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Ghosts in the Machine

By

ERIC COBLE

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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(GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE)

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The Gersh Agency
41 Madison Ave., 33rd Floor
New York, NY 10010 • Phone: (212) 634-8153

ISBN: 978-1-61959-201-8

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“Originally commissioned and produced by First Stage
(Milwaukee, Wisc.) under the title *TXT U L&R*.”

Ghosts in the Machine premiered at First Stage (Jeff Frank, Artistic Director; John MacLay, Director of Artistic Development) in Milwaukee on March 10, 2017.

CAST:

Taylor	Grace Becker
Cherisse.....	Hope Riesterer
Melissa	Chantae Miller
Shawn.....	Dean Sabatino
Pels.....	Zoe Powell
Anthony.....	Cole Winston
Cody.....	Sarah Niemann
Zelda	Abby Barbeau

PRODUCTION:

Director	Matt Daniels
Scenic and Video Design	Kristen Ellert
Costume Coordination	Jenny Thurnau
Lighting Design	Marisa Abbott
Sound Design	Matt Whitmore
Stage Management.....	Julia Xiong

Ghosts in the Machine

CHARACTERS

PELS: A rough-and-tumble girl.

SHAWN: A duuuuude boy.

ZELDA: A free-spirited girl.

TAYLOR: A high-achieving girl.

CHERISSE: A sweet, simple girl.

MELISSA: A shy, disappearing girl.

ANTHONY: A quiet, athletic boy.

CODY: A pissed-off girl.

SETTING: A mostly bare stage representing areas in and around a high school.

TIME: Now.

PRODUCTION NOTES

All roles can be played by actors of any ethnicity and gender with slight changes to dialog. Set and props are to be suggested and kept to a minimum for maximum flow between scenes. Theatricality is encouraged in staging, if not in performance. Technology terms and texting language may be updated as needed.

Ghosts in the Machine

(Lights up on eight high-school juniors and seniors, each in a separate area, all holding their cellphones, facing the audience.)

They all begin to talk at once—all except MELISSA, a shy girl who sits uncomfortably looking around; ANTHONY, a quiet athlete who fidgets in his chair; and CODY, a young woman seething alone in her army jacket.)

PELS *(a rough girl, speaking simultaneously with everyone else)*. Huh-uh, no way man, no. I was trying to do *good*, I was *helping* people, I am not gonna be punished for that, I did not do nothin' *wrong*.

ZELDA *(a wide-eyed, free-spirit girl, simultaneously)*. The whole thing, it just raises more questions than answers, you know, mysteries about life, about time and space, about cellphone plans ...

SHAWN. *(a bro-boy, simultaneously)*. I took off, I absolutely took off, but 'cause we *had* to, not 'cause it was my deal, you know? This was so far from my deal it's like I'm here and it's PSSSSHHH over there.

TAYLOR *(hyper-smart achiever, simultaneously)*. I think the word you're looking for is "implausible." The whole series of events is "implausible," not "impossible," but highly, highly unlikely.

CHERRISSE (*sweet, not too quick on the uptake, simultaneously*). You should ask the others. They can explain better than me. I just remember wishing I'd brought my jacket, you know? (*Then speaking alone.*) That, and I wondered if we were all going to die.

(Beat. They pause.

Then lights down on everyone except TAYLOR.)

TAYLOR. That's the thing, you can ask anyone, I would *not* get involved in something like this. This would be the anti-me, the parallel universe Taylor.

(Lights down on TAYLOR, up on ZELDA.)

ZELDA. Sometimes I wonder that, you know? Like if I'm making decisions in this universe and it's affecting another Zelda in another universe, or vice versa, like I think, "Hey, I'd like some chunky monkey ice cream" and I think I thought that but really it's like Zelda-X in Universe 829-B who ordered dark cherry ice cream right before her boyfriend was hit by a steampunk train, which wouldn't be a problem for me 'cause: no boyfriend, no steam trains—but now he's dead and at the funeral she swears only chunky monkey from now on and so I order it and—What was the question again?

(Lights down on ZELDA, up on SHAWN.)

SHAWN. Dude. That's what I'm saying, if I *wanted* to pull something like this, I'd totally be stealth ninja about it, we would not be having this conversation. This is someone who *wanted* to get caught. Majorly.

(Lights out on SHAWN, up on MELISSA.)

MELISSA. Um. I just—

(Lights fast back up on SHAWN.)

SHAWN. And I'm not saying I *do* do stuff like this, ninja or otherwise, you know. I'm not confessing anything.

(Lights out on SHAWN, still up on MELISSA.)

MELISSA. I don't really—

(Fast lights back up on SHAWN.)

SHAWN. But I'm not confessing by saying I'm not confessing. I'm saying I didn't do *anything*. Period.

(Lights down on SHAWN. MELISSA hesitates... makes sure SHAWN is done ... starts to speak—

Fast lights up on SHAWN.)

SHAWN (*cont'd*). End of story.

(Lights out on SHAWN. Still up on MELISSA.)

MELISSA. I just. I'd kind of like my mom to be in the room.

(Lights out on MELISSA, up on PELS.)

PELS. I ain't talkin' without a lawyer. I seen those shows, man. Whatever I say or don't say or whatever, you gonna twist it and next thing I know I'm sittin' in the electric chair or somethin'. No way. (*Beat.*) 'Cept our family ain't got a lawyer. But, like, the state provides one, right? Do I call someone, or do you guys, or ... ?

(Lights down on PELS, up on ANTHONY.)

ANTHONY *(quietly, scared)*. Is this gonna mess up my scholarships? 'Cause. My parents are counting on those. I'm like the first one in my family gonna go to college, you know, and the soccer scholarship—this can't mess that up. This has nothing to do with those, right?

(Lights down on ANTHONY, up on CODY, who glares bitterly at the audience. Pause.)

CODY. *What.*

(She shakes her head, looks at the ceiling in disgust.)

Lights down on CODY, up on CHERISSE.)

CHERISSE *(shrugs)*. Um. I just. Like. I just tried to be friends, you know? My dad always said “If you're not the smartest one in the room, you better be the friendliest.” And my family, none of us are ever, like, the smartest ones in *any* room. Like, not even when it's just us. So we're always, like, friendly. I was just trying to be friendly to them.

TAYLOR. I was just minding my own business. But part of my business is understanding how things work. I'm a curious person, I love learning, you know that, it's the theme of my whole college admissions essay, so of *course* I'm going to try to understand what was happening. It doesn't mean I *orchestrated* it, I'm not a mastermind, I just do things *right*.

MELISSA. Here's the only part I know, OK? I—

TAYLOR. Ask anyone. When I was five I got pet gerbils. I went online and found out they can live up to four years. I instantly decided *my* gerbils would live to *seven* years. And so I started my research, best foods, best grooming, best habitat, maximal

amount of water and vitamins, how much social interaction was ideal—how could I maximize the gerbil experience. And Fluff-Fluff lived eight-and-a-half years. I have photos.

MELISSA (*hesitates, watching TAYLOR ... makes sure she's done*). The part I know is that I was finishing lunch a few days ago and I got a text. I eat lunch in Mr. Collins' room. He's really nice. It's quiet there and you don't have to talk to anyone or answer questions. I was just reading my book and I, um, I got this text.

(The words of the text glide across the floor and walls: "Who do u know whos got some?")

MELISSA (*cont'd*). And I didn't know what it meant. And I don't recognize the number, and I should just ignore it, I know that now, but—I don't get a lot of texts and I just replied, I don't know why, I—

(She types on her phone—her text slides over the wall and floor: "Some what?")

MELISSA (*cont'd*). And I waited. I sat there staring at my phone. And it was, like, um, kind of exciting? This never—these things don't happen to me. I waited what seemed like a long time, I got ready to go to chemistry—

(Text slides over the stage: "Ingestible mood-altering substances")

She pauses.)

MELISSA (*cont'd*). And my first thought was, "Some friend is playing a prank on me." Except I don't really have any—the only people who text me are my mom and my uncle and my cousins. And they wouldn't think this was funny, so—

(She types fast, Text appears: “You’ve got the wrong #”)

MELISSA *(cont’d)*. And I went to chemistry. But I kept wondering why my first thought was that it was a friend. Where did that come from?

TAYLOR. The first one I got— *(Scans her phone.)* I erased it, I was *not* having that nonsense on my phone. But it said:

(Text glides across stage: “Heard u sell from ur car”)

TAYLOR *(cont’d)*. And I’m like, “What?” A) who is this? B) heard from who? C) Is that a typo? Like you meant *selling* my car? ’Cause I’m not, it’s my parents’ car, and it’s perfectly fine it’s only like five years old, and I just had the tires rotated.

(Text: “But maybe the narcs are onto u?”)

TAYLOR *(cont’d)*. Oh, “Sell from my car,” drugs, yeah, I’m totally cooking meth in my spare time in the lawnmower shed and selling it out of the trunk of my dad’s Honda Civic. *Breaking Bad* is based on my life.

(She types: “you are mistaken”)

SHAWN. So I’m toweling off after gym, getting dressed, and my phone buzzes—

(Text across the stage: “Hey sexxxxxy, looking devil cute”)

SHAWN *(cont’d, hesitates, looks around)*. There’s, like, twenty guys in here ... and some of ’em are texting ... but no one’s lookin’ at me—but ... and I’m like, “One of my bros yankin’ my chain”, but I don’t, like, *know* them that good that I can just ask—so I, like, I’m a little creeped.

Not that I'm homophobic or whatever, I got no problems with that, but I totally got a girlfriend, but I'm cool with tolerance, but if someone's checkin' me in the shower—and it's probably a joke, right? But I'm a little weirded out—

(He types, Text appears: “Thx”

Another text immediately slides over the stage: “Think I want those sweet lips on mine”

He freezes. Looks around.

Lights shift and he steps over to CHERISSE, who is at her locker between classes, checking makeup.)

SHAWN. Hey, Cherisse—

CHERISSE. Hey, baby.

SHAWN. Did you get a new phone? Or borrow someone's?

CHERISSE. No.

SHAWN. Did you text me last period?

CHERISSE. I don't think so?

SHAWN. You don't remember?

CHERISSE. I don't know. Probably not. It was Mr. Collins' class, he's pretty mean. I gotta go, are you OK?

SHAWN. Totally.

(She quickly kisses him and trots away. SHAWN's phone buzzes. He checks.

Text onstage: “U 2 so cuuuuuute!!!”

He looks around, concerned, confused ...)

TAYLOR. So it's bad enough getting texts from Mr. Druggy, right? But then I'm at home, *doing* my homework—I personally have no interest in AP Economics or French,

but it's totally going to fill in a gap in my resumé—and I think there were some kids going to a dance that night or something, but I do *not* have time nor inclination for the whole high-school game—I'm going to find my peers in college, I've accepted that—so I'm studying, I think I was translating Baudelaire maybe—and ...

(Text: "Its time to take responsibility for ur life")

TAYLOR (*cont'd, pauses*). And it's a different number than before.

(She texts: "Um. Think you have WRONG person")

TAYLOR (*cont'd, to the audience*). I'm the most responsible person of anyone I know. Who cleaned out all those paper towels from the girls' bathroom sinks? (*Points to herself*) Not my job, but I did it.

(She looks at her phone. Text: "Get off ur butt and DO something")

TAYLOR (*cont'd*). AHH!? OK, this is yet a different number from the last two—so *something's* going on—

(She types indignantly. Text: "???? I do do something every MINUTE")

Text: "LOLOLOLOL")

TAYLOR (*cont'd*). Arrghh!

(She types. Text: "Not like doo doo, dodo! Do!")

ANTHONY (*quietly*). So I catch the bus to work after practice. The 42C goes out by my uncle's place. I wash dishes and

bus tables and whatever he needs till close. But on the bus I mind my own business. Or actually everywhere, you know? (*Shyly grins as he puts in his earbuds.*) Earbuds in, I'm good.

(*His phone buzzes, he looks at it. Text flows over the stage: "Do you really think you're helping anyone?"*)

ANTHONY (*cont'd*). And I'm like, "What?" You know? "Who is this? I never said I helped anyone." 'Cause I don't know the number, but it has to be someone on the team, like they got my number from Coach's texts. So I'm goin' through faces, you know, like who would say that, you know?

(*Another text: "You have so many gifts. Use them for good!"*)

ANTHONY (*cont'd*). Same number. So now I'm thinkin' this has gotta be an adult 'cause no kid talks like that. Definitely not anyone in soccer. But it's not Coach's number. I've had teachers be like, "You really take command on the soccer field, Anthony, why don't you speak up in class?" But it's like in soccer, I know the *rules*, you know? I know what we're aiming for. Everything off the field—it's like, I better get quiet and just watch, you know? Keep your head down and you'll be OK.

(*He types. Text: "Who is this?"*)

Beat. He waits. Watches his phone ...

Text: "You know."

Lights shift as ZELDA steps forward looking at her phone.

Text rolls across the stage: “You know you can tell me anything”)

ZELDA. That’s what the first one said. “You know you can tell me anything.” And I’m like, “Cool!” I’m like ...

(She types. Text: “Who’s this?”)

Text response: “An ear to listen. A shoulder to cry on”)

ZELDA (*cont’d*). And I’m like, “Niiiiice.” Not that I need like a shoulder to cry on, ’cause I don’t cry, or not never, I cry at Pixar movies and/or when my mom slaps me, which isn’t even that often anymore, but when I cry it’s private and I don’t think you *want* me crying on your shoulder, ’cause then your shirt’s wet and there might be snot or even drool and I don’t know, and you don’t want *that*, I don’t want the guilt of ruining your blouse or whatever—but an ear to listen, that’s cool. Is this some kind of anonymous app like E-Priest or like “Counselor-in-a-Box” or whatever, except I think *I’m* supposed to be anonymous and not the counselor? But I’m like, whatever, this could come in handy—

(She types. Text: “Thnx!!”)

PELS. No way, man. I knew it was B.S. from the start. I was hanging out by the bus zone after school, “The Un-designated Smoking Area.” I don’t smoke, or not that much, but I got way more in common with those guys than anyone else, you know? And we were all—or *they* were—I just hang, you know, they’re not my *squad*, you know, I just—I was just there. It’s cool for me to hang there. But they were all laughin’ and doofin’ on Mr. Collins, like, (*In a stiff voice.*) “Students, I will take those electronic social media devices away! It’s in the handbook!” And I get this text ...