

The New Abnormal

A short play for stage or zoom

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

MARTHA

(Female, any age and race)
Hyper-connected, multitasking

GEORGE

(Male, any age and race)
Hyper-connected, multitasking

PLAYWRIGHT

(Any age, gender and race)
A vehement writer who still uses a typewriter

ZOOM PLAY STAGING

If staged as a Zoom play we have three screens

STAGE PLAY STAGING

If as a stage play the actors in three pools of light

THE NEW ABNORMAL

(ZOOM: Three screens.)

(STAGE: Three pools of light.)

GEORGE

Hello! Are you there?

PLAYWRIGHT

I am, I think I got Zoom working.

MARTHA

You look normal. Self-isolation agrees with you.

PLAYWRIGHT

Well, being a writer I'm kinda used to isolation.

(Fake laughs all around.)

GEORGE

Important question.

PLAYWRIGHT

Sure.

GEORGE

Are you wearing pants?

PLAYWRIGHT

Yes, I'm actually wearing pants.

MARTHA

Me too.

GEORGE

Me too.

(STAGE: Nervous laughs; they are not wearing pants.)

(ZOOM: Nervous laughs; they are not wearing pants.)

MARTHA

Are you ready to go into rehearsal?

PLAYWRIGHT

Can't wait. As soon as this mess is over//

GEORGE

Wait. What do you mean 'over?'

MARTHA

You do know we're starting rehearsals for your play this week?

PLAYWRIGHT

But there's a pandemic.

MARTHA

No. We're staging your play over Zoom.

PLAYWRIGHT

Wait what?

(MARTHA's I-Phone bings.)

GEORGE

Is that you or me?

MARTHA

Me.

(They wait as MARTHA checks her I-phone and thumb types.)

PLAYWRIGHT

Ah. Have to be somewhere?

MARTHA

(Off phone, matter-of-factly)

No, my blackhead dissolving gel shipped. *(Without a beat)* So just sign the contract and we'll start rehearsals right away.

PLAYWRIGHT

But isn't theatre supposed to be live?

GEORGE

Not anymore.

PLAYWRIGHT

But being live is what makes the theatre, the theatre. You know, the actors and audience in the same room. Breathing the same air.

MARTHA

Breathing the same air?

GEORGE

You want to kill everyone?

PLAYWRIGHT

Well no. But I thought we could wait til after the pandemic.

GEORGE

Haven't you read the headlines? It'll never be over.

MARTHA

After Covid-19 there'll be Covid-20, and 21.

GEORGE

Theatre, from now on, is going to be staged live//

MARTHA

Over Zoom.

PLAYWRIGHT

But is that really theatre? Doesn't that make theatre just like the movies?

MARTHA

No, there *is* a difference.

PLAYWRIGHT

How?

MARTHA

Screenwriters get paid, playwrights don't.

(GEORGE and MARTHA laugh.)

(GEORGE's I-phone bings.)

MARTHA

Is that you or me?

GEORGE

Me.

(They wait as GEORGE checks his I-phone and thumb types.)

PLAYWRIGHT

Really, if you have something to do.

GEORGE

(Off phone, matter-of-factly)

No, terrorist attack in Nepal, fifty-eight dead. *(Without a beat)* So, let's talk about the love scene.

MARTHA

Loved it!

GEORGE

Me to.

MARTHA

So tender. So passionate. So intimate.

PLAYWRIGHT

Thank you.

GEORGE
So we'll have to cut it.

PLAYWRIGHT
What?

MARTHA
How can you do intimacy over Zoom?

GEORGE
You can't.

PLAYWRIGHT
But it's critical to the story.

GEORGE
Not according to Story-Thing.

PLAYWRIGHT
Story-Thing?

GEORGE
You've heard of Final Draft and Plots Unlimited?

PLAYWRIGHT
They're like story development software?

MARTHA
Story-Thing is even better. It cuts all sexist language, race-specific characters and adds trigger warnings.

GEORGE
I ran your script through Story-Thing; it flagged your scene between the mother and father.

PLAYWRIGHT
What's wrong with it?

GEORGE
It's over ten minutes long. I mean, two people doing *nothing* but talking for a whole ten minutes!

MARTHA
Who does that anymore?

GEORGE
And there was that long monologue.

MARTHA
That's right, the monologue, at the end of the play.

GEORGE
It lasted for like, like, like... What?

MARTHA

According to Story-Thing, five minutes!

GEORGE

Five continual minutes of someone just standing there talking! You do know the audience is busy.

MARTHA

And it flagged the fact that the play takes place at a dinner party. I mean who does dinner parties any more?

(I-phone bings.)

MARTHA

Is'at you or me?

(MARTHA and GEORGE check their phones.)

GEORGE

(Off his phone)

Me. It's my mother. *(Squinting to read his phone)* "Dear George, just want to let you know, your Uncle dropped dead twenty minutes ago."

MARTHA

Wow, you should send flowers.

GEORGE

(To his I-phone)

Siri, what type of flowers are appropriate for a funeral?

SIRI FROM PHONE

"Okay, here's what I found for what type of flooring is appropriate for Ferrets."

GEORGE

(Talking to his I-phone)

No. What type of *flowers* are appropriate for a funeral?

SIRI FROM PHONE

"Okay, here's what I found for the hours of the baccalaureate tribunal."

(During the following GEORGE plays with his phone.)

PLAYWRIGHT

I really don't want to do my play over Zoom. I want to hear the audience react. Want to hear them laugh and cry. I want their undivided attention.

MARTHA

Undivided? Isn't that rather selfish on your part?

PLAYWRIGHT

Look, I experienced this before - The university I teach at//

MARTHA

You're a professor?

GEORGE

(Not taking his eyes off phone)

Of course he's a professor, he's a playwright.

PLAYWRIGHT

Even before the pandemic hit they were streaming their production over closed circuit TVs so the students didn't have to show up. They watched 'The Crucible' from their dorm rooms! John Proctor is wrestling with his very soul and the students are watching while gaming or texting or what? Taking a crap?

GEORGE

Got it. Flowers. What should the e-card say? I get three choices: *(Squinting to read)* "Our thoughts are with you." "Deepest sympathy." Or a third one that sounds like the first two.

MARTHA

Just pick one.

(He closes his eyes and picks one.)

GEORGE

Emojification?

MARTHA

Sad face with tear.

GEORGE

(Scrolling the emojis)

Sad face with tear. Sad face with tear.

PLAYWRIGHT

I was directing this production of 'Waiting For Godot'. Got into an argument with the sophomore playing Estragon who said that while he was 'waiting' wouldn't his character check his e-mails! Are you listening?

GEORGE

(Focusing on his phone)

Scrolling, scrolling.

MARTHA

You must admit that going to a physical theatre is a pain. Gotta get a babysitter, gotta fight traffic, put on pants. Plus it takes time. I saw your last play.

(MORE)

MARTHA (CONT'D)

In the program it clearly stated that the play was seventy-five minutes without intermission.

PLAYWRIGHT

So?

MARTHA

In fact it was eighty-one minutes.

PLAYWRIGHT

So?

MARTHA

(Dismayed)

That's like a whole hour and twenty-one minutes!

PLAYWRIGHT

But, plays used to last three, four hours and have five acts.

MARTHA

That's back when people didn't have a lot to do. Our generation's busy.

GEORGE

(Off his phone)

Flower order confirmed. *(Without a beat)* Now we do want to add a few twitter breaks.

PLAYWRIGHT

Twitter breaks?

GEORGE

Yes, little mini-intermissions so that people can check their messages.

MARTHA

Make a bathroom run!

GEORGE

Call their therapist!

MARTHA

Take their Zoloft.

(MARTHA pops a pill.)

GEORGE

Oh! And we also have a new producer.

PLAYWRIGHT

I thought you two were//

GEORGE

We've been bought out.

PLAYWRIGHT

By?

GEORGE

Google. As you know Google has always been dedicated to progress, people and new play development.

PLAYWRIGHT

No, I didn't know that.

GEORGE

Haven't you ever said to yourself we need a new theatre.

MARTHA

A theatre that appeals to anxiety filled, multitasking Instagram addicts who demand immediate gratification.

GEORGE

So we're introducing A.D.D. Theatre!

PLAYWRIGHT

A.D.D.?

MARTHA

Attention Deficit Drama! Theatre that gives the audience *exactly* what they want, not a bunch of crap some alcoholic playwright labored for months to write in a Starbucks.

GEORGE

Nothing good has ever been written at a Starbucks.

PLAYWRIGHT

But how does Google know *exactly* what a particular audience wants?

MARTHA

When you log on to watch the Zoom play, Google scans your credit card, from that they get your credit rating, from that your phone number, from that a list of your friends, from that your politics and bingo. Next Google sends you, the playwright, a text message telling you *exactly* how to emergency rewrite the play so you give the audience what they want before the Zoom curtain goes up.

PLAYWRIGHT

But is that theatre? I thought theatre was a place where we came to celebrate the unique voice of the playwright. Not a place to just reaffirm the audience's values.

(Two I-phones bing.)

MARTHA

Is 'at you or me?

(MARTHA and GEORGE check their phones.)

GEORGE

Me.

MARTHA

Ooo. Me too.

MARTHA

(Not looking up from phone)

You're fighting a losing battle!

GEORGE

(Not looking up from phone)

Everyone knows all the good writers have gone into television.

MARTHA

(Not looking up from phone)

Leaving a vast wasteland - What's this wasteland called?

GEORGE AND MARTHA

Theatre.

PLAYWRIGHT

Did you know that MRIs show that subjects who multi-task have lower brain density in the anterior cingulate cortex. The anterior cingulate is responsible for empathy. If you lack empathy you can't mono-task and a whole bunch of things start dying, like love, and making love, and listening to your children.

(ZOOM: GEORGE leaves the meeting.)

(STAGE: GEORGE's light goes out.)

PLAYWRIGHT

It also means the end of the theatre, because, just as with this play, the fractured events that make up our lives multiply without adding up to a plot.

(ZOOM: MARTHA leaves the meeting.)

(STAGE: MARTHA's light goes out.)

PLAYWRIGHT

Hello? Anyone there? George? Martha? Anyone? Okay. Well, at least you're still here. Yes, you, the audience. You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to perform the five minute monologue at the end of my play. And you'll see that its really a brilliant monologue. Here goes...

(ZOOM: The PLAYWRIGHT'S screen goes blank.)

(STAGE: Blackout.)

(OPTIONAL ENDING)

(ZOOM: On the screen appear the words:

Brought to you by Google. Keeping people in Self-isolation for over twenty years.

(STAGE: An announcers voice.)

ANOUNCER

"Ladies and Gentlemen, this play has been brought to you by Google. Keeping people in Self-isolation for over twenty years."

The End