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Dramatic Publishing

columbinus

by the United States Theatre Project

written by Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli
dramaturgy by Patricia Hersch
conceived by PJ Paparelli

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by the United States Theatre Project

“An unnerving study in adolescent angst, *columbinus* relentlessly paints a bold picture that bears witnessing ... It merges the facts of the Columbine massacre with a harrowing impression of what life is like in high schools today.” — *Star-Ledger*

“A powerful and important piece about the churning rage that’s all too likely to bubble over again one day.” — *N.Y. Post*

“The grim ecosphere of the average American high school is analyzed with sympathy and precision ... Mr. Karam and Mr. Paparelli have captured authentic notes of adolescent anxiety and yearning in briskly drawn scenes set in and around the classroom,

Documentary drama. By the United States Theatre Project. Written by Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli. Dramaturgy by Patricia Hersch. Conceived by PJ Paparelli. Cast: 5m., 3w. *columbinus*, a play sparked by the April 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., is a meeting of fact and fiction that illuminates the realities of adolescent culture by exploring the events surrounding the shootings. The play weaves together excerpts from discussions with parents, survivors and community leaders in Littleton as well as police evidence to bring to light the dark recesses of American adolescence. When *columbinus* premiered in 2005 at the Round House Theatre in Maryland and Perseverance Theatre in Alaska, Peter Marks of the *Washington Post* called it “an ambitious examination of the suburbanization of evil,” and the play went on to receive five Helen Hayes Award nominations including the Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Play. Following the off-Broadway opening at New York Theatre Workshop one year later, the production was nominated for two Lucille Lortel Awards, and *Variety* proclaimed: “This one comes straight from the gut—a wrenching return to the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in which 12 students and a teacher were killed when two senior classmates went on a shooting rampage. The United States Theatre Project’s smart and sensitive treatment of the event, which traumatized a suburban Colorado community and shocked the entire country, stirs up thought and feeling in this clean ensemble production.” *Unit set. Approx-*

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the United States Theatre Project

Written by
STEPHEN KARAM and PJ PAPARELLI

Dramaturgy by
PATRICIA HERSCH

Conceived by
PJ PAPARELLI

This excerpt contains strong



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(columbinus)

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All producers of the play must provide the following credit in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and in all instances in which the title of the play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the play and/or a production: “*columbinus*, by the United States Theatre project, written by Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli, dramaturgy by Patricia Hersch, conceived by PJ Paparelli.” This credit *must* also appear on a separate line, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and must appear in size of type not less than fifty percent the size of the title type. Biographical information on Stephen Karam, PJ Paparelli and Patricia Hersch, if included in the playbook, may be used in all programs. In all programs this notice must appear:

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In addition, all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“*columbinus* had a co-world premiere on March 8, 2005,
at Round House Theatre, Silver Spring, Md. (Jerry Whiddon,
Producing Artistic Director, and Ira Hillman,
Managing Director), and then on May 6, 2005, at Perseverance
Theatre in Juneau, Alaska, (PJ Paparelli, Artistic Director,
and Jeffrey Herrmann, Producing Director)
in conjunction with the United States Theatre Project.
Originally produced in New York by
New York Theatre Workshop.”

IMPORTANT PRODUCTION NOTE

The text of *columbinus* makes reference to several songs. Producers are hereby cautioned that permission to produce the Play *does not* include permission to use *any* of this material in production. Producers must procure permission to use this material from the copyright owners; or other songs, arrangements and recordings in the public domain substituted.

All fictional characters and organizations depicted in the first act of the play are composites, or composites inspired by information gathered from real records, transcripts and police records. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), organizations, institutions, or corporations is entirely coincidental. In Act II, with the exception of Eric and Dylan, the characters are composites drawn from a variety of factual information (transcripts, police records, etc.)—and while they are based on a variety of factual sources, they are not based on any specific individual.

Portions of this script were taken from the book *The Day of Reckoning* (Brazos Press) by Wendy Murray Zoba. Portions of this script were used with the permission of Alan Prendergast and Don Marxhausen. Music and script clearances by BZ/Rights & Permissions, Inc.

FOREWORD

My memory of the Columbine shootings is vague. I was immersed in a theatre production at the time that somehow disconnected me from the outside world. A pain in my tooth took me out of the insular theatre world I was in and forced me into the banality of a dentist's waiting room. I was sitting there, bored, wanting to go back to rehearsal, when I picked up a copy of *Time* magazine. On the cover were the faces of teenagers: some were victims, some their killers. I couldn't move. I was overwhelmed with disbelief. How could two teenagers do something so horrific? And why did it take me a week to realize what had happened? Three years later, I decided that never again would my mode of artistic expression not be directly connected to the world around me. I desperately wanted to create theatre events that would examine the major human events that impact our culture. The United States Theatre Project was my answer to that, and the first venture would be a search for answers to the questions of Columbine.

columbinus is not a play; it is a theatrical discussion. Its creators, a group of multi-generational artists, wanted to create a fictional world of adolescence, born out of our collective experience. Just as this fictional high school could be anywhere in America, so could the potential for a school shooting. We quickly realized that we needed to talk with this generation of adolescents and hear what they had to say about their world. At the same time, we needed to dive deep into the heart of Columbine and hear from the people who experienced the shootings, as well as teenagers living in Littleton today. We collected as much oral and written

fact about Columbine as we could gather. The merger of these two worlds would be the subject for discussion.

I always thought this piece would be an answer to the notorious question: “Why?” After traveling to Littleton and meeting parents, children, survivors and community leaders, I realized there were many answers from every perspective, including from the shooters themselves. With all these answers, I noticed things had not changed even in Littleton. Life went on. And all the reasons “why” remain. I asked myself, “What could this piece suggest as a different means of prevention?” I was afraid that we would never find an answer.

I eventually answered that question with more questions: How do we treat each other? Why do we treat each other the way we do? Why do kids, who will soon ask these questions about their kids, continue to treat each other the same way? Why does this cycle never change, even after the kids themselves resort to bombs and guns and butchering their fellow students to prove a point? Why do we look for an easy answer—a pill to take, a program to turn off—when we know in our hearts that something deep inside us has to change? What are we afraid of?

The project is the definition of collaboration. Hundreds of people were involved in its creation: the people of Littleton who let us into their lives, specifically, Randy, Judy and Brooks Brown, and Frank Earley and the students of Arapahoe High School; Gerald Freedman and the North Carolina School of the Arts for their support in the early workshops; Donald Hicken and the 2003 senior company of the Baltimore School for the Arts for “telling us like it is”; the Virginia Schools: Brenda Scott and the drama stu-

dents at J.E.B. Stuart and Carol Cadby and the drama students at Yorktown for allowing us to ask and being brave enough to answer; the Youth Ministry of All Saints Episcopal in Atlanta, Georgia, for their openness; Bryan Tallevi and Chris Till for their professional advice; Molly Smith and Arena Stage for letting the play be first heard; Chip Walton and Curious Theatre in Denver for letting it be heard in Denver; the Kennedy Center for letting the play be first seen; and the bravest souls: Jerry Whiddon at Round House Theatre in Washington, my incredible staff at Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, Alaska, and Jim Nicola at New York Theatre Workshop, all of whom gave the play life and an audience. Special thanks to a group of young actors who guided us in the early days: Anna, Alexis, Jordan, Adam, Ashley, Stacy, Tom and Trevor, most of whom were high school seniors when *Columbine* occurred. Our deepest respect and admiration go to the incredible talent and commitment of the original cast, who have forever shaped this piece: Anne, Jimmy, Ekatrina, Jeanne, Daniel and Gene. And of course, Karl and Will—Will and Karl—who carried the burden of two lost souls for four years and sacrificed and shared so much in bringing them to life. Finally, to Stephen Karam, my partner in all things *Columbine*, who always made me laugh and inspired me to be a better person.

columbinus is dedicated to all the voices that were silenced by the shootings on April 20, 1999. No one should ever feel that alone again.

PJ Paparelli
United States Theatre Project
May 1, 2006

columbinus had its co-world premiere on March 8, 2005, at Round House Theatre in Silver Spring, Maryland (Jerry Whiddon, Producing Artistic Director, Ira Hillman, Managing Director), and then on May 6, 2005, at Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, Alaska (PJ Paparelli, Artistic Director, Jeffrey Herrmann, Producing Director), in conjunction with the United States Theatre Project. The following artistic team collaborated on the co-world premiere:

Anne Bowles	<i>Faith</i>
Jeanne Dillon	<i>Perfect</i>
James Flanagan	<i>AP</i>
Daniel Frith	<i>Prep</i>
Gene Gillette	<i>Jock</i>
Karl Miller	<i>Freak / Eric Harris</i>
Ekaterina Oleksa	<i>Rebel</i>
Will Rogers	<i>Loner / Dylan Klebold</i>

by the United States Theatre Project
Written by Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli
Dramaturgy Patricia Hersch
Conceived and Directed by PJ Paparelli

Additional Contributors	Josh Barrett, Sean McNall, Karl Miller, Michael Milligan, Will Rogers
Set Design	Tony Cisek
Lighting Design	Dan Covey
Sound Design	Martin Desjardins
Costume Design	Denise Umland
Projection Design	JJ Kaczynski
Stage Manager	Shawn Dean
Assistant Director	Sarah Denhardt
Associate Lighting Design	Klyph Stanford
Director of Production	Danisha Crosby

columbinus had its New York premiere on May 22, 2006, at New York Theatre Workshop (Jim Nicola, Artistic Director; Lynn Moffat, Managing Director). The following artistic team collaborated on the New York premiere:

Anna Camp	<i>Perfect</i>
James Flanagan	<i>AP</i>
Carmen Herlihy	<i>Rebel</i>
Nicole Lowrance	<i>Faith</i>
Karl Miller	<i>Freak / Eric Harris</i>
Joaquin Perez-Campbell	<i>Jock</i>
Will Rogers	<i>Loner / Dylan Klebold</i>
Bobby Steggert	<i>Prep</i>

by the United States Theatre Project
Written by Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli
Dramaturgy Patricia Hersch
Conceived and Directed by PJ Paparelli

Additional Contributors	Josh Barrett, Sean McNall, Karl Miller, Michael Milligan Will Rogers
Scenic Design	Tony Cisek
Costume Design	Miranda Hoffman
Lighting Design	Dan Covey
Sound Design	Martin Desjardins
Projection Design	JJ Kaczynski
Production Stage Manager	Amy McCraney
Associate Lighting Design	Klyph Stanford

columbinus

A Play in Two Acts

CHARACTERS

Freak / Eric Harris

Loner / Dylan Klebold

The following characters play everyone else:

MEN

AP (Advanced Placement)

Jock

Prep

WOMEN

Faith

Perfect

Rebel

Note: The characters' names should not be listed in the program. From the audience perspective, they are simply a group of teenagers.

TIME & PLACE

From a fictional high school in suburban America to Littleton, Colorado, days prior to and including April 20, 1999.

SCENES

Scene titles should be projected at the top of each scene.

ACT ONE

MORNING RITUAL
SELECTION
IDENTITY
GUIDANCE: PART I
CAFETERIA
DRAMA
CREATIVE WRITING
GUIDANCE: PART II

PHYSICAL EDUCATION
HISTORY LESSON
WORK
I.M. (Instant Message)
MISCHIEF
DINNER
ALONE

ACT TWO

DYLAN & ERIC
JUVENILE DIVERSION
THE BASEMENT TAPES
WHAT IF
THE PARENTS
911
THE LIBRARY
GOODBYE
AFTERMATH

ACT I

(As the audience enters, houselights and stagelights are up. The space is stark and exposed. The stage floor evokes a gymnasium. On the back wall is a giant, functional chalk slate, which can also have images or words projected onto it. There are eight school chairs and two tables.)

The actors enter the space carrying their first act costumes and props. They prepare the space, then gather downstage and address the audience.)

ACTORS. Good evening (afternoon).

ACTOR (Freak). The story we will share this evening (afternoon) is based on true events, and inspired by actual people, writings and records.

ACTOR (Rebel). The characters were created from interviews and conversations with teenagers from across the country.

ACTOR (Loner). We appreciate you coming to the theatre tonight, and if you have a cell phone...now would be a great time to turn it off.

ACTORS. Thank you.

(An actor writes on the slate: COLUMBINUS. In their own time, the actors remove their clothes and strip down

to their undergarments, throwing their clothes offstage. They lie down throughout the space, except for the ACTOR PLAYING LONER. He goes to lie down, then hesitates. He stares at the audience as the lights fade to black.)

MORNING RITUAL

(Alarm clocks ring. In unison, the actors swing their arms round to the floor with a thud, silencing the bell.

MOTHER'S VOICE (Faith) *(pre-recorded)*. Rise and shine, sleepyhead.

FATHER'S VOICE (AP) *(pre-recorded)*. Hey, get up, get out of bed.

MOTHER'S VOICE. Get up...

LONER. Get out...

FATHER & MOTHER. Get up.

LONER. I'm dead...

FATHER & MOTHER. Get up. Wake up. Wake up.

ALL (*"I'm"* overlaps with the final *"wake"*). I'm up!

(Lights up. Everyone attempts to stay asleep.)

MOTHER You're late.

LONER. Huh?

FATHER. ...gotta run.

LONER. Huh?

FATHER & MOTHER You're late, gotta' run, run 'n go, see ya soon, don't be late, hey be safe, love ya bye.

LONER. I...

MOTHER. Bye.

LONER. I...

FATHER. Bye.

LONER. Good...

ALL (*sufficiently annoyed*). Goodbye!

(Sound of door slam. Blackout. Actors sigh and bitch a bit. An alarm clock rings, and then everyone in unison smacks the floor. Lights up.)

FREAK (*rolling out of bed*). Roll outta...

FAITH. Jump outta...

REBEL. Crawl outta...

PERFECT. Whatta wear?

JOCK (*simultaneous with "wear"*). Where's a towel?

PREP. Now'll shower.

LONER. Sour breath...

REBEL. And knots of frizzy hair.

AP. First I pee...

JOCK. Then I piss.

PREP. Lookin' good.

JOCK. Morning wood.

REBEL. First I'm thirsty.

PERFECT. First we need a...

ALL. Shower.

FREAK. I need a very, very cold shower.

LONER. I took a shower last night.

ALL (*as if saying "Yeah, right"*). Right.

(The rhythm stops. Actors sing a contemporary song while washing themselves, getting more and more exaggerated until they suddenly stop and step out of the shower into the following actions:)

PREP. Dry it.
JOCK. Shave it.
AP. Comb it.
PERFECT. Pluck it.
FAITH. Brush it.
REBEL. Let it.
FREAK. Scrub it.
LONER (*putting on his hat*). Fuck it.
BOYS. Slick it down.
GIRLS. Put it up.
LONER. My pants are where...?

(They “discover” their costumes, behind them.)

ALL. Oh!
REBEL (*looking at her pants*). They're wide.
FAITH. They're snug.
REBEL. They hide.
PERFECT. They low-ride.
AP. No time.
ALL. Move fast.
PREP. Flat front.
REBEL. Fat ass.
JOCK. Same old.
FREAK. Cargo.
PREP. Polo.
FREAK. Cargo.
PREP. Polo.
ALL. Button, Button, Button-fly.
FAITH & PERFECT. Wanna cry.
LONER/PREP (*exchanging shirts from across the room*). I
hate this shirt!

PERFECT. Skort.

FAITH. Or skirt.

PERFECT. Or short, short shorts...

PERFECT/FAITH. Or...

JOCK, FREAK, LONER, REBEL. T-shirt.

AP, PREP. A 'n F.

JOCK. F-'n A...

AP, PREP. Button-down fits well.

JOCK. ...it smells. I smell.

REBEL, FREAK, LONER. Just black.

FREAK & AP. Backpack.

FAITH (*overlapping with "pack"*). Pack lunch.

PREP. Hang on a sec.

AP. A quick e-mail check.

REBEL & PREP. I strap it on.

JOCK & FREAK. And slap it on.

(Everyone changes place on stage.)

PERFECT. Wait!

(Everyone stops, annoyed. PERFECT finishes dressing, moves downstage, zips the fly on her skirt, then...)

PERFECT (*wondering why everyone is annoyed*). What?

ALL. Gotta eat a...

JOCK. big breakfast...

PREP. quick breakfast...

PERFECT. skip breakfast...

AP (*overlapping with "breakfast"*). breakfast on the go.

FAITH (*simultaneous with "go"*). Going...

AP. Gone.

ALL. Homework?
FAITH, PREP, PERFECT. Some.
ALL. Homework?
AP & FREAK. Done.
ALL. Homework?
LONER. None.
ALL. Go, go, go, go.
FAITH. vitamin...
AP. Claritin...
PREP. Ritalin...
JOCK. Creatin...
REBEL. Mescaline...
FREAK. Pop a pill...
PERFECT. Pop “the pill.”

(A car horn honks.)

FAITH. My cell?
PREP. My stash?
REBEL. My Crosby, Stills and Nash.

*(Actors ad lib, confused on who she is talking about, i.e.,
“What?”, “Crosby who?”*

Horn honks. Projected: a digital clock that reads 7:48.)

ALL. We’re late.
FREAK, PREP, JOCK, PERFECT. ...jump in the car...
LONER & AP. ...wait for the bus...
FAITH. ...off for a walk...
REBEL *(walk faster)*. ...for a run...
ALL. What’s up?

LONER. Hey.
REBEL. Yo.
JOCK. 'Sup?
PREP. Yeah?
PERFECT. No?
FAITH. So...
AP. Way.
FREAK. Yeah.
PREP. I heard...
PERFECT. He is?
FAITH. To who?
PERFECT. To you?
REBEL. And him.
PERFECT. I know.
LONER. Whoa
FREAK. No
REBEL. So
AP. Hi
PERFECT. Whore
JOCK. Ho
ALL. Fuck.
AP. Time to go.
REBEL. One more smoke.
PERFECT. One more kiss.
JOCK. One more minute...
PREP. to take a piss.
FAITH. A pee.
AP. A poo. (*Beat.*) Oh, God I hate crapping in the school
bathroom.
ALL. I'll meet you in the...
LONER. Hallway or...
FREAK. Homeroom or...

AP. Study or...

FAITH. Store or the...

(ALL speak phrases in parenthesis.)

PERFECT. (The Caf) or the lab or the gym (by the door)

REBEL. By the north side of commons (the corner)

PREP. The gate so let's (wait)

JOCK. (Wait in the spot) in the back parking lot where it's
(paved) and I'm

ALL (saved). by the...

(School bell rings. The actors dash offstage, as if they were late for class. Music: "Mad World" by Gary Jules¹ begins to play.)

SELECTION

(Six props descend from above: a white baseball cap, a make-up compact, a pair of eyeglasses, a pack of cigarettes, a beaded leather choker and a cross necklace.

LONER enters, examining his new surroundings, and the choices he can make. He wanders a bit farther downstage.

LONER hides as FREAK enters. He watches FREAK wander among the various props dangling above his head. FREAK examines the baseball cap. PERFECT, REBEL and FAITH cross down, ignoring FREAK. FREAK crosses to the edge of the stage and sits.

¹ See copyright page for note on suggested music.

LONER, unnoticed by the others, sits to the side and watches the following.

FAITH crosses down and joins PERFECT and REBEL who are standing around the make-up compact. After a moment, they all three go for the compact, but PERFECT grabs it first. REBEL wanders away. FAITH follows. REBEL picks up the cigarettes and gestures to let FAITH have one. FAITH, a bit uneasy, moves away and grabs the cross necklace, blesses herself. REBEL, indifferent, pulls out a cigarette.

AP and JOCK cross into the light. AP immediately approaches the white baseball cap, and jumps, but it is out of his reach. Seeing AP's struggle, JOCK approaches and swiftly grabs the baseball cap on his first try. PERFECT is impressed.

PREP crosses down, determined. He walks around and observes, while waiting for the right moment to choose the most coveted prop. He picks up the glasses as AP picks up the choker. Unhappy with his choice, PREP crosses to AP and grabs the choker; AP is taken aback. As an afterthought, PREP hands the glasses to AP.

In unison AP, PREP, PERFECT, REBEL, FAITH and JOCK use their props to assume their identities. FREAK and LONER, not sure of where they should be, wander among the students. FREAK and LONER find each other. There are no props left.)

FREAK (*breaking the ice*). Hey.

LONER (*timid response*). Hey.

IDENTITY

(The characters are unaware of one another during this section, with the exception of unison text. Bell rings. Light goes to PERFECT.)

FAITH. She's nice.

AP. Ton of friends, knows everyone.

JOCK. She's cool.

REBEL. She hangs with jocks.

PREP. Drinks...like a horse.

FAITH. One can assume she drinks.

PREP. We all party together.

FREAK. She's a bitch.

LONER. We don't hang out but she's okay.

(Lights on JOCK.)

REBEL. A jock.

FAITH. Hardworking. Very determined.

AP. Yeah, he's a jock but he's different from what you would think.

PERFECT. He's really cool, very friendly with everyone. Sweet.

PREP. One of my best friends.

FREAK. Shining star of our school. Shining.

LONER. We spoke once in the sixth grade.

(Lights on AP.)

JOCK. Smart.

PERFECT. Very smart.

End of excerpt. Production notes

Production Notes

Staging *columbinus* is a challenging task. We were heavily influenced by the theatrical styles of Bertolt Brecht and Peter Brook: minimalist theatre with a strong awareness of the actor, the space, and the reason why the artists are doing the play. The production should be simple and honest. There should be no attempt to create sets and costumes for each location, transitions between scenes, or mask anything offstage. The scenes run like a surreal river, each flowing into the next. Therefore, sound and lighting are major elements, constantly redefining the space into new locations.

The projections and some of the technical elements are a challenging but critical undertaking. Dramatic Publishing can license the original projections created by J.J. Kaczinski, or we encourage you to develop your own. The technical sequences like **I.M.** or **911** should never be spoken by the actors. It robs the audience of the real experiences intended: the silent communication of teenagers, and the harsh reality of events of April 20, 1999. Although we explored the use of live video feed in several moments, **Work** was the only scene where it was successfully employed. The use of live video creates the problem of split focus (moments in which the audience isn't sure whether to watch the actors or the video), so we encourage you to explore its use long before you reach **Tech**. Remember, the story needs to be told clearly, simply, and as humanly as possible. After four years and three productions, we discovered: less is more.

The chalkboard memorial is one of the most powerful moments in the production. As explained in the **Aftermath**, there is much controversy about whether or not to include the names of Dylan and Eric among the victims of the Columbine tragedy. We did not. We felt the play focuses so heavily on Dylan and Eric that it was a more fitting memorial to end by remembering the victims.

We'll mention the obvious: there should be absolutely no cutting, censoring, or editing of *columbinus*. First of all, it's illegal. Secondly, by producing the play, you have a responsibility to the people who shared their stories with us. The world of adolescents and the Columbine tragedy are filled with the beautiful and the disturbing. They need to exist as they were discovered, otherwise it is not truthful.

Engaging the actors/designers in the reason why they are doing the show should be at the heart of every production of *columbinus*. We encourage everyone involved in the production to research the events of the Columbine Shootings. We also encourage the actors (provided they aren't teenagers themselves) to take some time to observe adolescents. Engage them in conversation (but do more listening than talking). You'll be amazed at what you hear.

— PJ Paparelli
February 1, 2007