Acting Edition

How to Defend Yourself

by Liliana Padilla

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF was first developed at UC San Diego as part of the Wagner New Play Festival, May 2018. The production was directed by Kim Rubinstein. The set design was by Yi-Chien Lee, with lighting design by Minjoo Kim, sound design by Steven Leffue, costume design by Annie Le, dramaturgy by Gabe Greene, script consulting by Ali Viterbi, Dylan Key and Gina Maria Cioffi, and self-defense consulting by Phoebe Morris. The production was produced and mentored by head of playwriting Naomi Iizuka, and stage managed by Amber Dettmers. The cast was as follows:

DIANA . . . . . Fedra Ramirez
MOJDEH . . . . . Ariana Mahallati
NIKKI . . . . . Molly Adea
KARA . . . . . Mary Rose Branick
BRANDI . . . . . Andrea van den Boogard
EGGO . . . . . Trevor Rinzler
ANDY . . . . . Garrett Schulte

HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF received developmental support from the Ojai Playwrights Conference (Robert Egan, Artistic Director), directed by Danya Taymor and dramaturged by Sasha Emerson; and from Victory Gardens IGNITION Festival (Chay Yew, Artistic Director), directed by Marti Lyons.

HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF had co-world premieres in the 2019 Humana Festival for New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville and in 2020 at Victory Gardens Theatre. The Humana production was directed by Marti Lyons, with movement direction by Steph Paul, fight choreography by Drew Fracher, set design by Kimie Nishikawa, lighting design by Heather Gilbert, sound design by Luqman Brown, costume design by Dina El-Aziz, prop design by Heather Lindert, and dramaturgy by Jess Reese. The production was line produced and cast by Emily Tarquin, and the production stage manager was Jan Hubert. The cast was as follows:

DIANA . . . . . Gabriela Ortega
MOJDEH . . . . . Ariana Mahallati
NIKKI . . . . . Molly Adea
KARA . . . . . Abby Leigh Huffstetler
BRANDI . . . . . Anna Crivelli
EGGO . . . . . Jonathan Moisés Olivares
ANDY . . . . . David Ball
SUSANNAH . . . . . Phoenix Gilmore

At Victory Gardens Theater (Chay Yew, Artistic Director) *HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF* was directed by Marti Lyons, with movement direction by Steph Paul, fight choreography by Matt Hawkins, intimacy direction by Rachel Flesher, set design by Yu Shibagaki, lighting design by Paul Toben, sound design by Thomas Dixon, costume design by Christine Pascual, prop design by Bren Coombs, and dramaturgy by Kat Zukaitis. The production was line produced and cast by Kanomé Jones, and the production stage manager was Alison McLeod. The cast was as follows:

DIANA . . . . . Isa Arciniegas
MOJDEH . . . . . Ariana Mahallati
NIKKI . . . . . Andrea San Miguel
KARA . . . . . Netta Walker
BRANDI . . . . . Anna Crivelli
EGGO . . . . . Jayson Lee
ANDY . . . . . Ryan McBride
SUSANNAH . . . . . Janessa Wu

HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF had its New York premiere at New York Theatre Workshop, Winter 2023. The production was co-directed by Steph Paul, Rachel Chavkin, and Liliana Padilla. The Artistic Director was Patricia McGregor, with artistic development by Aaron Malkin and Rachel Silverman, company management by Yang-Yang Chen, producing by Evan O'Brient and Audra Labrosse, production management by Tinc Productions, press and production support by Matt Ross Public Relations. Lighting design was by Stacey Derosier, sound design by Mikhail Fiksel, costume design by Izumi Inaba, and set design by You-Shin Chen. Movement direction was by Steph Paul, fight choreography by Rocio Mendez, assistant fight choreography by Alex Might, vocal coaching by Dawn-Elin Fraser, intimacy coordination by Anne James, and associate intimacy by Chels Morgan. Associate direction was by Veronica Burt, assistant direction by Camille Hayes, and self-defense instruction from Rae and Bianca from CAE. The production stage manager was Katie Young, and the assistant stage manager was Molly Shea. The cast was as follows:

DIANA . . . . . Gabriela Ortega
MOJDEH . . . . . Ariana Mahallati
NIKKI . . . . . Amaya Braganza
KARA . . . . . Sarah Marie Rodriguez
BRANDI . . . . . Talia Ryder
EGGO . . . . . Jayson Lee
ANDY . . . . . Sebastian Delascasas
SUSANNAH . . . . . Teagan Meredith

CHARACTERS

DIANA – Eighteen, Mexican-American, She/Her/Hers. Obsessed with guns. Never afraid to go first. Her tough exterior protects tender insides – she loves confrontation except when she's the one who's made a mistake.

MOJDEH – Eighteen, Iranian-American, She/Her/Hers. Just got to college and is trying on new selves. Desperate to lose her virginity and get into a sorority. She will do anything to be wanted. Observes others to know what's cool.

NIKKI – Twenty, person of color, She/Her/Hers. Wallflower with a vivid inner world. She's quiet and clocks everything. Over the course of the class, she begins to find her strength and her boldness catapults her to danger.

BRANDI – Twenty-one, White, She/Her/Hers. VP of the sorority and valedictorian of everything. She got a black belt in karate to make sure she never feels vulnerable again. She wants to make everyone safe.

KARA – Twenty-one, person of color, She/Her/Hers. Social chair of the sorority. Susannah's best friend. Her humor and cool are so effortless and laser-sharp that you just might believe her when she says she doesn't care.

ANDY – Twenty-one, White, He/Him/His. Varsity athlete and leader in his fraternity. Earnestly eager to end rape culture and unpack the man box. He tries to use the right words and be sensitive to others, he really tries.

EGGO – Twenty, person of color, He/Him/His. Can't wait to not be twenty anymore. He's pretty confused by all the rules and terrified of rejection. He joined the frat to have friends, they're okay – it's nice to have a group.

SUSANNAH – Six, person of color, She/Her/Hers, a young child who makes a wish.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

/ indicates an interruption, when this line appears, the next character begins speaking.

In choral scenes, featured text that we are meant to hear is in **bold**.

[ ] indicates language that is gestured, but not spoken.

THANKS

Thank you to all the artists, theatre communities and audiences who have supported this play and me.

Kim Rubinstein, thank you for teaching me to stand on the bones of my feet and open in ways I didn't know were possible. Dylan Key, thank you for your close reading and brilliant, loving feedback and support as this play found its life. Mom and Dad, thank you for always supporting my curiosity, voice, and dissent. Thank you to my friends who saw me through the many shapes this journey took.

Steph Paul, thank you for bringing so much life, joy, honesty, and beauty to this process and all the spaces you're in. Rachel Chavkin, thank you for your tenderness, ferocity, and deep attention. Marti Lyons, thank you for helping me find the ending again. Dawn-Elin Fraser, thank you for helping me see/feel/hear my own voice anew. Naomi Iizuka, thank you for your powerful mentorship and pushing me to write from my gut.

To all the incredible actors who have embodied these roles, thank you for bringing yourselves to the work and making it better, fuller, more dimensional, more inspired. Thank you for your questions and love.

Thank you to the designers, fight choreographers, intimacy choreographers, coaches, and self-defense instructors who helped us dream, speak, and be more vividly in our bodies. Thank you stage managers, assistant directors, and producers for grounding us and helping us make it real. Matt Ross, thank you for sharing your imagination, enthusiasm, and faith. Thank you Patricia McGregor and Chay Yew for your leadership. Thank you Kevin Lin and Michael Finkle for stewarding this work.

Thank you to the staff and communities of New York Theatre Workshop, Humana Festival, Victory Gardens, and UCSD for your incredible talents and efforts in supporting this play and bringing it to the world.

Thank you Reader, for being here.

Scene One

*(**MOJDEH** and **DIANA** enter the gym. It's empty. **DIANA** is mid-story –)*

DIANA. A gun

MOJDEH. A gun?

DIANA. Like an m-16 m-14 / m-something

MOJDEH. Machine gun?

DIANA. looked like one

I've never seen one in real life but it looked like one

she disarms him and I mean /

he had a fucking gun

MOJDEH. This class?

DIANA. This *technique*

MOJDEH. Whoa.

DIANA. tiny white girl

tiny hands, tiny

BAM. disarmed him.

BAM. her hand at his throat.

BAM. probably could have killed him.

BAM. she makes him her bitch.

I think I'm more powerful than I think I am. You know?

MOJDEH. Was that on the news? The actual news?

DIANA. Linked on that invite from Zeta Chi you sent me.

So Good

To have hard skills.

Mexican women have like hella hard skills

Americans have none.

In Juarez, we had to work on like

like not getting kidnapped

and like

speaking in code

because

MOJDEH. You were four

DIANA. I remember it completely

MOJDEH. Uh huh

DIANA. In my bones

My Mom – total warrior

Warrior spy

Totally focused on like

protecting our family

our community and and we get here and here she's like

buying shit on Amazon and reading op-eds

and sitting on her ass

Complacent as fuck!

I mean, I mean your mom was a LITERAL REBEL

MOJDEH. Well –

DIANA. That shit is *crazy*

Total whiplash to be here

In this in this fiction of safety

But still – still

You gotta be prepared cuz you DO NOT KNOW

If someone's gonna mug you or like gun you down or like…

(She inhales, thinks: rape you.)

Yeah

(She swallows.)

Is that girl still in the hospital?

MOJDEH. Susannah?

DIANA. Yeah, Susannah

MOJDEH. I don't know

DIANA. Every time I'm in a parking lot I'm like

check the corner check the corner check the corner

I went to that Billie Eilish concert and the security bitch confiscated my mace

and I was like really? really that's safer?

GLOBALLY?

that's safer?

you're afraid I'm gonna hurt someone?

I weigh like one hundred and seventeen pounds,

*(***MOJDEH** *smirks.)*

like one hundred and twenty, like, sometimes one twenty-three, four

but I was on my period

like

I am tiny

DIANA. you should not take my mace

you take my mace

you vulnerabilize me even more

so basically if something happens to me

that's blood on your hands

literally

...

literally.

(Beat.)

MOJDEH. People are just commenting on Susannah's pictures like "get well soon" and "praying for you."

DIANA. It's so weird how you stalk all the Zeta Chi girls.

MOJDEH. It's research. It's how I found out about this class.

*(***MOJDEH** *gets lost in her phone.)*

DIANA. And thank you very much.

I wanna get abs by my nineteenth. You think that's possible?

MOJDEH. Not if we keep eating cupcakes.

DIANA. *(Beat. Then, re: Mojdeh's phone.)* You're addicted, dude.

(Beat.)

Anyone on there?

MOJDEH. Lots of options, lots of options.

DIANA. Anyone good?

*(***DIANA** *walks over to look at* **MOJDEH** *swiping on her phone.)*

Which one is he?

MOJDEH. Polo.

DIANA. There's like ten guys in polos.

MOJDEH. Tall one

DIANA. Weird teeth.

(Swipes next.)

MOJDEH. Aw, baby goat!

DIANA. I bet he's met like one goat. For THIS PHOTO.

MOJDEH. He's cute!

DIANA. He looks like a cannibal.

(Swipes.)

Golf? Automatic no. Next.

(Swipes.)

Oh this guy wants you know he loves his Mom!

MOJDEH. I think that's his girlfriend.

DIANA. That's his Mom.

…

WOW.

MOJDEH. What?

DIANA. Looking for a nice girl to play with? Seriously?

MOJDEH. / I am a nice girl to play with

DIANA. Ew

*(***DIANA** *throws Mojdeh's phone away.)*

MOJDEH. Hey!

DIANA. It's fine!

*(**DIANA** gets up, starts throwing warmup punches. **MOJDEH** stands.)*

MOJDEH. You got anyone better?

DIANA. You're going out with that guy, right? from –?

*(**MOJDEH** joins **DIANA**, they shadowbox throughout the following.)*

MOJDEH. Bio. James Preston.

DIANA. *(As a cartoony James.)* Ooo shit "I'll show you biology."

*(**MOJDEH** laughs.)*

When?

MOJDEH. Wednesday – tomorrow!

DIANA. Hump day

MOJDEH. Aaaaaa!

DIANA. Aaaaaaa!

MOJDEH. Aaaaaa I'm so nervous.

DIANA. It's just a date.

MOJDEH. Yeah well –

DIANA. Ooo

MOJDEH. Maybe

DIANA. *(Playing the hypewoman.)* My girl's gonna get her cherry POPPED!

MOJDEH. D! Sh!

DIANA. See, inside you there's a little cherry.

A maraschino

And your partner puts in his dick and it just pp

(She gestures popping. **MOJDEH** *falls to the ground.)*

MOJDEH. You are such an asshole.

*(***DIANA** *approaches her, a playful straddle.)*

DIANA. You're gonna geeeet it –

MOJDEH. I don't / know

DIANA. *(Sex noises.)* Uh uh uh uh uh uh James uh uh Jaaaaames

MOJDEH. He is –

(So fine.)

An Adonis.

DIANA. Aaaaaaa!

MOJDEH. Yeah!

DIANA. Aaaaaa!

MOJDEH. Yeah!!!

*(***DIANA** *spots a zit on* **MOJDEH***'s chin.)*

DIANA. Yo, stay still.

You've got a massive zit.

(She picks at the zit. **MOJDEH** *shadowboxes out the pain.)*

MOJDEH. If we get in

DIANA. *When*

MOJDEH. *(Pain.)* Oh fuck

DIANA. Stay still

MOJDEH. *(Fine.)* And live in Zeta Chi

(Pain.)

MOJDEH. I promise –

Oh Sweet Lord

DIANA. Got it.

(**DIANA** *shows her yield.)*

MOJDEH. Oh fuck that's a good one.

DIANA. I know.

MOJDEH. I promise to help you become, like...the best version of yourself.

DIANA. *(Touched and a little embarrassed.)* Oh, Mojz. Same.

(**DIANA** *licks her finger, dabs saliva on* **MOJDEH***'s wound.)*

MOJDEH. My cousin Sanaz was a Zeta Chi. Do you remember Sanaz?

DIANA. The bitch who taught us drinking water made you full?

MOJDEH. That was a long time ago. She's an architect now, who is married to a lawyer. Who is HOT. Anyway. One Halloween she said she and her sister – not bio sister – sorority sister

DIANA. I gotchu

MOJDEH. Went to Taco Bell and ordered a chalupa and a soft taco supreme each / and like

DIANA. I thought she was anorexic

MOJDEH. It's complicated. Anyway through the magic of the Taco Bell Gods, they received two dozen of each. Suddenly they've got all this friggin' Taco Bell and they go home and they ring the all call –

DIANA. What's an all call?

MOJDEH. Like a system

Like a bell?

I don't know

They can all talk to each other

And they say that they've got a fuckton of Taco Bell

And they spread it in their room like a picnic

And drunk girls pour in and sit on the floor and chow down

Sanaz said some girl started crying because she was lactose intolerant

Sanaz said it was her best Halloween ever.

DIANA. That's gonna be US!!!!

MOJDEH. I dunno. One in ten girls get in.

DIANA. Girl, we're at least ninetieth percentile. At least.

Gimme them cinnamon twisty things

MOJDEH. What?

DIANA. From Taco Bell, those, those cinnamon –

*(***BRANDI** *and* **KARA** *enter.)*

BRANDI. Oh.

Hi!

(To **KARA**.*)* Is this the right room?

KARA. North Gym Room Two. This is North Gym Room… Two.

BRANDI. *(Just to* **KARA**.*)* What time is it?

KARA. 4:59.

BRANDI. Yeah, okay, huh.

KARA. Twenty-two yesses and eight maybes. It was last-minute, so.

BRANDI. Uh huh.

KARA. And most of the girls are probably at Polish Week.

BRANDI. People really don't give a fuck, do they? I'm glad we're doing this.

KARA. Me too.

(**BRANDI** *pivots to* **DIANA** *and* **MOJDEH**.)

BRANDI. Hi warrior princesses!

DIANA. Hi!

MOJDEH. I'm so glad you're doing this

So important

I've always wanted to take self-defense

(**DIANA** *clocks this: what?)*

BRANDI. Hell yes

MOJDEH. I can't believe you have a black belt

I youtubed you. Ha

BRANDI. I've just been training for a while – anyone can do it. Everyone should, honestly.

MOJDEH. True. So true.

(Beat.)

BRANDI. Intros are first. Hello hello, I'm Brandi Jones. I'm here because I love Susannah very much and I have a black belt.

(Gesturing to **MOJDEH**.)

MOJDEH. Oh. Mojdeh. Mojdeh Ebrahimi. I am so thrilled to learn from you and also rush Zeta Chi. Diana's rushing too.

(**DIANA** *does a little wave.)*

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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