

A PLAY TITLED AFTER THE
COLLECTIVE
NOUN FOR
FEMALE-IDENTIFYING
20-SOMETHINGS LIVING
IN NEW YORK CITY
IN THE 2010s

BY

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DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

A PLAY TITLED AFTER THE COLLECTIVE NOUN FOR FEMALE-IDENTIFYING 20-SOMETHINGS LIVING IN NYC IN THE 2010s
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For CJF,

*for every Bushwick-kitchen summit,
for SLC and NYU, New Haven and the Bronx,
for the Bluestockings day in the summer of the end of the world,
for every phone call,
and especially for the ideological and theological debates.*

*For 2006 and 2016 and the decade between,
and the decades to come.*

Onwards, comrade.

A PLAY TITLED AFTER THE COLLECTIVE NOUN FOR FEMALE-IDENTIFYING 20-SOMETHINGS LIVING IN NEW YORK CITY IN THE 2010s was first produced as part of Corkscrew Theater Festival (Thomas Kapusta, Artistic Director; Alexander Donnelly, Executive Director) at the Paradise Factory, New York City, in July 2019. It was directed by Lauren Zefel, the set design was by Afsoon Pajoufar, the costume design was by Raphael Regan, the lighting design was by Kelly Rudolph, the sound design was by Drew Weinstein, the production stage manager was Aaron Van Scyoc, and the stage manager was Stephanie Kay Garcia. The cast was as follows:

SHIRIN Mari Vial-Golden
CJ Akyiaa Wilson
ELIZABETH Remy Zaken
THE EXTERMINATOR Justin Fuller

THANK YOU

To Brandon Smithey, for too much to list here, but in essence, thank you for believing in me and my writing, from the very first draft of the very first play.

To Cassie Tongue for reading every single freaking line change and word choice and telling me over and over to *keep going*.

To Willie Johnson for being a true comrade, for understanding my project from the earliest pages, for the readings at PlayDate, and for the struggle to move theater beyond the theater.

To all the actors who read this beast over two and a half years: Melis Aker, Sade Namei, Anita Abdinezhad, Cyndii Johnson, Akyiaa Wilson, Starr Kirkland, Breanna Foister, Shelley Farmer, Emma Maxwell, Vongai Shava, Curry Whitmire, and thank you especially to Kyle Hines for the Exterminator insights.

To the creatives and cast of the Corkscrew production. Lauren, for reminding me about tenderness and for believing wholeheartedly in my artistic voice. Drew, thank you for *getting it*. Afssoon joon for the kismet connection and your ingenious designs. To Aaron for jumping in and getting it done, gracefully and indefatigably. Mari, thank you for proving at the exact moment I was about to give up that the Shirin I know is real and *can* be brought to life. Akyiaa, for saving us and for being the best lawyer I can imagine (which is why I keep doing that to you...!). Justin for going so deep but with such humor and charm. Remy, thank you for your fire, onstage and off. To Kelly, Stephanie, Raphael, Tova, Gabriel, and every other human who helped make this insane show under insane circumstances: Thank you.

To Tom and Alex and Alex: Corkscrew makes making theater in New York a better place.

To all the comrades over the years who've given me the faith to keep going, keep living, when everything we were and are fighting for seems futile. To everyone who reached out to me over the years and the drafts and the performances to say this play touched them, or held space for them, or changed them. This is entirely for you.

CHARACTERS

SHIRIN, 29. Iranian American. A PhD labor journalist working on her first book. Her brain works at 100 whether she would like it to or not. She adores discourse but only with people who are on her level; she is not the most patient with or adept at shifting her language to accommodate those who know or care less than she does—but she’s working on that!

CJ, 29. Black American or Afro-Latinx. An indigent criminal defense attorney with BXD (the Bronx Defenders). As brilliant as Shirin but her specialty is in the nuances of particular 21st-century systems, i.e. law and the Repressive State Apparatus. In classical Marxist terms, Shirin fixates on the base while CJ critiques the superstructure.

ELIZABETH, 21. An ethnicity that would now be considered White but has not always been privileged as such in America. Eight years younger than Shirin and CJ, she has much more facility in the language of “identity politics.” But she flounders for a sophisticated analysis of those politics and her position within the global capitalist structures.

THE EXTERMINATOR, 20s–40s. Sublimely beautiful. Looking at them makes you feel what glimpsing Michelangelo’s *David* in person for the first time makes you feel. A corporeal manifestation of the archangel Michael. Or a figment of Shirin’s imagination. Or just a regular person. Who knows?

SETTING

New York City. Uptown. February – September 2016.

CASTING

Cast actors who identify as women for the three women. Cast appropriately to the characters’ backgrounds. (Middle Easterners are not all the same.)

The Exterminator may be played by an actor of any gender but must be masc-presenting.

SOME THOUGHTS ON STAGING

This is an intellectual play about intellectual people. The difficulty of the language is real, it is intentional, and, as you will know if you've spent time around serious leftists or perhaps are one yourself (salam, comrade!), it is how these women speak—because it's how they live. An audience will never understand or even hear every word or reference; do not act or stage the language for that purpose because the entire show will sink. Immediately. Instead, for the actors playing Shirin and CJ, have the language come from the most comfortable place. Your jokes come from the same place as your arguments, your allusions are also expressions of your deepest anxieties. Live inside the language, act the language, and trust that the audience will go with you as far and as deep as they can, individually and collectively.

Directors, trust the arguments in the play are operating always at the emotional level as much as (or, in the case of the final fight, even more than) at the intellectual level. The arguments here are not between political rivals. They're between people fundamentally on the same team. Find the thing being said behind the jargon—the humor (there are a LOT of jokes in the play that are for no one but the character who says it), the loneliness, the doubting and the faith. Find the tenderness between these characters and you will achieve the play, which is to say you will have beaten off the alienation.

Some practical tips: Lean into the juxtaposition of speedy sitcom scenes and real-time meeting house scenes. There is a drastic tonal and practical shift that must be felt. Don't be afraid of sitting together in silence; it will feel jarring after so much language, so much *noise*. At the risk of overexplaining...that's the point. The laugh track is alienating; don't fight the obnoxiousness of it, don't second-guess it, no matter how much audiences might be annoyed (oh, they will be). There are rules for the laugh track; be clear about these rules from the first moment of the play. Shirin is the only one who hears them, but I caution against having the actor play too much "with" them. If she responds too aggressively or too annoyed every time a laugh track happens, it begins to look like she's actually mentally losing it, rather than encountering an external force that happens to sting every one of her particular anxieties. The laugh track fades when she participates

in some ritual (her morning writing; setting up the haft seen) or activates her personal agency towards practical engagement with the outside, or, simply, the triggering factor disappears.

Though the play is set only a few years ago, think of it as a period piece. This is not a play about Trump. It's in fact a play closer to the (failures of the) Obama years than the world of post-November 7, 2016. If we don't understand how we got to 45, we have no chance at envisioning a world beyond, or instead of. Project the scene titles: They are written to remind the audience of exactly this. For the "apartment" scenes, we had a lot of fun with Foley sound effects created by the actors in full visibility. For example, for the dropped coffee mug in Scene 1, our brilliant actor threw "coffee" out of a mug onto herself, dropped the mug into a (padded) drawer and simultaneously kicked a box full of broken glass. The *New York Times* prop was a blank broadsheet with the pages drawn in roughly with Sharpie. You're encouraged to find your own Brechtian design and staging solutions to the "apartment" elements.

I will, however, make one author's prerogative prescription: The recorded voice memos *must not* be done by actors (or, really, any theater professional). Find a friend, a mom, a grocery store cashier. There is an automatic inflection to actors and other people too well versed in how dialogue in plays "should" sound, and if you use them for the folks outside on the front lines of the struggle, it will feel false at best and probably cringe-worthily disrespectful. Much of the text for the memos is taken from YouTube recordings of actual people on the ground; use sounds from the protests referenced.

Finally, read Brecht's writings on theater! This is a Brechtian play, written in direct conversation with his theories of a theater for the working person. (Brecht is utterly, even willfully, misunderstood in the American theater.) There's a suggested bibliography at the back of this volume for sources specific to the arguments in the play and general further reading, but if you're busy trying to make theater and have a life, I'll leave you simply with this critical thought of Bert's:

"The theatre can only adopt [a complex representation of modern life] if it lets itself be carried along by the strongest currents in its society and associates itself with those who are necessarily most impatient to

make great alterations there...to edge as close as possible to the apparatus of education and mass communication. ...For those who are constructing society it sets out society's experiences, past and present alike, in such a manner that the audience can 'appreciate' the feelings, insights and impulses which are distilled by the wisest, most active, and most passionate among us from the events of the day or the century. The audience must be entertained with the wisdom that comes from the solution of problems, with the anger that is a practical expression of sympathy with the underdog, with the respect due to those who respect humanity, or rather whatever is kind to humanity; in short, with whatever delights those who are producing something."

Thank you for reading this play. I hope it makes you feel less alone.
We are never alone.

—Haleh Roshan
September 2019

“Indeed I live in the dark ages!

...

*They tell me: eat and drink. Be glad you have it!
But how can I eat and drink
When my food is snatched from the hungry
And my glass of water belongs to the thirsty?
And yet I eat and drink.*

...

*There was little I could do. But without me
The rulers would have been more secure. This was my hope.”*

—Bertolt Brecht
“To Posterity,” 1938

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This play happens in a space recalling a Quaker meeting house, an inviting clapboard room where 250 years of Americans, whatever that means, have engaged with their souls and their society. In Friends meeting houses there is no hierarchy. Pews do not face an altar but other pews, so everyone in the space faces other people in the space. It looks, in fact, a lot like a theater in the round.

The “altar” (as in Friends meeting houses) is a plain wooden table with a Persian rug under. This altar is the signifier for the primary living space in a millennials’ cramped Uptown two-bedroom. There may also be an obviously fake “apartment set,” as in a live-taped sitcom, surrounding the table/rug. If so, we should be able to see beyond the “apartment” to the meeting space/theater beyond.

With or without apartment accoutrements, the only true “set” wall is a bookshelf bursting with books. A really, really big bookshelf, so big it breaks the structural boundaries of the theater, somehow.

At rise the table is already the gravitational center for accumulating books and papers, and over the course of the play should become truly overwhelmed with intellectual artifacts and the haft seen’s totems.

1.

Thursday, February 4, 2016. 17th anniversary of the murder of Amadou Diallo. 5th Democratic Primary debate, Durham, New Hampshire.

7 A.M. From a “bedroom” Shirin enters in a hoodie and boxers, brutally hungover and mildly panicked. A laugh track explodes in the space, which startles her; she bumps into someone or knocks over an empty chair, winces at the noise. She’s trying to be quiet!

Shirin exits to the “kitchen.” While she’s off, out of the same “bedroom” comes Elizabeth in yesterday’s party clothes, looking around. When she sees no one, she exits for the “bathroom.”

CJ enters via the “front door” in winter running attire, carrying a New York Times. She drops it on the table and exits to the other “bedroom.” Shirin reenters with coffee. She sits at the table, picks up the newspaper. Elizabeth emerges from the “bathroom.” [I will now stop using quotes for the apartment since I think we all get that these elements may or may not exist as such.]

ELIZABETH. Hi.

SHIRIN. *(Too casually.)* Heyyyy.

ELIZABETH. Good morning.

SHIRIN. Good morning...

ELIZABETH. Sweet apartment, it looks way bigger in daylight.

SHIRIN. Hah yeah, when you can actually see it.

Awkward beat as the laugh track explodes.

Shirin hears it. Elizabeth does not.

ELIZABETH. You have a LOT of books. I guess I would have assumed, but...you really do.

SHIRIN. I have Not Enough Books!

ELIZABETH. What are you going to do when your lease is up?

SHIRIN. That’s future Shirin’s problem.

ELIZABETH. Avoidance is super sexy.

SHIRIN. It's rent-stabilized so I'm clinging to this apartment until I die. Or until the permissible annual increases eventually push the rent to above the regulatory threshold and it becomes automatically destabilized.

Laugh track!

ELIZABETH. It's like a married people's apartment, you could raise a baby in it.

SHIRIN. *No children.* But I'm trying to convince my roommate to get a cat with me, settle into the good U-Haul lesbian life.

Laugh track!

ELIZABETH. Wait—is this, are you like in an open—

SHIRIN. NO, no! No. She has a boyfriend.

Awkward beat, then Shirin feels kind of bad about being curt...

He's in D.C. and she's been talking about moving there, so the future of our cohabitation is kind of—.

ELIZABETH. (*Relieved and not doing a good job of hiding it.*) Long distance, that sucks.

SHIRIN. They make it work.

Another very long, very awkward beat.

So I have to, I'm supposed to be finishing a chapter / by the end of the weekend—

ELIZABETH. Oh totes. Gosh, what time is it? I have class at nine, I should go home and shower...

Elizabeth retreats to the bedroom to get her stuff together; Shirin follows awkwardly, trying to not be a jerk after she was a jerk.

SHIRIN. Where do you live again? Sorry, I know you told me.

ELIZABETH. It's cool! In East Williamsburg? Off the Montrose—

SHIRIN. Oh yeah, yeah, with the girl who doesn't clean.

Laugh track.

ELIZABETH. Yesss.

Elizabeth is basically out of the apartment, herded by Shirin. At the door...

SHIRIN. Make a right when you leave the building, you'll see the train in like four blocks. You can take the A / to 14th—

ELIZABETH. To the L yeah.

Elizabeth leans in—for a kiss? A hug? Shirin pulls back, afraid of a kiss, but might could be fine with a hug?, but by then it's too late and they end up just sort of touching each other's arms.

Laugh track as:

About my rationale, can I still send it to you?

SHIRIN. Um sure, yes. I'm super behind on my own deadline but I can try to get you my comments in a couple days?

ELIZABETH. Awesome, thanks so much!

SHIRIN. You got it.

ELIZABETH. See you...

SHIRIN. Bye.

Elizabeth finally exits. Shirin returns to her coffee and reading the newspaper. CJ enters in lawyer drag.

CJ. You look terrible.

SHIRIN. Behold the manifestation of drinking like you're 22 when you're 29. Why do academics have parties during the week? It's *literally* ALWAYS a school night.

Laugh track! As it plays, CJ goes to the kitchen, gets her own coffee.

CJ. (Off.) Maybe academics know better than to drink like they're 22.

SHIRIN. Haven't you seen *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Academics *only* know how to drink like they're 22.

CJ. (Off, a joke.) Is that a movie?

CJ. (Reentering, taking the paper for herself.) Since today is a holiday, you do have an excuse to be a hot hungover garbagebag.

SHIRIN. Amadou Diallo day!

CJ. Amadou Diallo day.

Laugh track!

CJ. (To the heavens.) Descansa en poder, Amadou.

SHIRIN. What are you doing to celebrate? Other than being a hot non-garbagebag.

CJ. Got mad petty thieves, minor sex offenders, marijuana dealers, the yooj. And I'm meeting with a new client who says the gun for which he was arrested of possession was planted by the arresting officer.

Laugh track.

SHIRIN. FUCK. You win.

CJ. Too perfect, right? What's your party plan?

SHIRIN. I am going to finish revising my chapter on the post-Reagan gutting of private-sector unions and concurrent tripled wage gap between black women and white women.

Laugh track.

CJ. Wasn't that due last month?

SHIRIN. Specifically the deadline was two weeks ago. So like, in writer time I'm still way ahead of sched!

Laugh track as the apartment doorbell rings, shrill and false.

CJ, always on top of shit, gets it. Shirin realizes a beat too late it's probably Elizabeth and jumps up after—Yep.

ELIZABETH. Hi, I'm Elizabeth. Is Shirin—?

SHIRIN. (*Around CJ.*) Hi, yeah. Hi. How did you / get in downstairs?

ELIZABETH. Sorry, I wanted to—huh? Uh, someone was leaving—

SHIRIN. Right right, did you for/get something—?

ELIZABETH. No, I just—Before, like you know, five minutes ago?, I know you were doing the morning-after thing where you don't actually, like, want to talk to the person you hooked up with and are hoping they'll just get out of your house without taking any more of your time. I do not have the mental energy to spend all day thinking about whether that means something about us, or if there even is an us, so, like... Let me just be clear about what's going on here? Last night was a completely mutual, consensual hookup, right?

SHIRIN. (*A little stunned.*) ...Correct.

ELIZABETH. Well I think you're gorgeous and brilliant and I'd like to see you again, outside of the rationale. On a date.

SHIRIN. Oh man. I am, um. I'm really flattered / but I—

ELIZABETH. "Flattered," cool cool cool.

Laugh track over:

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by Haleh Roshan

1 man, 3 women

Shirin is working on a book about post-Occupy Wall Street grassroots movements and trying not to succumb to anxiety attacks. CJ is a public defender navigating NYC's fucked up judicial system, while trying to make time for a meaningful personal life. Elizabeth needs to finish college and figure out what to do next. Oh, also, there's a mysterious bug infestation in the kitchen. Hashtag millennials, amirite? Putting an urgent spin on stories about "girls" in any medium, COLLECTIVE NOUN is a love letter to an unsung history of collective action and a battle cry for radically reenvisioning what it means to fight for change.

"COLLECTIVE NOUN is VERY GOOD. ...It's a font of esoterica; it felt made specifically for me but I'm betting you'll feel the same." —Maxamoo

"No title may be juicier than Haleh Roshan's urgent, theatrical, feminist half-play, half-cri de cœur... These titular figures are not a gaggle, not a cohort, and certainly not girls; instead, [COLLECTIVE NOUN] spotlights uprisers long entrenched in humanitarian and social justice battles that...even liberal Americans have long ignored and sidelined. Through their daily lives and epic struggles, Roshan crafts a testimony to how we engage with politics and pens a vociferous ode to the souls on the frontline of fights for change."

—Culturebot.org

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