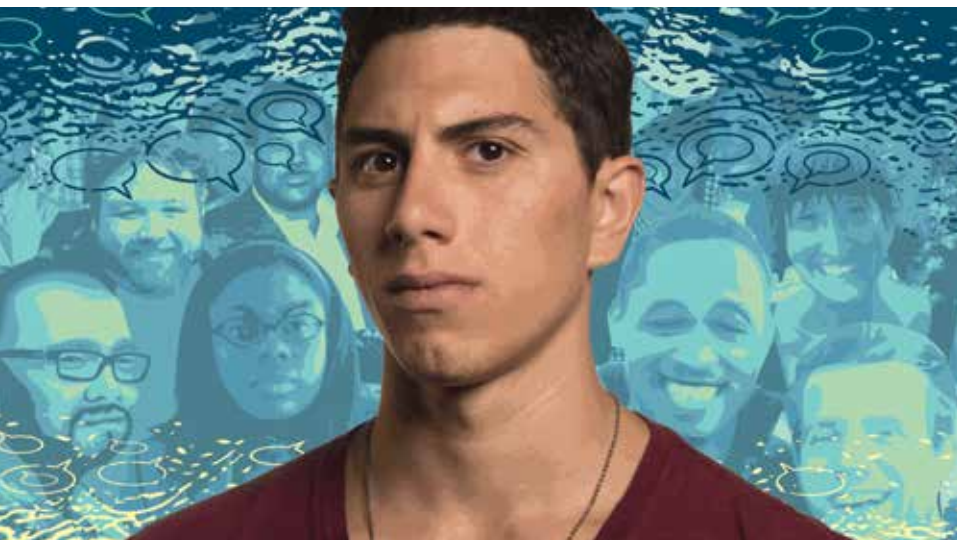


illuminations

A Guide to the 2014 Plays





DANIEL JOSÉ MOLINA (ELLIOT ORTIZ)

Notes by Tanya Palmer

Who's Who

Elliot Ortiz

An Iraq War veteran with a slight limp. An aspiring actor currently working at a Subway sandwich shop.

Yazmin Ortiz

Elliot's cousin, who goes by Yaz, is in her first year as an adjunct professor of music.

Haikumom (aka Odessa Ortiz)

Elliot's biological mother and Yazmin's aunt. Founder of an online chat room for recovering addicts, and a part-time janitor.

Fountainhead (aka John)

A computer programmer and entrepreneur who lives on Philadelphia's Main Line. The newest member of the chat room.

Chutes&Ladders (aka Clayton "Buddy" Wilkie)

A former addict who lives in San Diego, he's been working for the IRS since the 1980s.

Orangutan (aka Madeleine Mays, birth name Yoshiko Sakai)

Her adoptive family lives in Maine. She's recently traveled back to Japan to teach English. A former addict, she has 90 days clean.

A Ghost

Also plays Professor Aman, an Arabic professor at Swarthmore, and a policeman in Japan.

WATER BY THE SPOONFUL

Quiara Alegria Hudes

Directed by Shishir Kurup

The Story

It's been six years since Elliot Ortiz was shipped off to Iraq. Now back home with a leg injury, the 24-year-old former Marine and aspiring actor is struggling to make ends meet working at a Subway sandwich shop. He's also caring for the ailing Ginny, who adopted Elliot when his biological mother—Odessa, Ginny's sister—couldn't care for him. Ginny is the matriarch of Elliot's extended Puerto Rican family, an intrepid gardener, community organizer and an anchor in their troubled neighborhood of North Philadelphia.

Elliot is haunted by the memory of an Iraqi man he encountered during the war. He seeks out the help of an Arabic professor, whom he meets through his cousin Yaz, to help translate a phrase the Iraqi man said to him, which he hasn't been able to forget. The translation doesn't provide comfort, and Elliot continues to struggle—literally and figuratively—with his memories of this man and his time at war.

Yaz is a high-achieving composer and academic, the one who made it out of the barrio and got an education. She thought she'd be a tenured professor by 30, but instead she's going through a divorce and working as an adjunct music instructor. Together, she and Elliot try to support each other through Ginny's illness and subsequent death without much assistance from the other members of their family.

Odessa is a recovering crack addict living "one notch above squalor." But as the creator and site administrator of a chat room for other recovering addicts, Odessa (who goes by Haikumom) plays a critical role in her online community. She serves as a kind of den mother for this eclectic group that includes Chutes&Ladders, an African-American civil servant; Orangutan, an Asian-American adoptee; and Fountainhead, a once-successful computer programmer and entrepreneur now struggling to get clean. While their interactions take place primarily online, their commitment to each other is real, as one by one, each reaches out and asks for help.

Odessa watches over her online charges, censoring their outbursts, pushing them to take care of themselves and each other. But when it comes to her own family members—who

demand that she contribute to the funeral expenses for her sister—she has less to offer. Crippled by her guilt over her failure to take care of her children, and hamstrung by her meager resources, Odessa is unable to step up, leading to a confrontation with Elliot that pushes her to the brink. And in the aftermath of Ginny's death, the remaining members of the Ortiz clan must make sense of where they belong—since it was always Ginny's garden, Ginny's kitchen and Ginny's plastic-covered sofas that signified home.

The Making of a Trilogy

Before she was thrust into the spotlight with her 2012 Pulitzer Prize win for *Water by the Spoonful*, playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes was best known for writing the book for *In the Heights*, a Tony Award-winning musical about the denizens of the Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights. The brainchild of composer and lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda, *In the Heights* played to Hudes' strengths with its detailed depictions of life in a working-class Latino community. But it was an earlier Hudes play, inspired by another urban community—this one in Philadelphia, where she was born and raised—that she felt truly captured her voice and vision as a dramatist.

Written the year after she completed her MFA in playwriting at Brown University, *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue* was inspired by the experiences of Hudes' cousin Elliot Ruiz, a Marine who served in the Iraq War. The stories and characters in the play were drawn from interviews with Ruiz and other members of Hudes' extended family. Her process for creating this and many of her subsequent works was one of merging fact with fiction. During interviews she took notes by hand on a legal pad, then filtered those stories and emotional truths through her own particular sensibility. What emerged, she explained in a *New York Times* article, was more interpretive than literal—focusing on “why their stories matter than what the particulars of the stories are.” Those stories—of characters haunted by the ghosts of their past, struggling with poverty and addiction but trying heroically to build and sustain a healthy community in the midst of it all—are as defined by Hudes' deep lyricism and

love of music as they are by the real events that inspired them.

The thread of music

Trained as a composer and musician, Hudes eventually turned to writing, but music remains a critical part of how her stories are told. With *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*, Hudes imagined it first as a musical composition—in this case, one inspired by a Bach fugue. “As I was visualizing the play,” she said in an interview in *Guernica: A Magazine of Art & Politics*, “before I even started writing it, I imagined three characters and their lives happening, their stories happening, on top of each other. It visually felt like a fugue to me.” The play weaves together the stories of three generations of Latino men who served respectively in the Korean, Vietnam and Iraq Wars. For each generation, war brings fear, loneliness and possible death. But as Hudes shows, because they are unable to find the language to share their experiences with the next generation, each man must come of age through the war alone.

In the years following the premiere of *Elliot*, Hudes dove into her work on *In the Heights* and also wrote *26 Miles*, a play about a teenage girl's relationship with her estranged mother. But, as she told Marcus Gardley in *The Brooklyn Rail*, she continued to look back on *Elliot* as the play that “felt like my most distinctive and ‘me’ work yet. . . . I wanted to live in that writing world a little more. . . . I thought ‘I'm the only writer who could have written that.’ What I found, though, was that I couldn't go back, couldn't retrace my footsteps. I wanted to do something new. . . . So I thought about working with music in the same way but using a different type of music so that I

PLAYS IN THE INTERNET AGE

With technology transforming the way we consume and communicate, it's not surprising that it's also impacting the way stories are told onstage. Twitter, Facebook, texting, Gchat—all these technologies have transformed the way language is used. Many formerly reliable dramatic devices, such as the arrival of a messenger with news from far away, are now hopelessly out of date.

Playwrights have taken note and many contemporary plays represent online worlds onstage. But while *Water by the Spoonful* shows a chat room that gives its participants a chance to reveal their true selves, other plays—like Patrick Marber's 1997 hit *Closer*, about deception in adult chat rooms; Carlos Murillo's 2007 *Dark Play: or Stories for Boys*, inspired by a real case of a teenager's online subterfuge; or Jennifer Haley's award-winning *The Nether*, about a darkly complex online role-playing game—explore how virtual worlds offer us the ability to shed our physical selves and take on any identity we choose, regardless of our race, gender, age or sexual orientation—often with devastating consequences.



Armando Riesco as Elliot in Quiara Alegría Hudes' *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue* at Culture Project, 2006.

MONIQUE CARBONI/CULTURE PROJECT

WATER BY THE SPOONFUL

PUERTO RICAN PHILADELPHIA

While New York City is seen as the center of the Puerto Rican community in the United States, Puerto Rican enclaves have existed in locations as far flung as Hawaii and New Orleans since the beginning of the 20th century. Following World War I, a wave of Puerto Rican migrants were enticed—or pushed—to emigrate as a result of the island’s changing economy and policies that displaced workers by concentrating Puerto Rico’s wealth in the hands of a few U.S.-owned companies.

Puerto Ricans were actively recruited as a source of low-wage labor, and with the passage of the Jones Act in 1917, which declared all Puerto Ricans United States citizens, any remaining obstacles to migration were removed.

In spite of this, Puerto Ricans often faced open discrimination and hostility in their new home. But they continued to make the trip; by 1960 the Puerto Rican population in the U.S. had grown to nearly 900,000; by 2008, it had reached 4.2 million, surpassing the population of Puerto Rico itself. Those who were not actively recruited sought work through social networks. Families and friends helped to finance airfare and

would be experiencing the same type of process writing-wise but would be moving forward with a new play.”

With that insight, a new ambition took shape: to write a trilogy of interconnected plays building on the characters, themes and style she had established in *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*. She began the process of crafting the next two plays with some nascent ideas of what they would contain. She envisioned the second play as being about “recovery” and the third about “a kind of activism.” She knew each play would follow Elliot’s journey in the aftermath of his military service in Iraq and each would draw on a different musical tradition. The musical idiom that she chose for *Water by the Spoonful*, the second play in the trilogy, was jazz—and in particular, the dissonant and atonal work of visionary saxophonist and composer John Coltrane (see sidebar on page 54). She wanted something distinctly American and felt that the thorny, improvisational nature of jazz captured the tone of the world she was envisioning, which ricochets between Elliot’s life back in Philadelphia and the denizens of the online chat room.

The play picks up Elliot’s story where the first play left off. Newly returned from Iraq, Elliot is

injured and struggling to come to terms with the violent memories that haunt him—a haunting that Hudes carries through all three plays in the trilogy. Elliot is scraping together a living working at Subway and is caring for the critically ill aunt who raised him, with the help of his cousin Yaz.

His story is juxtaposed with scenes between and among the participants in an online chat forum for recovering crack addicts. The administrator, a no-nonsense maternal type whose online handle is Haikumom, links the two worlds. She is Elliot’s birth mother, and her story is both the play’s most heartbreaking example of the destructive nature of addiction and its most compelling case for the necessity of forgiveness.

Addiction: the equalizer

For each of the characters in this play—a strikingly diverse group in terms of race, age, geography and socioeconomic status—life and its inevitable suffering are great democratizers. No one, no matter who they are and where they came from, can escape from their past and the choices they made, choices that hurt them as much or more than they hurt the people around them. While many plays that explore online worlds emphasize the disconnection that our



(left to right) Haikumom (Liza Colón-Zayas), Orangutan (Sue Jean Kim) and Chutes&Ladders (Frankie R. Fayson) in the 2013 Second Stage Theater production of *Water by the Spoonful*.

physical isolation can bring, the characters in this play are desperately seeking connection. The chat room where they congregate is their lifeline and a conduit to true friendship both online and off. Chutes&Ladders has avoided relationships out of fear and a desire for control, but he is drawn out of himself by Orangutan, who is desperate to escape her isolation. Fountainhead, the former CEO-turned-crack addict, is forced out of his narcissism and denial when a fellow member relapses. In the “real world,” Elliot and Yaz find both comfort and pain in the communities that surround them: family, friends and the impoverished neighborhood they call home.

Water by the Spoonful premiered at Hartford Stage in 2011 to strong reviews; critic Frank Rizzo described it as “one of the best new plays I’ve seen in years.”

When the play opened Off-Broadway in 2013, *The New York Times* critic Charles Isherwood wrote: “For a drama peopled by characters who have traveled a long way in the dark, *Water by the Spoonful* gives off a shimmering, sustaining warmth. Ms. Hudes writes with such empathy and vibrant humor about people helping one another to face down their demons that regeneration and renewal always seem to be just around the corner.”

Of memory and forgiveness

That sense of renewal and regeneration is exemplified in the musical form Hudes chose for the third play in the trilogy, a bittersweet celebration of love and transformation aptly titled *The Happiest Song Plays Last*. For this final play, which premiered in 2013 at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Hudes shed the dissonance of free jazz for the simplicity and nostalgia of Puerto Rican folk music, also known as *Jibaro* music. Still very popular on the island, it is most closely associated with the Christmas holidays, when it is played during *parrandas*, a kind of musical celebration. This music also plays an important role in connecting members of the Puerto Rican diaspora back to La Isla.

The Happiest Song Plays Last is set in two wildly different worlds—the crumbling North Philadelphia neighborhood of Elliot’s youth and a movie set in Jordan. Elliot is hired to work on

a gritty documentary-style film about the Iraq War. (In real life, Hudes’ cousin Elliot served as a consultant, and ultimately starred, in director Nick Broomfield’s feature film about Iraq, *Battle for Haditha*.) In the play, the film serves as both a painful reminder of events Elliot would rather forget and a remarkable second chance for him to seek forgiveness for his actions in war.

Through this trilogy—which she began in the years immediately following the 2003 invasion of Iraq and which have occupied her for the better part of a decade—Hudes has created a rich, multilayered and deeply moving portrait of one man’s experience of war and its aftermath. Through it, she allows us all to reflect on the impact of war on our fellow citizens, our families and our communities. Shifting effortlessly between detailed depictions of life in Aunt Ginny’s kitchen to an embrace of the huge, messy world around us—a cybercafé in Japan, a waterfall in Puerto Rico, a demonstration in Tahrir Square, a chat room in cyberspace—Hudes’ project is both grandiose and prosaic in its depiction of deeply human characters whose struggle to survive and overcome is nothing short of heroic.

Further Reading

- Marcus Gardley. *The Brooklyn Rail*, August 1, 2012. “Music Is Her Muse: Quiara Alegria Hudes and Her Path to the Pulitzer.”
- Charles Isherwood. *The New York Times*, January 9, 2013. “An Extended Family, Sharing Extended Pain.”
- Kathleen Potts. *Guernica: A Magazine of Art & Politics*, July 2, 2012. “*Water by the Spoonful*: An interview with Quiara Alegria Hudes.”
- Alexis Soloski. *The New York Times*, November 28, 2012. “A Family’s Story Spans a Trilogy, and Beyond.”

secure housing and jobs for those newly arrived in the United States.

But while New York saw the largest influx of migrants early on, communities across the country, including the Puerto Rican enclave in Philadelphia depicted in *Water by the Spoonful*, continued to grow. By 2000, Philadelphia was home to the third-largest Puerto Rican community in the United States, with the largest concentration living within a four-square-mile radius in North Philadelphia. Most came from the island’s countryside, looking for work in the face of declining coffee, sugar and tobacco industries. When they arrived, they found jobs primarily as unskilled laborers, working in factories and service industries, or as agricultural workers on the outskirts of the city.

But as the 20th century progressed and more manufacturing jobs moved out of urban areas and overseas, the members of this vibrant Puerto Rican community found themselves displaced once again—struggling to maintain their community in the face of poverty and isolation.

JOHN COLTRANE

Legendary saxophonist and jazz composer John Coltrane, whose music inspired the structure of *Water by the Spoonful*, was an innovator whose pioneering work redefined the jazz aesthetic and brought him a cultish following among listeners and fellow musicians alike. Born in 1926 in Hamlet, North Carolina, Coltrane received his formal training at the Ornstein School of Music in Philadelphia, and during World War II performed in the U.S. Navy Band in Hawaii. He went on to play with a number of jazz legends, including Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis, whom he credits with giving him the freedom to explore his own sound. As a member of the Miles Davis Quintet in 1958, Coltrane became known for a method of playing dubbed “sheets of sound” because it involved playing multiple notes at once. During this period, Coltrane also struggled with drug and alcohol addiction—and emerged from this personal crisis with a strong sense of spirituality and a commitment to celebrating his beliefs in his music.

In 1960, Coltrane formed his own quartet, and together they released a series of notable

The Chat Room

The initial experiments into what would later become the Internet began at MIT in the early 1960s with computer scientist J. C. R. Licklider’s vision of a “Galactic Network,” a set of globally interconnected computers through which anyone could quickly access data and programs from any site. But it wasn’t until nearly 20 years later that the first rudimentary chat rooms took shape. Inspired by that ultimate geek signifier—the game *Dungeons and Dragons*—a British student named Roy Trubshaw created a program called MUD, short for Multi-User Dungeon, to allow him and his friends to play the fantasy-based game together in real time from their home computers. Combining elements of role-playing games, interactive fiction and online chat, MUDs are virtual spaces that allow players to interact with each other simply by typing commands. This initial program spread beyond Trubshaw’s network of friends and acquaintances, and by 1994, more than 400 “MUDs” had been created on the Internet.

Their focus moved beyond gaming, with many of these virtual environments capitalizing on the chat capabilities to take on a purely social function. They allowed people from far-flung geographical locations to socialize in real time, though often with an element of role-playing still involved. Dr. Sherry Turkle, a clinical psychologist who has written extensively about how the Internet has transformed our relationships and sense of ourselves, describes how players within MUDs become “authors not only of text but of themselves. . . . MUDs provide worlds for anonymous social interaction in which one can play a role as close to or as far away from one’s ‘real self’ as one chooses.”

Another early innovation was Internet Chat Relay, or IRC, which was created in 1988 by Jarkko Oikarainen at the University of Oulu in Finland. This forum allowed any user to open a channel and attract guests to it, all of whom spoke to each other as if they were in the same room. Guests were known only by their user names (or handles—a term borrowed from CB radio), providing them with anonymity and the opportunity for self-creation.

What started out as a pastime for computer geeks, most of whom were middle-class men under the age of 30, gradually expanded to

encompass a slightly broader population as the technology became more accessible and intuitive. Starting in the early 1990s, a number of commercial chat platforms—like Java chat, AOL and Yahoo! Messenger—provided any user with an Internet connection access to chat rooms through their web browser. The essential components of these chat rooms were simple; they were a means for two or more Internet users to speak to each other in real time using text or a microphone. Users expressed themselves through a combination of language and graphics called emoticons that express emotions, such as :) for a smiley face, or :(for a sad face. As the technology developed, many chat rooms also added a webcam feature as well.

A room with a (point of) view

Chat rooms have sprung up on every topic and interest imaginable—some as a means for people who already knew each other “in real life” (or IRL—on the Internet everything has an acronym), and others for strangers to connect over a shared interest, need or desire. Individuals can set up their own chat rooms online and serve as the administrator (or admin), as Haikumom does in *Water by the Spoonful*. Administrators set the parameters for their room, name it, define access and moderate the room to ensure that participants follow the rules. They can censor language they deem inappropriate, turn off participants’ microphones if it’s a voice room and remove a disruptive or abusive person.

Because the purpose of each chat room can vary so wildly—from swapping school gossip to sharing sexual fetishes—an informal ratings system has developed that mirrors the one used by the film industry. But these ratings are difficult, if not impossible, to enforce: An individual who has been removed for inappropriate behavior can simply log back on under another name and go undetected. Many rooms may have no administrator at all. Filtering and monitoring systems are available to help parents prevent their children from entering inappropriate virtual spaces, or from being pursued by Internet predators, but the web’s ability to hide basic facts of our “real” identities while simultaneously offering ample opportunities to create new ones can lead to all

sorts of complicated, deceitful and potentially dangerous interactions.

Breaking boundaries

Yet despite these dangers, this technology has an unprecedented ability to foster communities that aren't limited by geography and can transcend traditional stumbling blocks to connection such as age, race, gender, body type, physical ability and sexual orientation. When robbed of the visual cues that ignite our prejudices as well as our interest, our boundaries become more porous. And for those who are suffering from chronic conditions, including mental illness and addiction, the ability to reach out and connect with others who share their experience can have a real and potent impact on their health and quality of life.

In a recent study sponsored by the PEW Internet and American Life Project, researchers Susannah Fox and Kristen Purcell describe chat rooms, blogs and other online meeting grounds as “the 21st-century version of the age-old instinct to seek solace in the community” because of their ability to “provide a way for people to share information, emotional support and practical advice.”

It is of no small consequence that this advice is generally delivered not by experts but by fellow sufferers battling the same diseases and demons. In their introduction, Fox and Purcell offer a quote from Thomas Jefferson to demonstrate the importance of this shared experience: “Who then can so softly bind up the wound of another as he who felt the same wound himself?” Ironically, many of those who would most benefit from the information sharing and support found within these digital communities—those living in poverty and suffering from chronic diseases—are also the populations that have least access to the Internet.

The chat room in *Water by the Spoonful*, however, exemplifies what is hopeful about this technology. Transcending class, geography, race and age, a group of individuals gather together to take responsibility for both their own and each other's sobriety. The connections they find there are deep and surprising, and eschew traditional notions of what constitutes a relationship. There is love, but not necessarily romance; there is duty and commitment, but no familial bond. Brought



Yaz (Sandra Marquez) and Elliot (Armando Riesco) in Quiara Alegria Hudes' *The Happiest Song Plays Last*, Goodman Theatre.

together by a common need, this community has developed their own language, their own moral code and a deep sense of mutual responsibility.

“Don't take it lightly when I say a sober day for you is a sober day for me,” Haikumom tells Fountainhead, the newest member of the group. Within this virtual space, Haikumom has forged a community whose shared past contains within it the promise for a more hopeful future. They are committed, responsible and caring—and their relationships are reciprocal. It's not always that way IRL.

Further Reading

- David Finkel. *The Good Soldiers*. A visceral depiction of the Iraq War as experienced on the ground in Baghdad by members of an Army battalion during the 2007 surge.
- Sherry Turkle. *Alone Together*. Turkle, a clinical psychologist and MIT professor, examines the way technology is changing how people relate to one another and construct their own inner lives.
- Carmen Whalen. *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia*. Whalen, a professor of Latino/a Studies at Williams College, offers a historical look at the Puerto Rican migration to Philadelphia, and examines the efforts of Puerto Rican Philadelphians to create and sustain their community in the City of Brotherly Love.

albums including *My Favorite Things*, *Africa Brass* and *A Love Supreme*, a 1964 “concept album” that celebrated God and Coltrane's deliverance from self-destruction. By this time, Coltrane had become more involved in the free jazz movement, drawing inspiration from innovators like Charles Mingus, Sun Ra and Ornette Coleman. Their influence can be felt strongly in the 1965 album *Ascension*; with its atonality, free design and what music critic Sam Samuelson describes as “strikingly abrasive sheets of horn interplay,” the album was a departure for Coltrane and placed him firmly in the avant-garde.

The free jazz movement, which rejected conventions and traditional hierarchies and embraced personal expression, was also linked to the burgeoning civil rights movement. In an interview in 1962, Coltrane summed it up this way: “We all know that this word, which so many seem to fear today, Freedom, has a hell of a lot to do with this music.”

Tragically, Coltrane died of liver disease just a few years later, in 1967, at the age of 40, leaving many to wonder what might have been.