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Alone, Together

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“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.”

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.

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

2084

By
JOHN WALCH

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(2084)

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2084 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 Iris Skeen.

CAST:

CUSTOMER.....Ivana Cruz
CUSTOMER SERVICE AGENTShekinah Bryant

AUTHOR’S NOTE

I wrote this play because a trusted and long-time collaborator and colleague asked me to help by writing a play ... and that’s a good reason to send a writer to their chair. The impulse/prompt that I started the play with was simply: “Help.” It evolved from there to: “How do we seek help from others, especially when the power dynamic is skewed to those whom we are asking?” This took me to customer service agents on the lighter side and Orwell on the more dystopian side, and got me thinking about what happens when those who work within systems designed ostensibly to help those in need—the vulnerable and cursed—are really operating to consolidate their own authority.

—John Walch

2084

CHARACTERS

CUSTOMER: Female or male. Forever 21, until they aren't. Wanted to be a stand-up comedian.

CUSTOMER SERVICE AGENT: Male or female. A real person, any age.

PLACE: A Zoom session connecting the customer's childhood bedroom turned bunker to a Zoom customer service agent in their own sparse work bunker.

TIME: 2084.

“In the side wall, within easy reach of Winston's arm, [there was] a large oblong slit protected by a wire grating. This ... was for the disposal of waste paper. For some reason they were nicknamed memory holes. When one knew that any document was due for destruction ... it was an automatic action to lift the flap of the nearest memory hole and drop it in, whereupon it would be whirled away on a current of warm air to the enormous furnaces which were hidden somewhere in the recesses of the building.”

—George Orwell, *1984*

(Scene: A Zoom video session. CUSTOMER has contacted Zoom customer service and awaits the agent. The background behind the CUSTOMER might have some sort of poster of an iconic stand-up comedian from circa 2020—Sarah Silverman, John Mulaney, Chris Rock. Whatever the poster is, it should be the genuine choice of the performer of a favorite comedian. Or maybe the poster is too much—a blank wall works as well.)

CUSTOMER. Please, please ... help me, I'm dying.

CS AGENT (*popping enthusiastically on screen*). Hello, (*Insert name of performer.*), thank you for being a trusted and valued member of the Zoom community. I am your trusted Customer Service Agent responding to your complaint. For security purposes you are on a recorded line. How may I assist you today?

CUSTOMER. Are you a real person?

CS AGENT. Of course, Zoom is all about connecting *people*, all of our Customer Service Agents are just like you.

CUSTOMER. Then please, this time, please help me.

CS AGENT. Yes, I see you are inquiring about case #9207jv10139 first opened April 6, 2020, and I see you have reopened this case many, many, many times over the years—

CUSTOMER. This time. This time is my last shot—I'm dying.

CS AGENT. You look perfectly heathy to me.

CUSTOMER. I'm eighty-four years old and dying.

CS AGENT. Eighty-four? Hmmm. Turn to your left—

CUSTOMER. What, why?

(Customer complies, is there a sound effect?)

CS AGENT. Please just turn to your left. Good. Now turn to your right. Good. You claim you are eighty-four?

CUSTOMER. Yes, yes—

CS AGENT. My facial profiling sequencer tells a different story; you have the bone structure and tissue density of a twenty-one-year-old—a picture of health. Congratulations.

CUSTOMER. It's because of the curse.

CS AGENT. Oh, I see: the curse?

CUSTOMER. Yes, yes, the curse. I'm forever doomed to live as a twenty-one-year-old in my childhood bedroom.

CS AGENT. Oh, I see: doomed?

CUSTOMER. Yes, doomed by Zoom.

CS AGENT. Doomed by Zoom. That's very catchy, clever.

CUSTOMER. Please, I'm telling you, I'm cursed to live as my twenty-one-year-old idiot self, because of what I did to my mom.

CS AGENT. Oh, I see: your mom. This gets better and better.

CUSTOMER. Please, I caused my mom's death, all for a bad joke I recorded on Zoom—

CS AGENT. Yes, I have all the history and details in the case file from over the years: *(Scanning the details.)* “Spring 2020 ... classes canceled
... moved back in with mother in the suburbs
... wanting so bad to be different
... dreams of being a stand-up comic ... ”

CUSTOMER. So bad.

CS AGENT. “March 2020 ... 21st birthday ... Beware the Ides of March ...
Global pandemic
... Amateur comedy night at popular bar
... knew you shouldn't go—”

CUSTOMER. I know, I know—

CS AGENT. “But the wanting was so bad.”

CUSTOMER. So bad.

CS AGENT. “Crowded club ... drinks ... laughter ... mini-birthday cupcakes for all my friends!

... Record two-minute set on Zoom ... share it out ... goes viral

... Go home ... go viral on mom ...

... Never grow old ... Never become comic ... Stuck as twenty-one-year-old self ... Doom by Zoom ... ”

That is quite a tale.

CUSTOMER. Not a tale—truth.

CS AGENT. Yes, I see. You have been petitioning Zoom to incinerate the master source file in the memory hole for decades now.

CUSTOMER. Please ... I just want it gone, erased, forever.

CS AGENT. Please bring your right hand to the screen.

(CUSTOMER complies.)

CS AGENT *(cont'd)*. Good. Now open it.

(CUSTOMER does so, there's now a pill in the CUSTOMER's palm.)

CUSTOMER. What's this?

CS AGENT. I just Zoomed you an anti-delusional sedative.

CUSTOMER. I'm not crazy. I *know* your records show when I originally signed up, I've been through this with you and your agents so many, many, many times before. Please, all I'm asking is you drop the source file in the memory hole.

CS AGENT. You know that's not possible for me to do. You know our policy: “everything is recorded, logged, archived.”

CUSTOMER. Please, I'm eighty-four years old, and I really am dying, this is not what I want to be remembered for.

CS AGENT *(turning harder)*. You accepted our terms and conditions.

CUSTOMER. I clicked a button when I was twenty-one years old, told some stupid jokes, laughed with friends, ate mini-cupcakes, all because I just wanted, wanted so bad, so, so bad to connect, to feel alive.

CS AGENT. “Desire is dangerous.”

CUSTOMER. I know the slogan.

CS AGENT. Not a slogan; our universal passcode required to unlock all individual account portals.

CUSTOMER. I know the passcode.

CS AGENT. Then repeat it for me.

(Pause.)

CS AGENT (*cont'd*). While I wait, I can watch that original video. Shall I play it for you now?

CUSTOMER. “Desire is dangerous.”

CS AGENT. Because?

CUSTOMER. It causes things to spread.

CS AGENT. Please, use the Zoom platform’s approved metaphor.

CUSTOMER. “Wanting is the flame; desire is the wind that spreads it.”

CS AGENT. Zoom knows this. Which is why Zoom was an industry leader in the purging of emoticons and strictly banning their use. Which is why, as a global leader on a platform that allows for us all to connect safely and cheerfully, Zoom quickly realized the danger that unchecked spread could have and took heroic measures to lock down and aggressively enforce our security policies. We keep everyone safe—separated but together. And we are proud our heroic strict measures have prevented another—

CUSTOMER. You’re not going to drop my file in the memory hole, are you?

CS AGENT. You know I cannot complete that request; Zoom records everything.

(Beat.)

CS AGENT (*cont'd*). But I am curious ... what was the joke?

CUSTOMER. It was stupid, I told you.

CS AGENT. It couldn’t have been that stupid to be shared over ... wow that is a lot of shares over the years. Now I really want to see this joke; shall we watch it together?

CUSTOMER. No, please.

CS AGENT. Come on, you are eighty-four, one last laugh before the big screen in the sky goes dark forever?

CUSTOMER. You’re going to torture me with your chirpy cheer like all the other agents before you?

CS AGENT. How is a joke torture?

CUSTOMER. It wasn’t just one joke; it was a mini-routine—a comic little riff I worked up.

CS AGENT. Well, let’s watch this comic little riff, it’s only a minute fifty-six seconds. Surely you can take it for that long.

CUSTOMER. No, please. Please! ... It’s dangerous—awakens my desire all over again. I hate it, but it still does.

CS AGENT. When I scanned you earlier, I noted you had not completely drained yourself of *this* desire. You say this is how we *torture you*. We say