuum cleaner is heard. Slide: Mother.

MOTHER. (*To Father.*) Aiyo, Daddy, you’re going to break your back, stop cleaning so hard, she’s not the Queen of England. I don’t know why we even invited them for Thanksgiving. I’m not going to slave over a stove for these people, and none of this TURKEY³ nonsense! Whatever we have, they have to eat!

Slide: Molly.

MOLLY. We’re about to go spend Thanksgiving with HIS parents, the same people who didn’t want to see him for two years. And you know what he tells me? That his parents are my parents—and when they get old, he wants them to come live with us⁴... THEY

2 My dad cooked and cleaned and ironed clothes and shoveled the driveway and raked the leaves and planted things in the garden and he never complained much about any of it. It wasn’t until much later in life that I realized not all dads were like that.

3 When we were children, my parents celebrated Thanksgiving and Christmas with turkeys and trees and presents. They didn’t know what stockings were or what went in them and we had to explain it to them. Later, they would get tired of turkeys and Christmas trees, see them as traditions that were not their own. And later still, they would bring them back, finding joy in them again.

4 I grew up with stories of India where four generations lived under one roof: My great-grandfather, the businessman; my grandfather, the intellectual who died too young; my grandmother who had a grade-school education and gave birth to ten children, of which eight survived; a string of cousins who were old enough to be my aunts and uncles, and another string of cousins young enough to be my nieces and nephews. I was raised to believe that children respected and served their elders. It feels morally wrong to put my parents or Elizabeth’s parents in any kind of “home.”

Ironically, in their retirement, they moved to Florida, far away from us, to live in a retirement community, to play tennis and canasta, and to go out to dinner with their

don't have any pictures⁵ of him in the house PAST HIGH SCHOOL. These are people who don't want to know anything about his life, ABOUT ME⁶—how are they going to come live with us?

*Slide: Nick, a friend from high school.*⁷

NICK. She was a friend in high school. Shireen was never like the other girls. She dressed kinda weird, but I just figured she needed a way to rebel 'cause her parents were so strict. If she brought home a B on her report card, she'd get in trouble! If I brought home a B I'd probably get money.

When we went to prom, I guess she did spend a lot of time picking out my tux,⁸ but I didn't think anything about it, I just, it's her prom, so I'll wear whatever she wants me to wear, I don't care. But then, I was, I don't know... I'd never seen her in a dress, ever, until prom, and it was just like... WOW. I mean, her hair, it was wrapped in this thing with little white flowers in it—she wasn't wearing her army vest or her bandanna—she was all in this long black velvet dress, and it kind of blew my mind. And I wasn't the only one, everyone

neighbors. As an adult, I cannot reconcile the feeling that the family should be together with the fact that we are not.

5 Elizabeth collected pictures of us, had them framed, and sent them to my parents as a gift. Though I thought this a passive-aggressive way to deal with the situation, I believe my parents preferred her method to mine.

6 My parents have always liked Elizabeth as a person, but had a hard time with what she represented: That I was dating, that I was dating women, and that these things were being done out in the open. And at the same time—and this was difficult to reconcile—they were *grateful* for her, too, because she was there to take care of me. Years later, they would be grateful that Elizabeth had a job they understood, one with an office and a paycheck, and that because of these things, I was not starving or living in a box.

7 For the last half of senior year, Nick was my best friend: We talked on the phone at night and passed notes during the day, we saw cheesy movies on the weekend. We were dating—my friends knew it, his friends knew it—we were the only ones who didn't. The night before I left for college we danced in the town gazebo. We were never friends again after that night. Though I have always been attracted to men, I never understood how to be with them until after I transitioned, until men were able to look at me and see another man.

8 The tux had tails and a vest. Nineteen years later, on September 2, 2012, I would wear one just like it—but fancier, white tie this time—as Elizabeth and I stood in front of more than a hundred people at our wedding reception.

was really floored to see her like that. She was, beautiful, like a real girl.

Slide: Mother.

MOTHER. I already had one son⁹ so of course I prayed for my second child to be a daughter. But Shireen has been one long headache since the time she became a teenager. Everything must be an argument. American teenagers, everything is drugs and sex and getting pregnant—I was a pediatrician, I know, I see the way these kids treat their parents.

We were strict, of course, they had to study hard, both of them. But it paid off—both were valedictorians, both went to good colleges. . . . But once she gets to New York, where her college is, she begins hanging out with red hair, blue hair, homosexuals, Madonna, Michael Jackson—everyone has more influence over your kids than you do—no matter that we were the ones who slaved like dogs.

I asked her, I say, Shireen, why did you have to cut off ALL of your hair? And such a stupid thing she says: She wants people to be less judgmental. People ARE going to judge you! They see you and your bald head and they'll think you're a freak!

I didn't want her to come home. My own child. People talk. My patients might have seen her. Ten minutes of insanity that will take a whole year to fix!

9 My mom has endured a lot. Shortly after my parents were married, they moved to England so my father could sit for the Royal College of Surgeons exams. They arrived without warm clothes to wear, with no spices to improve the food, and because of where they could find work they ended up living in different towns, my father taking the bus to see my mother every weekend. My mom worked through her pregnancy, gave birth to my brother alone, my dad able to come up only afterwards to see her. My brother was her first child, and I can only imagine how she must have doted on him those first few months. It was short-lived, however, because she had to return to work and my parents still lived in different cities. My brother was sent to India to be raised by my dad's mother and sisters where, as the first son of the first son, he would not want for anything. It's not often my mom will talk about how painful that was for her.

Her second trauma, as she explained it to my therapist when I was in the hospital, was when I was a baby: As she would get ready for work, I would cry and cry, and then suddenly, inexplicably, I would give up and slump over. She said she never felt guiltier than having to leave me like that.

None of this would have happened if we'd stayed in India.¹⁰ This country is morally bankrupt—everyone, even the politicians, they're all having affairs and with no sense of decency. ...Do you know, the first time I saw her with no hair, she had this one braid, coming out of the top of her head like a Hari Krishna. I used to have dreams, actual dreams, where I snuck into her room at night and cut it off!

Slide: Father.

FATHER. This country was very strange at first. Pizza. Snow tires. Halloween. But, the weather is nice, you know, not SO hot, and SO humid all the time. I can play tennis outside, inside. And we have some Indian friends¹¹ we visit, we can enjoy some spicy food together, speak our own language.

We used to all get together on the holidays—the Krishnans took New Year's, but our holiday was Thanksgiving—everyone came here, we had turkey, biryani, Indian and American, all rolled into one—we call that a kind of masala! All the kids running around and playing games in the basement, yelling and screaming, fighting and eating...it was so nice.

That year—it was 1994—we had to cancel all the holidays.¹² If people had seen Shireen looking like that, it would have been very bad.

A very young child. Slide: Rabia, Deen's niece.

RABIA. We can either spend a stressful Thanksgiving in Connecticut with Yemma and Dada and daddy's brother, Shireen, or we can spend it in traffic trying to get to Thatha and Patti's. Daddy said holidays are about stress. And families are about stress. Daddy says that individually, Dada is a great guy and Yemma, as long as you don't talk about Shireen, she's nice, too. Daddy says Shireen is

10 My mom thought they were only coming to the States for a few years, and would eventually move back to India. But as children, we were miserable (from heat and sickness) whenever we visited India, and eventually my dad came to prefer it here in the States.

11 My Muslim parents didn't have a large community of Indian friends, the way many of their Hindu friends did, and they didn't feel comfortable socializing with non-Indians outside of work settings until much later in their lives.

12 My parents never hosted a big Thanksgiving again.

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by Mashuq Mushtaq Deen

1 trans man or flexible casting

The hilarious and deeply moving story of conservative Muslim mother at her wits' end, a Muslim father who likes to tell jokes, and a queer American woman trying to make a good impression on her Indian in-laws. In a story about family and love and the things we do to be together, one immigrant family must come to terms with a child who defies their most basic expectations of what it means to have a daughter...and one woman will redefine the limits of unconditional love. This unique play compassionately brings to life the often ignored struggle that a family goes through when their child transitions from one gender to another.

"[DRAW THE CIRCLE] chronicles, with surprising empathy, not just what it was like to slowly, painfully come to terms with transition, but what it was like for loved ones who shunned everything about it."
—**The Washington Post**

"...an insightful work that is noteworthy for the compassion with which the playwright...explores viewpoints different from his own. ...even the most intolerant of characters are allowed to come across as warmly sympathetic in their own ways."
—**TheaterMania.com**

"...essential viewing... Deen's extreme vulnerability and creativity coalesce to make it a vitally important piece of theater. ...DRAW THE CIRCLE is a singular theatrical experience."
—**BroadwayWorld.com**

"The effect of Deen's storytelling technique and artistry is arresting. ...a masterful act of writing... If you believe theater can teach us something important about who we are as gendered beings—or even if you just have a hunch that America cannot be great if driven by hate—DRAW THE CIRCLE is an epochal inquiry into identity...and some of the most pressing questions of our time."
—**DCMetroTheaterArts.com**

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