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Alone, Together

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Festival *Alone, Together*; Risa Brainin, Artistic Director.”

Thank you to all the playwrights; directors; actors; designers; dramaturgs; artistic, production and administrative folks; donors; and audiences who have contributed to making LAUNCH PAD a vibrant home for new plays.

Alone, Together

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword.....	7
By Risa Brainin	
The Plays (by author):	
Linda Alper	
Pick Me Up	11
Katie Bender	
King Zoom.....	19
The Most Human Human.....	31
Jami Brandli	
Pandemic Therapy.....	37
Zoom Audition	47
Leo Cabranes-Grant	
Zoom Baby.....	53
Dan Castellaneta and Deb Lacusta	
Dynamite Sales	61
Rosebud.....	71
Mia Chung	
Quietus	77
Which Actually Isn't So New	81
Yussef El Guindi	
Cha-Cha	89
Anne García-Romero	
Late Night Prayer.....	99
Idris Goodwin	
The Art of Coping	105
Talk Tomorrow.....	111
Enid Graham	
Do Not Go, My Love.....	119
Arlene Hutton	
All the Cranes in the World.....	127
Neither Here Nor There	133

Lila Rose Kaplan	
A Pandemic Romance Monologue.....	141
William Davies King	
Les Mots Justes, or Hold Your Tongue	145
Jenny Mercein	
Auld Lang Syne	153
Brian Otaño	
I'm Not Coming Home	161
South Lake Tahoe, California	167
Lynn Rosen	
But Here I Am.....	177
That Flower, That Flower.....	185
The Shakespeare Section	189
Cheri Steinkellner	
The Great Greats	193
James Still	
Abundance (a requiem on Zoom)	203
Mom's Kids (a reunion on the Zoom).....	211
Waiting for Now (a duet on security cameras).....	219
Whitman v. the United States: Case 36 (on Zoom).....	227
Alison Tatlock	
Flight.....	235
Here Comes the Sun.....	241
Annie Torsiglieri	
First Date.....	249
The Safest Space	255
John Walch	
2084.....	263
Cheryl L. West	
Corona Chicken (Part One).....	273
Corona Chicken (Part Two)	279
Safety Net.....	287
Sheri Wilner	
LOL OL.....	293
<i>Alone, Together</i> Festival Chapters	304
<i>Alone, Together</i> Company.....	306
Author Biographies.....	608

Foreword

On March 10, 2020, one week before the end of winter quarter, everyone in the University of California, Santa Barbara community received an email from Chancellor Henry Yang instructing us to move to online teaching as soon as possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The theatre/dance faculty immediately came together to figure out what to do to best serve the needs of our students. Final projects and upcoming productions had to be canceled, and students were heading home for the foreseeable future to take classes on Zoom from their childhood bedrooms! We were all thrown into a bit of chaos: how could we create a remote curriculum for all of our aspiring young artists?

It was at that point that my dear friend, festival co-director and head of the B.F.A. acting program, Annie Torsiglieri, had the vision to say: “Let’s commission playwrights to write monologues and plays that are meant to be performed on Zoom.” Well, I went a little crazy and invited every writer who has ever worked with our new play development program, LAUNCH PAD, over the past 15 years to participate. That was around 30 writers, and 24 answered the call! We gave the writers this prompt: *Alone, Together*. A total of 39 plays were written, 23 directors engaged, 61 actors cast, 5 stage managers, 3 designers, 3 dramaturgs and 10 staff assembled virtually, and, together, we created an all-day, live Zoom festival in four chapters on Saturday, June 6, 2020.

What we couldn’t anticipate is that not only would we be rehearsing during a global health pandemic but also in the midst of a revolution. George Floyd was murdered on Monday, May 25, and it reignited the cry against racism in our country. Our company was composed of students, faculty, staff and professional guest artists from across the country. Many were protesting by day and rehearsing by night. Even today, as I write this, the protests continue. It was important to both Annie and me that all of the artists involved in *Alone, Together* knew (and still know) that UCSB Department of Theater and Dance and LAUNCH PAD stand with our Black communities across the country on this day and every day. BLACK LIVES MATTER. We are with you.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in a famous letter from the Birmingham jail in 1963: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” We, as artists, are committed to speaking out against injustice.

Xochitl Clare, one of our actors, announced *Alone, Together* on her Facebook page by quoting performance and installation artist Ester Hernandez who said, “We must continue to use our creative skills to give strength to our political, cultural and spiritual struggle.”

Xochitl then continued with her own thoughts: “‘Is making theatre really important now?’ my heart asks. As a young Black artist, struggling to grapple with our world, channeling my energy towards my craft has provided me some solace. Support me as I move forward in virtual solidarity with fellow theatre artists across the nation to do a very simple, yet important thing—to *come together*.” And that’s exactly what we did on 6/6/20. With an audience of 800 people over the course of the day, we all came together.

As theatre-makers, we communicate through the art we create. The 39 plays in this collection reflect many perspectives on life during the early days of the quarantine. They brilliantly offer moments of joy, pathos, insight, hope and comfort knowing we are never really alone.

—Risa Brainin
Artistic Director, LAUNCH PAD

The Great Greats

By

CHERI STEINKELLNER

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(THE GREAT GREATS)

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The Great Greats was commissioned and originally presented in June 2020 as part of the University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Theater and Dance LAUNCH PAD Zoom Festival *Alone, Together*; Risa Brainin, Artistic Director. It was directed by Cheri Steinkellner.

CAST:

GRANDMA ELSIEJane Morris
ANGEL Martin Wong
ELLIOT..... Angel Villalobos
TAYLOR..... Matte Kranz
AVERY..... Valerye Jimenez
RILEY..... Mario Yanes
CHARLIE Navnoor Singh Kahlon
JORDAN..... Violet Hansen
QUINN.....Maison “Bub” Bray

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Two weeks into COVID quarantine 2020, I hadn’t written for two weeks. Like cousin Jordan, in the play, I was immersed in confusion—and completely blocked. Then I attended my younger brother’s Zoom birthday party and this play found me. *The Great-Greats* is a patchwork of near-verbatim conversations I witnessed through my screen in the early days of isolation. The only character I pulled from another time and place is my Grandma Elsie, who for the last many years of her life, only spoke the words, “No wonder, no way”—but through those few words, communicated the world. Every grandchild was her favorite, and she was all of ours. This play is for Grandma.

—Cheri Steinkellner

The Great Greats

CHARACTERS

ANGEL: 20s, an aide in Grandma's assisted-living facility and her adopted grandchild.

GRANDMA ELSIE: 100 today. A stroke left her with few words, but she makes herself clear.

ELLIOT: 22, a Trader Joe's crewmate, now an essential service worker.

TAYLOR: 23, a comic without a stage.

AVERY: 25, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and a stealth Republican.

RILEY: 25, a law-school dropout/bartender/breathwork coach.

CHARLIE: 24, a healthcare worker, down with the virus.

JORDAN: 21, a student playwright, stuck in London with writer's block.

QUINN: 22, a Galactic Light Force worker.

(AT RISE: a blank screen.)

ANGEL *(off screen)*. OK, birthday girl. Let's see how you look for the great-grandkids.

(Close on: GRANDMA. She sees her face, too close.)

GRANDMA. No way.

ANGEL *(off screen)*. Yeah way.

(GRANDMA pushes the screen away.)

GRANDMA. No-wonder-no-way. No-wonder-no-way. No-wonder-oh-God—

ANGEL *(off screen)*. Don't worry, they'll be here. C'mon, fixed you a little birthday cocktail while we wait. Alcohol, sugar, lemon-wheel, yummmmm—

(He hands her a glass. She drinks.)

GRANDMA. No-wonder-no-way-no-wonder-no-way—

ANGEL *(off screen)*. I'm sure this is the link. Lemme try it on my laptop—

(Second screen opens on ANGEL.)

ANGEL (*cont'd*). Yeah, that's it. Oh wait, yay—someone's coming! Here we go—

(*Third screen: ELLIOT, in a Trader Joe's crew Hawaiian shirt, holding a TJ's cake with a flaming taper and singing.*)

ELLIOT. HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO US
HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO US
HAPPY BIRTHDAY, GRANDMA ELSIE AND ELLIOT—

(*Zoom ding. A new voice, singing fancy.*)

TAYLOR. HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOOOOU!

(*Fourth screen: TAYLOR, in front of a Zoom background of Ellen's Oscar night group selfie.*)

TAYLOR. Hey Grandma, just me and the squad here to say HAPPY BIRTH—
GRANDMA. No-wonder-no-way—

ELLIOT. Taylor? Tay? You froze up, cuz. Hang up and call back—

TAYLOR. Duh, Elliot. I was joking, dumbass.

ELLIOT. Earmuffs, Grandma. Please excuse my cousin, uhh—?

ANGEL. Angel. I work with your grandmother. I mean, if you could call it work. It's sorta more like she's my grandma, right, Elsie?

(*GRANDMA blows a kiss. ANGEL catches it.*)

ELLIOT. Except she's not.

TAYLOR. Yeah, you have your own.

ANGEL. Actually I don't. All mine died when I was little. So yeah, she kinda is.

ELLIOT. Except she's not.

TAYLOR. Back down, cuz. We know who she loves best. (*Grins, an animated sparkle bounces off his teeth.*) Hey, Grandma, look what I gotchu—

GRANDMA. No-wonder-no-way!

(*TAYLOR changes background to: a mountain of toilet paper rolls.*)

ELLIOT. Not funny, Tay. Real people are still hoarding. Yesterday at work there was a literal fist-fight over two-ply.

TAYLOR. You still slumming at Trader Jokes?

ELLIOT. As opposed to living off my mom and dad? Um, yeah. And also, in case you missed it: I'm an essential worker, a-hole. Like a nurse or a firefighter. People thank me for my service.

TAYLOR. Grandma, Elliot called me a-hole!

ELLIOT. He called me dumbass!

TAYLOR. Hey, control your rage issues, huh? I'm here for the woman I love.

(New background: a vintage photo of a younger GRANDMA as a new voice is heard.)

AVERY *(off screen.)* Zoom is such bullshit, you guys. *(Fifth screen opens.)*
HearNow is such a better app.

ELLIOT. Why, because you built it?

AVERY. My team did, yeah.

TAYLOR. Whoo, Avery has a team.

AVERY. Correction: Teams. Also: My teams have teams. Also: They're all working right now. Remotely. From home. On HearNow. To which I sent you all a link for a free month's trial, so why the hell are we still on Zoom?

(Screen six opens. RILEY enters.)

RILEY. Because no one trusts you with their PayPal?

AVERY *(yells, pounds wall)*. Shut your damn door, Riley, I'm getting feedback!

RILEY *(hollers back)*. You shut your door!

AVERY. We don't have sound issues on my app. I built in filters—

TAYLOR. You mean your team did—

ELLIOT. You mean her team's team did—

RILEY. Shut up you guys, it's Grandma time. *(Raises a glass of wine.)* Happy b-day, gorgeous! Love you!

GRANDMA. No-wonder-no-way!

ELLIOT. Oh? Are we day-drinking now, Riley?

AVERY. Unrelentingly.

RILEY. Are we the party mom now, Elliot? Grandma, guess what? I'm training online to be a breathwork coach.

AVERY. AKA, quit law school and is working as a bartender.

RILEY. Uh, so was AOC like two years ago. Whuttt, bitch?

(Zoom ding: CHARLIE enters, in bed, sideways, buried under the covers.)

ALL. Charlie/Char-Char/Ohmygosh/Are you OK? Do you have it?

(CHARLIE shrugs, coughs out of control.)

TAYLOR *(to ANGEL)*. Our cousin Charlie's genuine medical, Angel. Graduated early to be on the frontline. That's a service, Elliot.

CHARLIE (*through the coughs*). Elliot's doing the real work, Tay. Without Ell, we don't eat.

ELLIOT. You're my favorite cousin, Charl.

RILEY. Charlie's everyone's favorite cousin, Elliot. You're not special.

CHARLIE. Ell's special, Ri. So are you.

GRANDMA. No-wonder-no-way—

CHARLIE (*between coughs*). Yeah way, Grandma.

ANGEL. Hey, I do that, too.

AVERY. We all do.

RILEY. Who's that?

ELLIOT. Grandma's surrogate great-grandchild, apparently.

TAYLOR. Don't be bitter at the help, cuz. (*To GRANDMA.*) Angel gets paid, Grandma. We're here for love.

GRANDMA. No-wonder-no-way!

ALL. Yeah, way.

TAYLOR. See, Angel? It's our Grandma Elsie's love-language since I was, like what, two?

ELLIOT. I wasn't even born when she had the stroke.

RILEY. I can't remember her ever saying anything except "No-wonder-no-way."

TAYLOR. I can. One time we were all over at her house, and she took me in the kitchen. Just me. She was making chopped liver. And she put down the onion and looked at me and said: (*Quotes, sincerely.*) "You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

ELLIOT. She said that?

AVERY. No, Elliot. Grandma was not the poet Mary Oliver. And Taylor was two years old.

TAYLOR. But a very precocious two.

RILEY. Easy my dude. Hey, wanna do a little breathwork, you guys?

AVERY. Umm, isn't that kind of insensitive to Charlie?

RILEY. Umm, this is *for* Charlie. Gotta work those lungs. C'mon, everyone, inhale through your mouth, straight to the belly, blow it up like a balloon.

(*RILEY flips the camera, lifts t-shirt, exposes belly button and blows it up.*)

AVERY. Nobody wants to see that.