

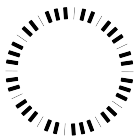
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CONCORD
THEATRICALS

SPUN

By Rabiah Hussain

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have always known I'm not white. But I didn't always know I was working class.

My earliest memory of racism is tied with home. At the age of six, my cousin and I stood silently in the front garden as the kids from a white family down the road strode past calling us "pakis". As they continued to walk away, we started conferring about what to call white people. When they reached their house, we shouted out "Engees!" – because English and white were interchangeable – whilst being ready to run inside should they decide this was a real insult. It was at that moment I understood "paki" to be a derogatory word for my skin colour, one that positioned whiteness into the centre of my wider view of the world.

Our response to being called "pakis" that day was a reflection of how we'd respond throughout our lives to the spotlight thrown on our identity. Not knowing the correct response to words used against us and fearing the reaction should we respond at all. The intimidation we'd always feel from the confidence of whiteness. Up until then I just looked different. But at that moment, I knew I wasn't white.

Realising I was working class came much later in my life, despite the fact that my identity has always been inextricably linked with home. I'm a Londoner through and through. But London to me has always been a vast estate, where those like me live in outhouses surrounding the extravagant mansion at the centre of it. This mansion is guarded by wrought iron gates that we can occasionally peer through but hardly ever enter. The white middle-class world within it was never visible to us from Newham, East London. Being a second-generation British Pakistani was the identity I attached to myself. The class element wouldn't come until I stepped through those iron gates and into that mansion.

Despite the Olympic and Westfield connection, most of Newham isn't like the London of TV and films. It's where immigrant communities have created a home away from home. Most people I knew growing up shared the same background and experiences

as me – fathers working in factories, free school dinners and the majority of white faces around us were our school teachers. It's this shared experience that superficially sheltered many of us from what it means to be working class. Even when I went to sixth form in the slightly wealthier borough of Redbridge, sharing the same culture with the large South Asian population meant I still never thought of myself in terms of class. It also meant I didn't recognise racism either. It wouldn't be until I was much older that I'd realise the egg thrown at me by a white man in a white van was not a random act.

Stepping outside of East London, you start to see yourself in relation to wider structures. At university, I saw myself standing within the vast estate that is London, and in direct view of the mansion that was always inaccessible to me. Getting through university by doing admin roles in small offices felt like I had walked close enough to the iron gates to be able to look through them.

It was with my first job in a large organisation in central London that things changed. Walking past the lines of Asian shops on Green Street to get to Upton Park Station felt like approaching the iron gate that separated the outhouses, and travelling the district line was like walking towards the door of the mansion.

Getting off at St. James's Park and walking to the office, my entire world would change. I was standing in the mansion, scared to sit or touch the furniture. When you first enter this space, you feel invisible.

Being in a queue anywhere you are ignored as the white person behind you is served first. You are talked over, but all eyes are on you when there's a terrorist attack anywhere in the world. And you shrink. Partly because you felt invisible and partly because you stood out. In this mansion the cleaners, post room and canteen staff were mainly black, brown or Eastern European, whilst the majority of faces sitting at the computers were white. And I felt guilty for sitting amongst them.

I remember the exact moment I realised why I felt so out of place here. There were other people of colour who seemed to be comfortable, so what was wrong with me?

When an MP made headlines for criticising Oxford's quota system for minority and working-class students, I listened to the general debate amongst my colleagues. And the words of my boss are ones that I've never forgotten.

"I agree. I don't pay thousands of pounds for my kids to go to private school just so some smelly oik can take their place." The silence from others was indicative of what they felt about this comment. But the fact was no one there was from a working-class background. But for me it felt like the words were deployed against me. I was that smelly oik in the room. It's the first time I realised that I was working class.

I use the word deploy quite deliberately here, because the effect of language from those in more privileged positions is used without recognising the violence it can cause. Words don't always land on your body and fall off. They hit you like artillery fire. They seep into your bones. Words can shatter you. Even whilst writing this I can feel where those wounds were.

It's in order to heal these wounds that many of us try to shed what we can of our identities. People can see race but try hard enough and class can be hidden. You can change the way you speak, how you carry yourself, your viewpoints, all in the hope you'll neither be invisible nor too conspicuous. With this you try to adopt traits that are more white and middle class. And the most painful part – you start to look upon those outside the iron gates in a certain way because you want to disassociate yourself from them. You start to call the mansion home.

But identity is not so easy to erase. You can pack away parts of who you are but this space was never made for you and will always see you in a certain way. Words continue to land on you, breaking your bones. "Are you going to have an arranged marriage?", "Where are you really from?", "You're really different." Words can change your sense of self. When I tried desperately to wash and dry the only coat I owned when that egg was

thrown at me, I didn't feel working class. But when privilege used the words "smelly oik", it took me years to recover. That is the reality of words. Microaggressions are delivered with a smile by those you normally consider "nice people", so it becomes difficult to know how respond to them, despite the rupture they cause internally once the words really sink in. It's a reminder of the confidence of whiteness I had experienced from childhood.

Rabiah Hussain, 2020

NOTES ON TEXT

‘..’ Indicates when a character is talking to another character

“..” Indicates when a character is voicing someone else in the story

/ Indicates an interruption

... Indicates a thought or pause

SPUN

Spun by Rabiah Hussain was first performed at the Arcola Theatre and ran for 30 performances between 27 June and 28 July 2018.

SAFA
AISHA

Humaira Iqbal
Aasiya Shah

Writer
Director
Designer
Lighting Designer
Sound Designer
Movement Director
Stage Manager
Production Manager
Production LX
Assistant Director

Rabiah Hussain
Richard Speir
Khadija Raza
Geoff Hense
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Catriona Tait

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For Mum and Dad

CHARACTERS

SAFA – 21, British Pakistani, Londoner

AISHA – 21, British Pakistani, Londoner

PROLOGUE

AISHA 'What do you see when you look at me?'

SAFA 'Everything I don't want to be.'

Beat.

'What do you see when you look at me?'

AISHA 'Everything I shouldn't have been.'

ACT ONE

Lights go up.

SAFA and AISHA on stage.

SAFA Shit! She's here? Never early for anything, but the one day I need her to be late.

AISHA Made it! Send her a text. Tell her I'm outside and to hurry up 'cos I ain't here to wait around for her, you know. So stupid she makes me do this. Her mum's never gonna check up on her. Never has. But this one's extra cautious. Always has been.

Beat.

Why is she dangling her new brown boots at me from her bedroom window?

'What?'

Whatever the bitch's mouthing is going straight over my head. Might as well be doing sign language. Hold my thumbs up. Tell her,

'Boots are sick.'

Beat.

What's she mean 'no'? Why ask if she's decided not to wear 'em. Dickhead.

SAFA Oh, my days. Whoever said best friends can always understand each other, no matter what, was chattin' bare crap.

AISHA You know how girls have their boyfriends waiting around the corner for them? I get the privilege without having the goods.

SAFA This is exactly what living in a semi-detached is for.

AISHA She's holding out some blue carrier bag now. Think her boots are in it.

Beat.

Is she aiming towards where I'm parked?!

SAFA Basic projectile motion science here. There it goes...

AISHA What??

SAFA There it... No!

AISHA Idiot! That's the worst throw in the world. Trying to be bloody Shahid Afridi. I swear, once she has her mind set on wearing something, she just has to wear it. Queen fucking Victoria.

Whatever, I can't do nothing about it.

SAFA Run to the living room, fast as I can. Look round hoping to get a clear way to the back garden... but Mum's praying in front of the patio door!

Send Aisha a text.

'Beg you get 'em for me.'

AISHA Fuck's sake, how am I supposed to do that? Swear down, she really takes the piss.

Beat.

'Fine.'

SAFA 'Yes!'

AISHA 'But she owes me big time.'

SAFA Now, I can see that the bag has landed about two meters away, but Mum prays with her back to the door, so if she hurries...

AISHA Always been pretty athletic I have. The number of times I've out-run and out-climbed the police when they'd

seen me bunking in Plashet Park. But this. This is real. Safa's Mum.

Here I go.

SAFA Best thing about mums at this time is, that no matter what's happening around them, they don't look up from their prayer. For anything.

AISHA One foot in the bit with a brick missing. I pull myself up and look over. I see them! See Safa's mum too, but only thing gonna distract her right now is the Judgement Day trumpet. One big jerk up, over and I land right on my feet. Proper Olympic shit.

SAFA I pretend I'm cleaning up. Side-eyeing the garden the whole time. She gets on her hands and knees and does some Rambo shit across the grass. Commando crawling and that. She's showing some mad skills right now.

She has the bag! She's getting ready to jump back over... But she ducks?

Beat.

Mum's finishing prayers! I can't look!

AISHA Fucking hell, get her out of there.

SAFA I ask Mum to show me the fabric she bought from Green Street. Try to lead her out of the room but she empties the bag right there!

AISHA Is this the time for the bitch to be checking out clothes?

SAFA I'm pretty sure I'm about to pass out any minute.

AISHA Fuck it.

SAFA She aims, fires, and the bag is over! She's taking one last look around, leaps up, hands on the wall and hurls herself back outside.

AISHA This time, I land straight on my arse.

SAFA She did it!

AISHA I'm a fucking G!

SAFA She'll be dancing around the car right now and banging on about this for days.

AISHA They should get me to represent team GB in 2012, innit.

Beat.

Ah, my fucking trainers, man! It took me ages to find these. Wish I'd been wiser choosing a best friend.

I get back in the car and I can tell you exactly how it's all happening in Safa's house right now.

SAFA is doing exactly what AISHA is describing.

She's gonna run upstairs to her room, change her top, put a jacket on so her mum can't see what she's wearing. Then she's gonna go back downstairs, wave bye, pretending she's off to uni but avoiding her mum's gaze 'cos Safa can't lie for shit, and just as she's about to leave the house, her younger brother's gonna wanna wrestle her for jokes, cos he knows she's really off somewhere else.

SAFA Little shit!

AISHA And any minute now... Yep, she runs like a fire is chasing her and flings herself in.

Beat.

SAFA 'Love ya.'

AISHA 'Fuck off.'

SAFA I'm ready to celebrate slash mourn the end of uni.

Beat.

'Ready?'

AISHA 'Doing this for you, bitch.'

*Coloured lights and Bhangra music.**

SAFA 'Come on, dance!'

AISHA 'No, thanks.'

SAFA 'Fine, be boring.'

Beat.

AISHA Despite their age, the majority of girls here aren't allowed out past nine pm. But doesn't mean they don't want to rebel within boundaries. So, seizing the opportunity to provide a second best alternative, a bunch of DJ's and money minds set up Desi Nights... And they're shit. Whoever heard of clubbing at seven pm? I could've been getting ready for some sick rave right now. But instead...

SAFA I fucking love this! Lying to mum is shitty, I know. But I can't tell her that instead of learning about Henry Gantt, I'm dancing to the heavy beats of DJ Sanj.

AISHA Dad doesn't really lay down any rules for me. Gives me space so long as I'm not doing anything too outrageous. And trust me, this is no where near my definition of outrageous. 'Course, can't tell him I enjoy the occasional Jäger shot and the not-so-occasional Peroni. But at least I don't do drugs... Well, apart from the occasional spliff. But that's a grey area.

SAFA My strategy? Compartmentalise the guilt 'til I get back home. Then, along with the sparkly top, I change my act. And yes, the guilt kicks in when I see Mum, but I remind myself, I'm only dancing. No alcohol, no drugs, and definitely no grinding against the manky Asian boys who automatically assume you're easy just because you like to let your hair down...

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AISHA ...And with clinical precision, seven minutes from entering, some knobhead starts coming towards me doing what looks like the chicken dance to Miss Dynamite. Trouble with the guys in East London is that they're all so fucking predictable.

"Alrite? What's your name?"

'Aisha.'

He looks down at the beer in my hand and nods his head like he's one of those Churchill bulldog toy things.

"Aisha? Are you Muslim?"

Dickhead smells like Bacardi Breezers and weed but has the balls to ask me that question? I stand up straight and square up to him.

'Fuck off back to your cave, mate.'

SAFA Not again.

AISHA He's about to walk off but before he does, under his breath,

"Fucking slag."

Nah, I ain't having that.

SAFA I stop her. For his sake not hers.

'Fuck it, you can't fight all the knobs.'

Lights change. AISHA starts to light up a cigarette.

AISHA 'One of these days you're gonna have to back me up.'

SAFA 'Just ignore them.'

AISHA 'People will walk all over you if you don't stand up for yourself.'

SAFA 'I can stand up for myself. Remember/ in...'

AISHA 'In/ first year when you had a go at Faiza for copying your essay. It don't count if you went and apologised later.'

SAFA 'How do you know that?'

AISHA 'I'll never understand why you need everyone to like you.'

SAFA 'I can't be like you, okay. Always looking for a fight.'

AISHA 'No. I just don't take shit.'

SAFA notices AISHA's scuffed trainers.

SAFA 'Owe you one.'

AISHA 'I ain't got the time to be climbing over walls for you. Your mum don't even say nothing to you.'

SAFA 'She'd keep calling to ask where I am.'

AISHA 'You know she's a worrier. Exactly like you are.'

SAFA 'She treats me like a baby.'

AISHA 'You literally ask her to feed you.'

SAFA 'Only when I'm tired!'

Beat.

'Our last moments of being students. Feels weird.'

AISHA 'Hm.'

SAFA 'Are you scared?'

AISHA 'About?'

SAFA 'Whatever's next.'

AISHA 'What's there to be scared of? You figure out what you want, and, you go for it.'

SAFA 'You know what I'm looking forward to the most? Being able to walk into a shop and buying stuff I want without stressing about money. And giving some to Mum and Dad. Contributing like you do.'

AISHA 'I only do a bit of shopping.'

SAFA 'I badly want that Marketing Associate job in central.'

AISHA 'You'll get it.'

SAFA 'Let's do something different for our birthdays' this year.
Go somewhere fancy in central.'

AISHA 'You're gonna turn into one of them posh twats, aren't you?'

SAFA 'Swear down you have to ruin every plan I make. Fine, we'll just go Dixy or some shit.'

AISHA 'Okay, man. Somewhere fancy in central then.'

SAFA 'Don't do me any favours.'

AISHA 'I can't win with you.'

Beat.

SAFA 'What do you think we'll be doing in ten years time?'

AISHA 'Why ten?'

SAFA 'Just. Random.'

AISHA 'I don't know. I don't like this game.'

SAFA 'I think we'll still be tight /and'

AISHA 'Why /wouldn't we be tight?'

SAFA 'I said we will be.'

AISHA 'Yeah, but why would that even be a thought?'

SAFA 'It's not, man. I just said it. I think we'll still be tight and hang out all the time and...well, not all the time... Shit! Thursdays won't be our day anymore!'

AISHA 'Why?'

SAFA 'Cos of work.'

AISHA 'We can take the day off.'

SAFA 'It's not uni.'

AISHA 'When we gonna hang out then?'

SAFA 'I know! We'll meet outside Upton Park in the mornings and go to work together. And then come home together in the evenings.'

AISHA 'Don't need to see that much of you.'

SAFA 'Well, you won't if you haven't sent your application off still?'

AISHA '...'

SAFA 'Aisha! Deadline's next week. Samina and all them lot applied ages ago. The scheme's only for Newham, so do you know how many people from ends will be applying? Practically half our year is. I'll come over tomorrow and help you.'

AISHA 'Nah, it's fine.'

SAFA 'I know you, you'll leave it 'til the last minute. When I come /over...'

AISHA 'I'm /not applying, Safa.'

Beat.

SAFA 'Why not?'

AISHA 'I want to be there for Dad the next few months.'

SAFA 'What d'you mean?'

AISHA '...'

SAFA 'Oh.'

AISHA 'I just need a chilled out job for a bit. I'll apply next year.'

SAFA 'What are you going to do then? Stay part-time at New Look?'

AISHA 'No.'

SAFA 'Then?'

Beat.

AISHA 'I'm gonna be a TA.'

SAFA 'TA? What's that?'

AISHA 'Teaching Assistant, you idiot.'

SAFA (*laughs*) 'You're gonna be a teacher?'

AISHA 'No, Assistant! You know my cousin, Tara? She said to apply for her class and help in the science department.'

SAFA 'Bitch, that's our old school.'

AISHA 'It's just temporary. I ain't gonna be there long.'

SAFA 'But... you're gonna be shit.'

AISHA 'What the fuck, man?'

SAFA 'What d'you want me to say? You're not exactly a people person. And you hated school.'

AISHA 'I'll be the cool one. The girl's will love me.'

SAFA 'Yeah, alright.'

AISHA 'Thanks for the support.'

Beat.

SAFA 'Your mum would've been proud.'

AISHA 'That's not why I'm doing it, okay.'

SAFA 'That's not what I... Okay, I'm sorry. I think you'll be crap, but I hope I'm wrong.'

AISHA 'Bitch.'

Beat.

SAFA 'Do you realise it's the first time we're gonna be doing different things?'

Beat.

'I'm gonna miss you, man. The jokes we have.'

AISHA 'Don't get emotional. You know I can't deal with that shit.'

SAFA 'Fine. Stupid cow.'

Beat.

AISHA She's an idiot. But I do love her.

SAFA Glued to each other, our teachers always said. But she's fine on her own.

Beat.

AISHA 'Evenings.'

SAFA 'What?'

AISHA 'We'll meet Thursday evenings. Every week.'

SAFA 'Yes! Dinner and sheesha?'

AISHA 'Whatever.'

SAFA 'Love you.'

AISHA 'Fuck off.'

Lights change.

SAFA Aisha drops me off home. When I get inside, my brother is sleeping and mum and dad are watching Geo TV.

Beat.

Mum's left dinner for me on the kitchen table. Doesn't matter what time I get home, she always does that.

AISHA Dad's sleeping, but like every night, he leaves a glass of milk for me on the counter. Like mum used to for him.

Beat.

Her picture sits on the mantelpiece. I've always hated having it there. I hardly ever look at it.

Beat.

I've never told him I hate milk.

Lights change.

Helping Tara teach secondary to me was supposed to be like, Dead Poet's Society. Or at least I could be the cool one, like Jack Black, finding talent for something or other. But I'm hardly past the school gates and already I can tell that these girls are absolute arseholes.

SAFA Woke up well early! Couldn't sleep 'cos of the excitement. I'm on the District Line and as we go past each stop, I notice how everything changes. From Upton Park, Plaistow, Mile End to Monument. The faces, the clothes, the way people talk. Even though it's English, it morphs from *ghetto* into the *Queen's English*. But one thing is the same. Everyone looks fucking miserable.

AISHA They're running around throwing water on each other! One splashes me on the arm and little shit doesn't even stop. Shouts, "sorry!" and legs it. I'm sure we weren't as bad as these lot.

Beat.

Well...

SAFA I love London. Always have. Ever since that first trip to the Science Museum in school. The buildings, travelling by tube, the rush. Even the tourists!

Beat.

I get my MP3 player out. Aisha's made me a sick playlist for my journey.

Garage blasts until it abruptly stops and a cheesy Bollywood song comes on. SAFA panics, quickly changes it, hoping no one on the train heard it.*

Stupid cow!

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AISHA Tara's showing me around the Science lab like I didn't spend five years in this school. Me and Safa used to sit in that corner over there.

She's on some next flex now saying all this will look good on my PGCE application. Tell her, 'I'm not doing a PGCE!' Saved by the bell as the kids start coming in.

I sit at the back of the class, notepad and pen ready.

That brat who threw the water on me walks in. Tries to hide behind her friend. But I seen her.

SAFA Kim, my boss, collects me from reception. We get the lift up and she's telling me about the scheme. Permanent job if I smash my review!

We get off at the fifteenth floor and the view is beautiful. All the people outside look like ants from up here.

AISHA The little brat's name is Sadia. I swear I ain't about to be wound up on my first day, but Tara ain't looking and she's jumped on my table, is leaning over me and changing the clock to get out of class early.

Beat.

I'm right here! But she thinks I'm invisible 'cos I'm not actually a teacher. Plenty of detentions if I decide to tell Tara. Just watch.

SAFA Kim takes me around the floor introducing everyone. I'm trying to remember names but all I can notice is how posh and that everyone speaks. Like the words are, like, long and tall.

(posh voice) "Welcome to the team, Safa."

I imagine their necks being as stiff as a giraffe's, that's the only way the words can come out like that.

AISHA The one place we were never allowed to go and today, I'm in the staff room, man! Tara's making me do a shit load of photocopying. I swear I didn't sign up to be her servant.

Beat.

Out of the window, I can see the bus stop where me and Safa used to wait when we'd bunk off. She hated bunking, but was so easy to convince her.

SAFA My desk is sick! I organise my pens in a straight line. Opposite me sits Tim. I'm trying to concentrate but I'm too distracted by him having a polite verbal dissing match with someone. The guy walks off and Tim just tuts. His version of giving the finger. I can't wait to tell Aisha!

AISHA Shit, Miss Crankshaw, my old form tutor. I hide my face but she sees me and comes over. She's telling Tara about all the dumb shit I used to do. I side step away and start stapling the photocopies. I'm counting down to the next class.

Never thought I'd say that.

SAFA I've spoken as little as possible the entire day. I'm scared I'm going to blurt something out like,

'Yeah, that was such a *bad* - as in good - episode wasn't it?'

Right now, Tim is cracking a joke about the CEO. The whole team's in fits and I'm about to put into practice what I've seen is the best response to a joke in the office. Instead of saying, 'that's sick', I say, 'That is brilliant!' My tallest voice, even though I don't understand what the fuck is so funny about someone choking on their Weetabix. But still. I'm well proud of myself. Innit.

Beat.

Oh, my god. An Asian person! We both notice each other!

AISHA I'm obviously not invisible anymore.

"Aisha. Aisha."

They pretend they're calling the Aisha sat in the front of the class. Idiots! Last bell rings and I run to get my arse home. These corridors are taking me back to school days. Weird being here without Safa though.

SAFA I pack up to go home. Helen is adding a new picture to her desk. Here, desks are decorated like they're bodies stamped

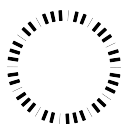
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