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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

**Whitman v. the United States:  
Case 36 (on Zoom)**

By  
JAMES STILL

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(WHITMAN V. THE UNITED STATES: CASE 36 [ON ZOOM])

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*Whitman v. the United States: Case 36 (on Zoom)* 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 Selene Betancourt.

CAST:

ROBIN .....Maison “Bub” Bray  
JUDGE .....Brian Harwell

### AUTHOR’S NOTE

Part fever dream and part digital trial, *Whitman v. the United States* is about a writer battling some very particular demons while the world shelters in place. With all the arts shuttered in the U.S., many of us are wandering around not sure why we’re writing and whether or not any of it will ever see the light of day. With anxiety and uncertainty as a writer’s primary companions, this play takes things a bit further as a writer imagines being on trial for writing stories that have no plot.

—James Still

# Whitman v. the United States: Case 36 (on Zoom)

## CHARACTERS

ROBIN  
JUDGE

NOTE: In the same spirit in which I wrote the play, characters may/can/should be played by actors of any race, ethnicity, origin and other-abledness. In whatever way the play is cast, it will tell the story of a storyteller and a judge.

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*(ROBIN—a writer of stories—stands before a JUDGE in a U.S. court of law. Except they may not be standing, they aren't really in a court of law—each are in their own domestic spaces. The case is happening via Zoom. Or maybe it's happening in ROBIN's writerly imagination ... )*

JUDGE (*formal*). ... heretofore as charged by the government of the United States, you, Robin Whitman, plaintiff in Case 36 also known as “Whitman v. the United States,” have been asked by this court to state your reasons for bringing this matter to the court’s attention. Let the record show that you have waived your right of representation and that you will be speaking on your own behalf. Please acknowledge such for the records.

ROBIN. Um—

JUDGE. Let us also acknowledge the unusual circumstances that have forced this court to hear this case not in the usual way. While we continue to observe sheltering-in-place, the work of the court is being held in this digital space rather than the usual courtroom setting.

*(Less formal.)* Fine. The court will now hear your side of things. And this better be good.

ROBIN. Right. OK. So—I’ve been charged by the United States government with preferring stories without plots ... I ask the court to consider the irony—I mean, we live in a time when it’s usually the *opposite* charge made against its citizens—that being a charge of “plotting” to overthrow the government or some such sinister and dark wrongdoing.

JUDGE. The court asks that you get to the point. You are charged with telling stories with no plot.

ROBIN. And my point is that telling stories without a plot is its own kind of plot.

It's like negative space—do you understand? The concept known as “negative space” is still a kind of space. In a story that has no plot—*that is its plot!*

JUDGE. How do you figure?

ROBIN. Well, I'm here defending plotlessness—and yet by doing so I'm actually *creating* a plot which in its own strange way then is defending the plot by pretending to defend plotlessness.

JUDGE. Whoa, whoa, whoa—

ROBIN. There's plot in everything!—Think about nature: we even call it “a *plot* of land.” And on that plot of land one might plant a seed—let's call that the inciting incident. It's an action that disrupts something that's otherwise static. Then at a certain point, it might rain—and not long after that some kind of shoot might poke out of the ground. Now “*shoot*” is an interesting word because of course in my telling “shoot” is a noun. But “shoot” is also a verb—and a verb is action. And as I'm sure you know a plot is often (and maybe always) characterized by action, by what happens in its story. So the shoot in the plot of land gets inspired and grows little by little, maybe it has a sudden spurt of growth. Do you know that there is anecdotal proof that corn has been known to grow so fast that one can actually hear it growing at night?

JUDGE. Anecdotal proof? That's not something permissible in a court of law.

ROBIN. I understand, your honor—

JUDGE. Do you?

ROBIN. Well since you brought up the court of law, I imagine there may be long stretches of time in your courtroom when there seems to be nothing going on—when there seems to be no plot. Still—I am sure you would agree that those days or weeks in a courtroom when nothing seems to be happening—it is not without a story. Something is happening below the surface, information is being assembled and presented—and sometimes that takes a long time.

JUDGE. So am I to believe that your commitment to “plotlessness,” as you have so “poetically” dubbed it—that it only has to do with things that take time?

ROBIN. Time is an ingredient in storytelling—but it's only one part of the experience. The issue at hand is whether or not plotlessness is a crime against humanity. I have been charged with a crime, have I not?

JUDGE. You have. And if you don't get to the point, I may charge you with additional crimes.

ROBIN. And that's what I'm here to argue against. I cannot defend plotlessness one way or another—

JUDGE. Then what are we doing here?