



THE BURN

BY PHILIP
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DRAMATISTS
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THE BURN was developed by Steppenwolf Theatre Company (Martha Lavey, Artistic Director; David Schmitz, Managing Director) through its New Plays Initiative and was presented as part of First Look on February 14, 2018, at Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago, Illinois. It was directed by Devon de Mayo, the scenic design was by Courtney O’Neill, the costume design was by Melissa Ng, the lighting design was by Heather Sparling, the sound design was by Sarah Ramos, the projection design was by Rasean Davonte Johnson, and the production stage manager was Brian Maschka. The cast was as follows:

TARA Birgundi Baker
ANDI Nina Ganet
SHAUNA Dyllan Rodrigues-Miller
MERCEDES Phoebe González
ERIK Erik Hellman

Excerpts from *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller used with the express permission of the Arthur Miller 2004 Literary and Dramatic Property Trust.

CHARACTERS

All students are 17–19. All girls. All seniors.

TARA

Female, black, popular (by any means necessary). Wants to be seen. And wants to be the one everyone looks to for trends, advice, what to think, wear, say, and do. Incredibly sharp. She's able to use reason, fact, and logic to justify her severe attacks upon others. Because she can. Comes from money but not from love. Tara uses social media for VISIBILITY.

ANDI

Female, white. BFs with Tara—though she may not like her all the time, she's obsessively enamored with her. Academically mediocre and fine with that. Well liked at school. Sliding by in all aspects of life. Distant/absent family members. On the basketball team and serious about it, but constantly on academic probation. Likes to talk “street” but it's a front. Openly gay, secretly crushing on Tara. Uses social media to SEARCH and FOLLOW.

SHAUNA

Female, any ethnicity. A seeker: of information, of approval, of help. Popular enough, but only at the mercy of Tara and Andi. She's the student in class who can always find the right answer but doesn't always know what to do with it. Interested in knowledge. She knows how to work a system to her benefit. She's biding her time before she can get out of school and make different, better friends. Secretly a gamer. Uses social media for its PERSISTENCE and CONSISTENCY.

MERCEDES

Female, Latina. The outsider. From a different neighborhood than the other girls. Started at this school at the beginning of her senior year, after a semester of homeschooling. Quiet, attempts to blend and disappear, but is unsuccessful due to the fact that she sticks out like a sore thumb. From a very Christian Conservative family, her manner reflects that, and when she bothers to speak in school, it's

to be proudly vocal for her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This doesn't earn her a ton of friends and makes her an easy target. Mercedes had an older brother who fucked up with drugs and gangs and was a fatal victim of a gang-related shooting. Her family turned to their church for succor in their time of grief, and they are very protective of Mercedes, their only living child. Mercedes uses social media to SPREAD and to HIDE.

ERIK

Male. 37. White. Idealist. Teaches English and Drama but would much rather just be teaching Drama. In recovery through AA for about three years now. Was raised religious but lost it as he entered adulthood. From a small town, Erik had dreams of making it as an actor in Chicago. Truly loves theater. Lets his job consume his life, and this sometimes allows him to get caught up in "student drama."

NOTES ON TEXT

The play is meant to be performed with as few props and set pieces as possible. Actors never leave the stage. Rather, they should be visible at all times, always observing the action, whether participating in the scene or not (unless specifically stated otherwise). At any moment, any character could be called upon to participate in a scene, even if just for one line. It's possible for characters to deliver lines from a non-scene space—say, from the outskirts of the playing space while observing, almost like tossing a soccer ball back into play. The feeling should be that no moment in the world of this play is ever truly private. Everything takes place in some sort of public sphere, whether virtual or physical. All action is observable and transparent to the entire cast at all times.

Necessary elements are chairs, desks, and a door. Unnecessary elements include cell phones, computers, laptops, bluetooths (blueteeth?), etc. Please no miming of texting or computer usage, please. Make up a different movement/visual vocabulary for these actions. The line between IRL and digital space is intentionally blurred here. It should often be unclear whether the characters are in the same physical space or in a networked/online public. The environment should appear as low-tech, old-school, and sparse as possible. But the omnipresence of technology should be palpable, brought in by the people inhabiting this space, by the physical interactions between characters, indistinguishable from their networked interactions.

Time and space shift quickly and fluidly in this play. It's okay if sometimes we are unsure who is present in the scene or who is just onstage but not in the scene.

* indicates a very quick shift in time and space. It's not a blackout. There are no blackouts.

/ indicates the start of the next speaker's line. An interruption in dialogue.

Indented dialogue is spoken from a character in a different space or forum or time, but is spoken within the current scene. No pauses necessary.

Dialogue is meant to be breakneckly quick, the students' even more so than Erik's.

This seems like a lotta rules. But, you know, HAVE FUN!

Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity.

—Mark Zuckerberg

Email is for geeks and pedophiles.

—Ryan Phillippe, *Cruel Intentions*, 1999

Without social media, I felt like a tree falling unheard in the woods—was my life even happening with no one to Like it?

—Isaac Oliver, *Intimacy Idiot*, 2015

THE BURN

Mercedes rises and separates from the other players. She speaks to us. Fever-ish. Almost from another time, in a different body.

MERCEDES. I have been hurt, Sir.
I have seen my blood running out! I have been near to murdered every day because I have done my duty pointing out the Devil's people—and this is my reward? To be mistrusted, denied, questioned like a...**

TARA. Little freak.

Behind her the other girls begin their chatter, growing louder as Mercedes continues. She becomes more and more intense, as if possessed. The girls move toward her, as if evil spirits come to drag her to hell.

MERCEDES. Let you beware! Think you to be so mighty that the power of Hell may not turn your wits?!—beware of it!

ANDI. Beware of bitch!

MERCEDES. —There is! There is! I...I know not. A, a wind, a cold wind has come.**

ANDI. yeh Shauna farted!

SHAUNA. not funny

MERCEDES. A wind!

TARA. lols! bitch is cray-cray. Someone push her into traffic / already.

MERCEDES. I freeze. I'm frozen! I—**

SHAUNA. check ur phone. i sent a pic.

ANDI. OMFG!

SHAUNA. #PilgrimRunway

* A paraphrase from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Going forward, a ** on a line of dialogue indicates a paraphrase from *The Crucible*.

TARA. Fatty.

MERCEDES. Lord save me!

TARA. How dare you call Heaven.

ANDI. Loser.

SHAUNA. hi this is Heaven, please hold.

MERCEDES. I freeze, / Your Honor, I freeze!”

TARA. such a fckin weirdo. go back to whatevs hell you came from

ALL. Ya burnt

MERCEDES. *I freeze! I freeze! I freeze! I—*”

*

Instant shift into the classroom. Fluorescents. Blackboard (or whiteboard). All students are at their desks, Erik lecturing. He does not acknowledge their comments, just speaks right on over them. It seems to be a classroom over which he has no control, full of little battles not worth fighting. The girls look straight ahead, no effort to make it look like they're conversing with each other. The lecture should feel continuous with little or no breaks for the girls' interjections. It drives.

ERIK. The subject is “I.” The verb is? Anyone? Just shout it out. Be loud. Now is actually *not* when I need you to be quiet.

SHAUNA. his fly is down.

TARA. u *would* be / lookn at his junk.

ANDI. omg, it totally is!

ERIK. “Have Given.” The verb is “have given.”

TARA. Should I tell him?

ERIK. So, then “I have given” what?

ANDI. head.

ERIK. What are the objects? / What are the things to which I have given either directly or indirectly?

SHAUNA. OMG, STFU

TARA. he *said* now is not the time he wants us quiet

ERIK. We're talking Direct versus Indirect, remember?

SHAUNA. *i* want you to / be quiet!

ERIK. We touched on this concept / last week, right?

TARA. "Touched on." / Eew.

ANDI. what! / fo real!

ERIK. John Proctor says, "I have given" what? Or whom?

SHAUNA. omfG! this class is so easy.

ANDI. *you* so easy.

ERIK. Depending.

TARA. shut / up, Andi.

SHAUNA. What, Andi? I wasn't paying attention. I was too busy passing my classes.

ERIK. Pay attention, please, people, if you want to pass this class. Eyes up here, not in your lap.

TARA. eyes on *his* lap.

SHAUNA. gross. / officially gross.

ANDI. whore

ERIK. We touched on Direct versus Indirect / objects. Again, everyone stay with me please?

TARA. "Touched on," *again*. / I am dying! I'm dying.

ANDI. total perv monkey

ERIK. There are only two choices. Direct or Indirect. Take a stab, you'll probably hit it.

SHAUNA. Do you have any lotion?

TARA. I / do.

ANDI. naw girl. go fish

ERIK. "I have given..." what? "You," right? "I have given *you*." Now, is "You" the thing that is *being* given, or is "You" the *recipient* of the thing that is being given?

SHAUNA. thx

ERIK. Are we paying attention, please? Not passing things back and forth, Tara and Shauna? (*Before Tara can protest.*) That *includes* lotion.

TARA. omg, someone shoot me in the face. / put me out!

ERIK. What is the object which the character of John Proctor has given, *directly*? Andi? Don't think too hard.

SHAUNA. Don't worry.

ERIK. Hey, people, since we're studying Drama, can we at least *act* like we're paying attention?

SHAUNA. lol, he sounds like my dad.

ERIK. *What* has "I" given?

TARA. Which dad?

ERIK. —*directly*—

SHAUNA. The real one.

ERIK. Here's a hint:

TARA. (*Mock sincerity about family bullshit.*) They're all real, Shauna. Family is forever.

ERIK. It's on the final page of your scripts.

SHAUNA. No one in my family is / "real"

ERIK. *Really* easy.

TARA. your stepdad's real hot.

ANDI. damn, / girl!

SHAUNA. i hate you so hard right now tara

ERIK. You can just read me the last line of the play, and you'll say the answer.

TARA. you ever notice mr k has kind of a nice ass?

ERIK. The subject is / "I"...

ANDI. i think i just dropped my scab in my jacket.

ERIK. Verb: "have given"

TARA. how old you think he is for real?

ERIK. Indirect Object:

SHAUNA. 38?

ERIK. / "you."

ANDI. Eew.

ERIK. "You" being all of the people judging him.

SHAUNA. old enough 2 b my dad

TARA. who we established is fine as hell

ERIK. What is he *giving* to all of the people who are judging him?

SHAUNA. I swear to god I will kill you!

ERIK. Come on! What do the judges receive?

ANDI. ohmygodIdon'tcare

ERIK. You might think this doesn't matter, / but remember you may not audition for the play on Friday unless I have all of your accompanying homework.

ANDI. Uh Huh, yeah TARA. Yeah. SHAUNA. Yep

TARA. (*After "accompanying homework"; mock terror.*) omg, not be in the play?!

Shauna and Andi just laugh.

ERIK. And maybe that's not fair, but it's what happens when they make the drama teacher teach a million English classes.

ANDI. dang, I only signed up for this drama shiz cuz i thought reading plays be easier than reading *Crime and Punishment*, but this be like Pun. Ish. Ment!

ERIK. You know what? Actually? Let's pick a different sentence. Let's make it something relatable. Let's say, uh, "Tara—"

Tara looks up at him, surprised, caught, but giving away nothing.

I'm just using you as an example, okay? Let's say, "Tara is texting Shauna and Andi in class." Who are Tara's objects?

Phones away, ladies, or they're mine. *Directly.*

Now they say nothing, just sit and look grumpy and put-upon.

Thank you.

So...where was I?

MERCEDES. My soul.

The girls all turn to look at Mercedes. The looks = daggers.

ERIK. Mercedes? Did you say something?

MERCEDES. "I have given you my soul." "My soul" is the direct object.

Some giggles. Some snorts. Maybe some #underthebreathremarks.

ERIK. Quiet.

THE BURN

by Philip Dawkins

1 man, 4 women

Mercedes is an outsider. Tara makes sure she knows it. When a high school production of *The Crucible* forces them together, tensions escalate into acts of bullying—both online and IRL. **THE BURN** explores what happens to a teacher and his students when a classroom conflict turns into an online witch hunt.

*“...The playwright succinctly, yet emotionally, portrays the way social media has opened the door for modern day witch-hunts. ...Audiences familiar with *The Crucible* will marvel at how seamlessly [Dawkins] has both updated that script and paid homage to the classic. This is an important play...that will move audiences of all ages, inspire conversation and won't soon be forgotten.”*

—ChicagoTheatreReview.com

*“...fresh, bold... **THE BURN** is sharp, current, truly topical and always immersive. ...In its short 90 minutes, **THE BURN** pushes you to ponder much: truth, integrity, the power of groups, the sanctity of your name and cyber bullying.”*

—Northwest Herald (Crystal Lake, IL)

*“...moving, emotional, and powerful, with characters Dawkins is unafraid to place firmly into moral gray area, each of them justifying their actions in sometimes surprisingly valid ways. [**THE BURN**] understands so intricately the lives of teenage girls—the challenges they face, the ways they struggle to cope, and the multiplicity of identities they have to shape in an increasingly digital world.”*

—SplashMags.com

Also by Philip Dawkins

CHARM

THE GENTLEMAN CALLER

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