



THE WHO & THE WHAT

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THE WHO & THE WHAT
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The New York premiere of THE WHO & THE WHAT was presented by LCT3 at Lincoln Center Theater (Paige Evans, Artistic Director [LCT3]; André Bishop, Producing Artistic Director [Lincoln Center Theater]), in June 2014. It was directed by Kimberly Senior. The set design was by Jack Magaw; the costume design was by Emily Rebholz; the lighting design was by Japhy Weideman; and the sound design was by Jill BC Du Boff. The cast was as follows:

AFZAL Bernard White
ZARINA Nadine Malouf
MAHWISH Tala Ashe
ELI Greg Keller

CHARACTERS

AFZAL

ZARINA

MAHWISH

ELI

SETTING

Present day. Atlanta, GA.

NOTE

This play was written as a comedy. The events of the story may appear to take it into darker, more dramatic territory. Be that as it may, the need for comedic timing, tight pacing, and lightness of touch are central to the play's construction.

THE WHO & THE WHAT

ACT ONE

Scene 1

A kitchen. In it: Zarina, 32, of South Asian origin — gimlet-gazed, lovely, though her appearance is already lightly worn from worry. And ... Her younger sister, Mahwish, 25, light and carefree. Even lovelier. A real knockout. Both are American-born; both speak without any accent. Zarina's in an apron, chopping vegetables.

MAHWISH. Stop changing the subject.

ZARINA. There was a subject?

MAHWISH. Zarina, did you get that link I sent you or not?

ZARINA. 'Wish. There is no universe. In which I start. Online dating.

MAHWISH. Z ... if you don't start showing *some* interest, Dad is not gonna let me —

ZARINA. (*Cutting her off.*) You don't need me to get married for you and Haroon to get married. (*Beat.*)

MAHWISH. You're just *flouting* Dad.

ZARINA. *Flouting?*

MAHWISH. Because you can.

ZARINA. Do you even know what that word means?

MAHWISH. Yes, I know what it means. And I know it comes from a Dutch word that means "to hiss at in derision —"

ZARINA. (*Impressed, lightly sarcastic.*) Wow.

MAHWISH. (*Over.*) — Manuel says learning the words isn't enough. You have to learn where they come from.

ZARINA. Manuel. Your GRE teacher.

MAHWISH. Yeah?

ZARINA. With the muscles and the tank top.

MAHWISH. So Manuel's a stud? What does that have to do with —

ZARINA. Does Haroon know how you feel about Manuel?

MAHWISH. I don't *feel* anything. I just think he's hot —

ZARINA. — I think it's good. You're acknowledging your desire for someone other than Haroon.

MAHWISH. (*Over.*) I'm not *acknowledging* desire. I don't have any *desire* for Manuel.

ZARINA. (*Lightly taunting.*) Manuel. Manuel.

MAHWISH. (*Over.*) You're just trying to change the subject again. I can't get married before you do, Zarina.

ZARINA. That's absurd. This is not Pakistan.

MAHWISH. It's not what's done.

ZARINA. Neither is having anal sex with your prospective husband so that you can prove to his parents you're a virgin when you finally marry him ...

MAHWISH. I can't believe you just —

ZARINA. (*Over.*) — There has to be a better solution. Prick your finger. Bleed on the sheet —

MAHWISH. You're disgusting.

ZARINA. You're the one doing it.

MAHWISH. Here's what I know about you. Anything I tell you, sooner or later, you will use against me.

ZARINA. I'm a Scorpio.

MAHWISH. It's a character failing.

ZARINA. Shoot me.

MAHWISH. (*Suddenly.*) — Why are you cutting an avocado?

ZARINA. For the salad?

MAHWISH. We hate avocados.

ZARINA. *You* hate avocados.

MAHWISH. *Dad* hates avocados.

ZARINA. I love them.

MAHWISH. See? Flouting. (*Pause.*) I never told you this ... You know that book you have of the Prophet's sayings about sex. On your shelf ...

ZARINA. Yeah?

MAHWISH. One day I was in your room and, when I saw it there, I had this weird feeling like I should take it down and open

it. So I did. You know what I opened to? The Prophet saying that wives are like farms. That husbands could farm them any way they wanted. From the front or back. But not in the anus.

ZARINA. So the sin is on the farmer. Not the farm.

MAHWISH. Really?

ZARINA. 'Wish, I don't think any of us should be taking sex advice from the Prophet.

MAHWISH. Then why do you have the book?

ZARINA. If you're so worried, stop doing it.

MAHWISH. He's a man. If I don't do something with him, he'll find somebody else to do it with ... *(Beat.)* So you don't think I'm gonna go to *dozakh*?

ZARINA. 'Wish, you know I don't believe in hell.

MAHWISH. But what if you're wrong? Manuel said there was this philosopher guy —

ZARINA. You and Manuel were talking about a *philosopher*?

MAHWISH. — This guy named Pasta.

ZARINA. Pasta?

MAHWISH. Who said that he wasn't sure if there was a hell but it was better to believe in one just in case.

ZARINA. Pascal.

MAHWISH. Okay. Whatever.

ZARINA. And that's not actually what Pascal said.

MAHWISH. How are you not scared of hell?

ZARINA. I can't be scared of something I don't believe in.

MAHWISH. It's in the Quran.

ZARINA. It's a metaphor.

MAHWISH. For what?

ZARINA. For suffering. For the cycle of human suffering. *(Mahwish considers her sister.)*

MAHWISH. *(Impressed.)* See ... You're so smart. You're beautiful. You're young. But you behave ... like a ... *hurridian*.

ZARINA. A what?

MAHWISH. You know ... a bossy old woman.

ZARINA. *(Pronouncing it correctly.)* *Harridan*?

MAHWISH. Is that how you say it?

ZARINA. *Harridan*. Repeat after me. *Harridan* — *(Beat.)*

MAHWISH. You're like one of those compound wives on *Big Love*.

ZARINA. What in God's name are you —

MAHWISH. Too bad they canceled it. You'd be perfect. Married to me and Dad. I feel like you're my sister-wife.

ZARINA. You're truly insane.

MAHWISH. Dutiful. Despotic.

ZARINA. That was right.

MAHWISH. Thank you. Up and at 'em at six-thirty. Cooking breakfast.

ZARINA. For you and Dad.

MAHWISH. I never asked you to cook me breakfast.

ZARINA. You're an ungrateful brat.

MAHWISH. You wanna cook breakfast? You wanna clean? Fine. I'm just saying, there's better things for you to be doing.

ZARINA. Like cooking and cleaning and having babies with someone I don't love?

MAHWISH. I love Haroon.

ZARINA. I know you do. (*Mahwish's phone sounds with a text. She checks.*)

MAHWISH. Some new barista at Java on the Park recognized Dad from TV. Gave him a free cappuccino. (*Off another text, reading, perplexed.*) The eagle has landed.

ZARINA. The what? (*Another text.*)

MAHWISH. (*Reading, then to herself.*) God.

ZARINA. What now? (*Mahwish shows the text to Zarina.*) Dad's sticking his tongue out at you?

MAHWISH. He just discovered emoticons. It's so annoying. (*Typing into phone.*) Busy. (*Beat.*) You won't try online dating. You won't let me set you up with Yasmeen's brother —

ZARINA. My life is fine. Leaves me time and space to write.

MAHWISH. So you keep saying.

ZARINA. What is that supposed to mean?

MAHWISH. You never talk about what you're writing. You never show anybody anything —

ZARINA. Doesn't mean I don't write —

MAHWISH. Why don't you ever talk about it?

ZARINA. Because I don't want to.

MAHWISH. So you actually write when you go to the library? 'Cause that's not what the librarian said.

ZARINA. What librarian?

MAHWISH. The blonde. Stacy. She's in my yoga class. She says you stare out the window for hours.

ZARINA. I've had writer's block. That's why I've been staring out the window. *(Beat.)* And I don't just stare out the window. Sometimes I masturbate.

MAHWISH. You what?

ZARINA. Stacy didn't tell you that?

MAHWISH. In public?

ZARINA. The desk I sit at is in the corner.

MAHWISH. *(Intrigued.)* What's the book about?

ZARINA. This really hot guy who teaches me amazing words in my GRE class. It's called *Manuel*. *(Beat.)*

MAHWISH. Why can't you just tell me what it's about?

ZARINA. Gender politics.

MAHWISH. Hello? English?

ZARINA. Women and Islam. *(Beat.)*

MAHWISH. Like what, like bad stuff?

ZARINA. Not only.

MAHWISH. Well, I hope not. 'Cause everyone's always making a big deal about women in Islam. We're just fine.

ZARINA. Good to know.

MAHWISH. You don't actually do that, do you?

ZARINA. For me to know, and you and Stacy to find out ... *(Pause.)*

MAHWISH. You're hiding, Z. Behind the cooking and the cleaning and the "I'm working on gender politics ..." *(Beat.)* You have to put Ryan behind you. *(Pause.)*

ZARINA. He is.

MAHWISH. No, he's not. *(Beat.)* He's married —

ZARINA. *(Cutting her off.)* I know! *(She is suddenly emotional.)*

MAHWISH. I didn't want to tell you ... I found him on Facebook ... He's with his wife and they're holding a baby. *(Zarina is clearly affected at hearing this. Mahwish goes to comfort her. Zarina walks out. Lights out.)*

Scene 2

A bench at Java on the Park. On it: a South Asian man — late 50s, in a Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets sweatshirt — on his smartphone as he sips coffee.

This is Afzal, Zarina and Mahwish's gregarious, larger-than-life father. He has a very noticeable Indo-Pak accent.

AFZAL. (*Looking at his phone ...*) C'mon, Mahwish. I know you got my text. It says "read at 12:31." (*Just as Eli, 30, enters. White, with a beard, looking cleaned-up and eager. Not particularly handsome, but very soulful. Afzal notices him. Types into his phone ... Quietly.*) The eagle has landed. (*Putting down his phone, standing.*) Eli?

ELI. (*Surprised.*) Yes?

AFZAL. (*Going to shake hands.*) Afzal, Afzal Jatt.

ELI. Do I know you?

AFZAL. Zarina's father.

ELI. Her father?

AFZAL. She didn't tell you?

ELI. Tell me what?

AFZAL. We thought it best you met with me first.

ELI. I see.

AFZAL. Young man, we are a conservative family. She just thought — I just thought ...

ELI. Uh-huh.

AFZAL. You're disappointed.

ELI. (*Evasive.*) No, no, no ... I just don't know why she didn't let me know ...

AFZAL. Would you have come?

ELI. I mean ...

AFZAL. And I wasn't going to let her meet you face-to-face without me meeting you first ... So you see ... It really couldn't be any other way.

ELI. Couldn't it?

AFZAL. Young man, you'd be surprised at the types you meet on

the *online*. (*Off Eli's continued perplexity.*) Take a seat. Can I get you something?

ELI. Uh —

AFZAL. (*Winning.*) C'mon, take a seat. You came this far. Might as well ... You drink coffee? You like coffee?

ELI. Sure.

AFZAL. Milk? Sugar?

ELI. Black.

AFZAL. Drinks it like a man. I love it. (*He exits. Eli looks around, uncomfortable. Beat. Afzal's phone sounds with a text. Another beat. Afzal returns, a cup of coffee in hand.*) Dark roast.

ELI. What do I owe you?

AFZAL. On me. Actually, on the house. They recognized me from television ...

ELI. Wait ... You're ...

AFZAL. Always there for you.

ELI. The taxi company.

AFZAL. Zama Yellow Cab.

ELI. Right. Zama.

AFZAL. Named after my two girls. *Za-rina, Mah-wish*. Zama.

ELI. 444-ZAMA?

AFZAL. Do you have any idea how many hundreds of thousands of dollars it's taken to have that *jingle* printed on your brain.

ELI. Probably don't want to know, do I?

AFZAL. Why not?

ELI. (*Pointing at Afzal's phone.*) You got a text ...

AFZAL. (*Picks up his phone. Checks. Grunting to himself. Displeased.*)

Busy. Busy doing what for God's sake? Busy ignoring your father.

ELI. Is that Zarina?

AFZAL. (*Dismissive.*) No. The other one. (*Putting the phone down.*)

So — tell me about yourself, Eli.

ELI. So is she not coming?

AFZAL. No.

ELI. Um — you know, sir ... I — uh — Thanks for the coffee. I understand that you would want to know more about your daughter's potential romantic interest, but ... I've never gone on a date with someone's *father* before.

AFZAL. Look. I told you. We're a conservative family. Humor me. Good news is: I like you already. Dignified. Restrained. Intelligent.

ELI. You can tell all that?

AFZAL. A man of my instincts, son. I've gone from driving a cab to owning thirty percent of the taxis in our great city. I know a winner when I see one. C'mon. (*Beat.*) So, you run a mosque in Cobb County.

ELI. How did you know? (*Beat.*)

AFZAL. She told me.

ELI. What else did she tell you?

AFZAL. That you were a convert.

ELI. When I was twenty-three.

AFZAL. *Mashallah*. How did it happen?

ELI. Kind of a long story, sir ...

AFZAL. You're my only appointment this afternoon. (*Beat.*)

ELI. I grew up in Detroit in the inner city. I've been around Islam as long as I can remember. First time I ever went to a mosque, I was in high school. I'd never experienced anything like it —

AFZAL. *Subhanallah*.

ELI. — The sense of community. The call to prayer. Watching folks praying? It just — it opened me up. I wanted to be a part of that.

AFZAL. *Mashallah*. Being born into our faith is a great blessing. But even greater to find your way to it.

ELI. I don't think of it that way, sir. God's mercy belongs to everyone. (*Afzal grunts.*)

AFZAL. So, what's this about a soup kitchen? (*Beat.*)

ELI. Well, a lot of our folks eat pretty much one meal a day, and it's at our *masjid*. It's a pretty run-down part of town. We do a lot of home improvement. I'm a licensed plumber, actually.

AFZAL. Fix their houses. Then convert them. Good business plan.

ELI. Our outreach is more about serving others than bringing people to the faith.

AFZAL. Oh, you're a do-gooder! —

ELI. Well ...

AFZAL. — Only good thing I did in my life, young man, is my two girls. They are the sum achievement of an otherwise cosmically useless existence. Useless. Shuttling people back and forth. Half the time because they're too drunk to drive. Look. Don't get me wrong. Gotta put food on the table. Have to take care of my angels. (*Beat.*) How much money do you make?

ELI. Excuse me?

AFZAL. You're not deaf, are you?

ELI. No, I'm not, sir.

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