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Alone, Together

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Cha-Cha

By
YUSSEF EL GUINDI

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(CHA-CHA)

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Cha-Cha 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 Hala Baki.

CAST:

SALMA..... Kerry Jacinto
JUSTIN Harut Simonian

AUTHOR’S NOTE

My first response to the writing request was “no.” The call to writers came early in the pandemic, and I simply was not in a writing frame of mind. The enormity of the disaster came in waves, and as soon as I thought I’d settled on the emotional toolkit I’d need to get through it, another realization of just how unprecedented and colossal all this was hit me. I was too numb to react even to the loss of productions.

Then, as will happen, a couple of voices (or personas) lugged themselves up from whatever ink-soaked recesses of the imagination I use to start and finish a project. The characters—Salma and Justin—were thankfully charming enough for me to experience a little respite from the pandemic.

The other little voice that nudged me forward to write was a little more atavistic. And that was the call to adapt. Live theatre was at a standstill. I knew I depended upon writing for many things, including keeping my sanity, so ... I would simply have to adapt if I wanted to mentally and emotionally stay afloat. So here I am adapting. To goddamn Zoom. And thank God for connectivity by any means necessary.

—Yussef El Guindi

Cha-Cha

CHARACTERS

SALMA: Mid-20s, graduate student, can be of any ethnicity.

JUSTIN: Mid-20s, graduate student, can be of any ethnicity.

(JUSTIN and SALMA are mid-conversation. SALMA doesn't look well. Perhaps she blows her nose on a tissue.)

JUSTIN. Salma?

SALMA. Justin.

JUSTIN. Please? Call?

SALMA. I promise you, it's seasonal crap. Spring comes and everything that can leak leaks. Remember last year? I was a sneezing factory.

JUSTIN. Or—

SALMA. Or?

JUSTIN. It could be that.

SALMA. Could be the sky's about to fall on our heads; but it probably won't.

JUSTIN. Babe?

(Or another term of endearment.)

SALMA. I like this side of you.

JUSTIN. What side?

SALMA. Caring; worried. Look at that little frown on you, it's so cute. Little cutie nurturer. I don't see this side too often.

JUSTIN. I've always been a nurturer. What are you talking about?

SALMA. I see it now and again—peeking out. You disguise it real well under all that manly—he-man stuff.

JUSTIN. “Manly he-man”? That's—a whole lot of man. Thank you, I think. But you know you'd get bored with me real quick if I was always like, *(Overly solicitous tone.)* “Are you OK? How are you feeling? Can I get you anything? Are you sure?”

SALMA. Are you kidding me? Pamper me to death, please. I love seeing this warm beating heart of yours. I mean—I'm a big fan of some of your other warm, beating parts. Love getting real close to those too.

(JUSTIN perhaps makes a face to register the innuendo.)

SALMA (*cont'd*). But when you're this cute worrying.

(*She almost coughs the last word as she starts a short coughing fit. She picks up a glass of water and drinks.*)

JUSTIN. Have you taken your temperature?

SALMA. I don't have a thingy.

JUSTIN. Do you feel feverish?

SALMA. I am hot. Say more. Let's skip the small talk.

JUSTIN. You have to risk seeing a doctor. They're not going to deport you if you come in and they find out you have it.

SALMA. They'll just wait until I'm better and then do it. Then they'll come after my mom and dad.

JUSTIN. All that kind of enforcement has been suspended.

SALMA. You know that for sure? Do *they* know that? (*Before JUSTIN can continue.*) Look, if I did have it they'd only tell me to stay home, right? So—can we change the subject? This is date night. Fun night.

(*Perhaps she moves a small vase with a flower in it into the frame—or not.*)

JUSTIN. Salma—

SALMA. I have a great idea for what we can do.

JUSTIN (*just occurring to him*). You know what ... so do I.

SALMA. Oh? What?

JUSTIN. Well ... why don't we ... and think about it before you say anything. Why don't we ...

SALMA (*when he doesn't continue*). Yes? Listening.

JUSTIN. Because when I think about it, my first reaction is, "Well—why not?"

SALMA. Did I miss something you said earlier?

JUSTIN. Why don't we just get hitched now?

SALMA (*digests that for a second*). Hitched?

JUSTIN. Yes.

SALMA. You mean?

JUSTIN. I do ... That is what I mean.

SALMA (*digests that for a second*). Did you loop me into this conversation earlier and I just forgot about it?

JUSTIN. Aren't you bored? Let's just get married.

SALMA. Is that a good idea? Making life decisions out of boredom?

JUSTIN. Out of—you know, out of love. You wanted to see more of my warm beating heart, didn't you?