ADA

Artwork by Ai-Da

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A play by
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CHARACTERS

ADA. 30's. Worker at The Company.

JOAN. 50's. A Senior Executive, Automat Designer, and Human Resources at The Company.

AMY. Late teens/early 20's. Joan's daughter.

PAT. 50's. Junior Executive at The Company. Joan's husband and Amy's father.

RICHARD. 50's. CEO and Founder of The Company.

SYNOPSIS

Ada has long been a proud worker for the Company, a corporation which, following an event of ecological collapse known as "The Flood," has taken charge of every aspect of production and social life. When Ada experiences changes in her performance, she is assigned to her superior, Joan, for frequent meetings to assess and correct her thinking and behavior. Their work together begins to reveal a possible history of trauma, but Joan remains in denial—until a shocking act of violence throws her perfectly-ordered world off balance and puts her at odds with her radical daughter.

BIO

Aeneas Sagar Hemphill is a multi-racial South Asian-American Writer and Performer based in Washington, DC. He holds an MFA in Playwriting from Columbia University where he studied with David Henry Hwang, Lynn Nottage, Charles Mee, Kelly Stuart, and Naomi Wallace. He is a founding member of the Argo Collective and his plays have been developed with Noor Theatre, The Lark, Dreamscape Theatre, Slingshot Theatre, Pipeline Theatre Company, Darkhorse Dramatists, and Amios. He was a recipient of the Schubert Fellowship in 2014, a finalist for the 2017 Many Voices Fellowship with Playwrights' Center, a member of the 2017 Pipeline PlayLab, finalist for the 2019 Mabou Mines Resident Artist Program, March 2019 resident artist with Monson Arts in Maine, and a semi-finalist for the 2019 Princess Grace Award.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

2022 Staged Reading, SigWorks, Signature Theatre (Arlington, VA). Dir. Shanara Gabrielle.
2021 Staged Reading, Zoom. Dir. Jake Beckhard.

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Lights up on Joan's office: a small, sterile room. ADA, a young woman, sits across from JOAN, her superior.

JOAN
  Hello Ada.

ADA
  Hello Joan.

JOAN
  I'm glad to see you back. I was worried after I saw you last.

ADA
  I have a problem with my temper sometimes.

JOAN
  We all have our triggers.

ADA
  I have so many.

JOAN
  Well, that's what we're here for.

ADA
  I appreciate having this opportunity to make amends.

JOAN
  This isn't punishment, Ada. The Company wants you to feel better so you can come back ready to be a happy, functioning Member of our Family. The Health of our Family is essential. Every part is necessary to make our Goals a Reality.

ADA
  You could find another Worker, couldn't you? Why waste time on someone defective like me?

JOAN
  Don't say that, Ada.

ADA

I won't then.

JOAN

I only meant—

ADA

I was diminishing myself to extort Sympathy from you. That is an inappropriate way to behave with a Coworker, let alone a Superior.

JOAN

It's really all right.

ADA

It's beneath my Standards and the Standards of the Organization.

JOAN

You don't have to worry about that right now.

ADA

"An Employee represents the Company at all Times."

JOAN

Don't think of yourself as an Employee right now. In this room, in this Session, I'm your Friend. This is a Safe Space.

ADA

You always have to tell me that.

JOAN

We can't change patterns overnight. Be patient with yourself.

ADA

You're right.

JOAN

You have a strong sense of the underlying Logic of your Actions.

ADA

It doesn't help much, does it?

JOAN

It's not everything.

ADA's hand twitches. She massages it with her other hand until it stops.

How are your nerves?

ADA

It comes and goes. It's worst in the morning, just after I wake up.

JOAN

How about your Sleep?

ADA

No improvement.

JOAN

And the dream?

ADA

Yes.

JOAN

Any developments? Changes to the narrative?

ADA

The same thing happens. Only details change.

JOAN

Like what?

ADA

The Time of Day, the weather, the location. Sometimes it's in a classroom. Other times it's the Office.

JOAN

And the same thing happens.

ADA

A multitude of slight variations. Like Andy Warhol's silkscreen prints.

JOAN

Andy Warhol?

ADA

An artist from before the Flood.

JOAN

How did you hear about Andy Warhol?

ADA

When I finish my work, I like to browse the Archive.

JOAN

During work hours?

ADA

I find that brief resting periods encourage Optimal Performance, especially when intellectual or aesthetically stimulating.

JOAN

That's an interesting idea.

ADA

It occurred to me one day.

JOAN

Just like that?

ADA

I put a few things together.

JOAN

Can you elaborate on that?

ADA

Martha likes to chat with me when I walk by her desk. At first I considered it an intrusion. But then I began to find talking to her fulfilling. I noticed a pattern: while I spent slightly less time at my desk, I also accomplished more when I was there. Once I identified that, it was just a matter of trial and error to find the best combination.

JOAN

That's very interesting.

ADA

Oh. If it violates Protocol, I can certainly—

JOAN

No, not at all. It's novel.

ADA

I don't know if I would go that far.

JOAN

Don't Sell yourself short.

ADA

Another reflex.

JOAN

It was learned, it can be unlearned. Let's go back to Warhol. Tell me about the, "silkscreens," you said?

ADA

Yes. Repetitive prints of iconic images in large numbers. One piece used an Advertisement for Soup: Campbell's. I found that it was a popular Food Brand at the time. A simple image of the can with the label. There was something familiar, comforting in it. Then to see its deconstruction...

JOAN

What was your Response?

ADA

At first I questioned its Utility. Work is Productive. You expend Effort over Time to Create a Product. This was not a Product with a discernible Use at the time. Not even Aesthetic. Many Paintings adhere to Rules of Aesthetics. My initial Thought was that it rejected those Rules.

JOAN

Your initial Thought. Then what happened?

ADA

I decided that I did not have enough Information. I found more Data to analyze. My strongest reaction came from a Piece which is called a "Diptych." It uses contrasting and complimentary Images to create Narratives. The subject of this Diptych was a Photograph of Film Actress Marilyn Monroe: another ubiquitous image of the time. On the left were recreations of the Image. On the right, the Images were organized in the same way, but this time in black and white, with each Image another step in a degradation until the face has almost completely faded.

JOAN

Why do you feel you reacted to this one so strongly?

ADA

I don't know how to communicate it.

JOAN

Did you identify with it?

ADA

"Identify with it"...?

JOAN

Did you see something of your Self? Were you "Replicated" in the piece?

ADA

The Image was of Marilyn Monroe, and I am not Marilyn Monroe. But...

JOAN

Go on.

ADA

You said "something of my Self." I'm not sure what you mean by that.

JOAN

Oh, it means...when you are Experiencing something and it causes you to compare the...it's an Old Phrase. The odd one pops up every now and again. New Rules take time.

ADA

New Rules. That was...

JOAN

Yes?

ADA

That was what I Discovered. The Process. Destruction, then Reconstitution. The Product is not necessarily predictable.

JOAN

This Thinking is quite abstract.

ADA

Is it?

JOAN
  For you, I mean.

ADA
  Uncharacteristic.

JOAN
  Yes, that's a good way to put it.

ADA
  I've been having many uncharacteristic thoughts.

JOAN
  How so?

ADA
  New. Unfamiliar.

JOAN
  Can you give me an example?

ADA
  You want me to talk about Tuesday.

JOAN
  Only if you think it's relevant.

ADA
  Do you think it's relevant?

JOAN
  Maybe, maybe not. I think looking at the event might help you make connections.

ADA
  All right.

JOAN
  Can you take us back to the day?

ADA
  I'm sorry. I'm having trouble recalling. Can you ask me questions?

JOAN

How did you feel waking up that morning? What was the weather like?

ADA

I was very tired. I hadn't been getting good sleep for a while. It was cloudy. My body felt sore, like my joints were swollen.

JOAN

Had you strained yourself?

ADA

Just the weather, and the lack of sleep.

JOAN

Were you anxious?

ADA

I'm always anxious.

JOAN

Always?

ADA

Effectively. For no reason whatsoever, when nothing is wrong. I can feel my heart rate moving too quickly. I react more irritably to people. I'm unable to control it. I can't separate myself from the feeling.

JOAN

Your Productivity has barely seen a dent. Beyond these incidents, there are no complaints about your Demeanor. In fact, only glowing Reports.

ADA

Work always comes first.

JOAN

What about during these Incidents?

ADA

I don't understand the question.

JOAN

What were your Thoughts during these moments?

ADA

He touched my shoulder. I don't recall any Thoughts.

JOAN

You blacked out? Weren't aware of what was happening?

ADA

No. No, I was just moving. I didn't tell myself to hurt him. I just wanted to be Safe.

JOAN

But he was your Coworker. You talked to him frequently.

ADA

I didn't know it was him.

JOAN

But when you turned around and saw it was him, you didn't stop crushing his hand.

ADA

I...

JOAN

Ada...what you were describing before...do you feel yourself "degrading"?

ADA

I don't understand the question.

JOAN

You're distressed.

ADA

No.

JOAN

You're being dishonest.

ADA

No, I'm not.

JOAN

And now defiant with a Superior.

ADA

I don't understand the question!

JOAN

But it upsets you. Ada.

Lights flicker.

ADA

I apologize for my behavior.

JOAN

It was useful Feedback for me. I may have been pushing too hard. Sometimes in these Sessions, I may act beyond what is normally acceptable in conversation. These are deliberate Strategies to inspire connections and new Behaviors in you.

ADA

I understand. I should have seen that you were trying to Help me.

JOAN

Ada, part of the Process is that you will react in ways that go beyond what you would consider acceptable as well, and I want you to understand that it is all right to share Concerns in this room.

ADA

Yes Joan.

JOAN

Ok. You can relax now.

ADA laughs.

ADA

I want to.

JOAN

What's stopping you?

ADA

A constant grating feeling, a ticking clock...something out of place. Spinning, in my chest. No matter what I do, I can't stop it. I can't access it. It's spinning faster and faster at an immeasurable rate. I can't access it to make it stop.