

Acting Edition

Hit Machine

by Jonathan Caren

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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NOTE

This edition reflects a rehearsal draft of the script and may differ from the final production.

HIT MACHINE was originally produced by Spiral Stairs Entertainment in association with Soho Theatre, Juliet Berman and Kater Gordon, and was first performed at Soho Theatre on 8 July 2026. The cast and creative team were as follows:

WESJosh Radnor
ALEXNoah Galvin
DEFY THE LEADERKhalil Madovi

Playwright.....Jonathan Caren
Director.....Daniel Bailey
Set and Costume Designer.....Amelia Jane Hankin
Composers.....Ben Harper and CJ Harper
Lighting DesignerLaura Howard
Sound DesignerKhalil Madovi
Dramaturg.....Anna O’Donoghue
Producers.....Juliet Berman and Kater Gordon
Production Stage Manager.....Brent Sennett

CHARACTERS

WES – a music mogul

ALEX – his brother

DEFY – an artist

SETTING

a mansion, Bel Air,
and
a childhood bedroom
and
a stadium

TIME

today
and
twenty years ago

NOTES ON STYLE

If a thought changes course in dialogue, it is delineated by appearing on the following line.

This does not indicate a pause or break in speech or dialogue. The language should still flow.

A “/” indicates an overlap in dialogue.

“Methinks you are my glass, and not my brother.”

– *The Comedy of Errors*

PART 1

(In darkness: the rhythmic sound of a record player merges with the sounds of a house being torn apart. Adult voices overlapping. Glass breaks. Nobody is listening, and nothing can stop them. It morphs into a hip-hop beat. We hear two kids with concern: "What should we do, should we go down there?" Then: "Make a song with me.")

(All music cuts out, and we're left in pristine silence on -)

(ALEX, in his brother's estate. A backpack and an electronic keyboard in a case sit by his feet. Expensive art and some platinum records line the walls.)

(He's waiting for WESLEY to finish texting, dressed in "quiet luxury." Beyond the windows is a sprawling yard, so perfectly groomed it's as if nothing has ever touched it.)

(Interrupting the silence is the whirl of a leaf blower somewhere on the property. Then -)

ALEX. You have a *urinal*.

WES. ...Yeah.

ALEX. The producer put it there?

WES. It was his Oscar house. He used it for throwing parties.

ALEX. This is insane, Wes.

WES. One second.

(WES continues to text.)

ALEX. How many bedrooms?

(He doesn't answer for a moment.)

WES. Eight.

ALEX. *(Sarcastic, under breath.)* Just eight bedrooms?

WES. Nine...if you count the guest house.

ALEX. *HOW ARE YOU THIS FUCKING RICH!?!*

WES. Calm down.

ALEX. Do you have a billion dollars?

WES. No.

ALEX. Half a billion. A quarter bil?

WES. *(Slightly smiling.)* I work hard.

ALEX. A lot of people work hard. They don't live here.
(Ribbing.) Do you have a higher net worth than Samoa?

WES. OK.

ALEX. Can you point to it
on a map?

*(WES tweaks ALEX's nipple and puts a hand
on his shoulder. He recoils.)*

WES. Yeah, it's right here. **ALEX.** No. You don't have my
That's Samoa. consent.

WES. Relax.

ALEX. I'm starving.

WES. Get some food.

(Smelling him.) Take a shower.

ALEX. Your housekeeper offered to make me a quesadilla.

WES. Let Lupe make you a quesadilla.

ALEX. No no no. I can't do that.

WES. Why not?

ALEX. It's like against my religion.

WES. OK. Then, how about you make her a quesadilla?

ALEX. I thought we were having dinner.

WES. I can't tonight.

ALEX. (*Disappointed.*) Why not?

WES. Something came up with one of my artists.

ALEX. One of your artists.

WES. I gotta get to the studio.

(**ALEX** is hurt but covers well.)

ALEX. Yeah, no, do what you have to do.

WES. Thank you for understanding.

ALEX. It's not like I haven't seen you since *Christmas*.

WES. You're welcome for the iPad, by the way.

ALEX. A Christmas in which you spent the whole night on your phone.

WES. Didn't you say you have a meeting?

ALEX. That's tomorrow.

WES. What's it for?

ALEX. Doesn't matter. Nothing good is going to come from it. Nothing ever does.

WES. OK... So meet me after your totally useless and unnecessary meeting.

ALEX. Oh, so you *do* want to see me.

WES. Yes, Alex. I want to see you. Let's try to have a good time.

ALEX. How do we do that when you're in the studio with your artist?

WES. We have the whole house to ourselves. Tomorrow, after your meeting, let's play some tennis. I'll clear the day.

ALEX. *Clear* the day.

WES. That's what I said.

(ALEX grips his shoulder, uncomfortable.)

ALEX. Why do we have the house to ourselves? Where's your family?

WES. Jasper's on a school trip to Yosemite. Gracie took Gemma with her to Seoul to see her Harabeoji. *(Clarifying.)* Her grandfather.

ALEX. Guess I'm having dinner with *Lupe*.

WES. Did you eat on the plane?

ALEX. Cheez-Its.

WES. *(Very serious.)* No. Don't eat Cheez-Its.

ALEX. Why? What's wrong with Cheez-Its?

WES. Those are dead calories.

ALEX. For some reason, the flight attendant didn't have those lettuce heads with the roots attached.

WES. I don't make the rules. It's a known fact that eating fresh and alive food is the best thing we can do for our bodies.

ALEX. Oh, so I should eat the living?

WES. One second.

(A phone buzzes. WES immediately turns his attention away from ALEX, who "fake-texts.")

ALEX. (*Mocking.*) One second. It's Post Malone.

Real food is alive. Eat some human flesh.

WES. (*Pleading.*) Call your girlfriend.

(*Correcting himself.*) Fiancée.

ALEX. (*In disbelief.*) Wes. We called off the engagement.

WES. You did?

ALEX. (*Confused.*) We texted about this.

WES. (*Trying to remember her name.*) You and... / Clara?

ALEX. Clara. We had a whole text exchange.

WES. You said you got a dog.

(**ALEX** digs through his phone.)

ALEX. After that. C'mon, man. You responded. Here. Look.
I have it on my phone. I say: "*Engagement over, bro.*"
And you say: "*Whoa. Period. Awful.*" Did you even
write that? Or was that like some sort of assistant bot
person? It was! Look at you. You're smiling.

WES. Didn't you just move in together?

ALEX. Two months ago. I gave up my place, so I have to
find another one when I get back... If I go back...

WES. (*Concerned.*) You might – stay *here*?

ALEX. You've got the bedrooms.

WES. You can't stay here, Alex.

ALEX. You're *still* mad about the marshmallows.

WES. Gracie told you not
to give Gemma any
marshmallows. Stop.
She got a cavity. Stop.
I don't want to fight.

ALEX. I'm not the reason
your kids have cavities.
I love your kids. The
marshmallow came from
a place of love.

WES. Why'd you call off the engagement?

ALEX. I didn't.

WES. What happened?

ALEX. She left me.

WES. What did you do?

ALEX. Why do you assume I did something wrong?

(**WES** tries to "be there.")

WES. That sounds hard.

ALEX. Don't do that. Don't pretend to care.

WES. OK. So. What happens to the dog?

ALEX. Cara is like straight-up *nuts*. She has like so much anxiety, and now with the breakup, she like never wants to leave the house. It's gotten so bad, I had to put her on Prozac.

WES. You put your ex on Prozac?

ALEX. Cara is my *dog*, man. Clara is my ex.

WES. Who names their dog Cara when their fiancée's name is fucking Clara.

ALEX. Fucking Clara does.

WES. OK. I gotta go.

ALEX. Wes.

WES. Enjoy the house. Let Lupe make you a quesadilla.

ALEX. Mom needs help.

(**WES** pauses, then texts.)

Dad stopped paying her alimony. She can't cover her mortgage.

WES. Mmmm.

ALEX. Have you talked to him?

(WES doesn't answer.)

Put away your phone.

WES. If Mom needs help, she can ask me herself.

ALEX. I don't think she can do that.

WES. Why not?

ALEX. Because she's afraid of you.

WES. She should have let go of that house twenty years ago.

ALEX. *You don't want to help Mom.*

WES. Never mix. Money and family.

ALEX. Wow.

WES. It only causes problems.

ALEX. Fine. It's not Mom. It's me.

WES. You need money?

ALEX. I want to keep the house.

WES. I don't want to get involved.

ALEX. It's as much yours
as it is mine.

WES. Don't ask me that
again.

WES. And by the way – don't get a dog if you aren't ready to handle the responsibility.

ALEX. Wow. Thank you for the advice that I did not solicit from you whatsoever.

WES. Did you come here to ask for money?

ALEX. No. Absolutely not.

WES. Are you sure about that?

ALEX. I came to see my brother, *whom* I love and respect with all my heart.

(ALEX takes his keyboard out of the case. He plays a few notes.)

LOVE AND RESPECT WITH ALL MY HEART
LOVE AND RESPECT WITH ALL MY HEART
TAKE THIS LOVE TO THE TOP OF THE CHARTS
PUT IT IN YOUR SHOPPING CART
I'LL BUY YOUR LOVE TO SELL MY ART
LOVE AND RESPECT WITH ALL MY HEART

(WES claps.)

WES. Bravo.

ALEX. *(Bowing.)* Thank you.

(Sincere.) I thought that was pretty good.

WES. It's nice to see you believing in yourself.

ALEX. That could be a hit.

WES. OK. Now you're believing in yourself a little too much.

(ALEX turns to a paper lamp.)

ALEX. *(A little too aggressive.)* Cool lamp, bro.

WES. That's a Caldwell-Jones.

ALEX. A Caldwell-Jones.

WES. It's Gracie's favorite artist.

ALEX. You know who would love that lamp? *Mom!*

WES. She'd probably put it in the garage with all her paintings.

ALEX. Or sell it on eBay. She could make like fifteen mortgage payments with that thing.

(**ALEX** touches the lamp.)

WES. Bro. Don't mess with my lamp.

ALEX. You good, Wes?

WES. I'm great, man. Kids are great. I love the house.

ALEX. It's just... Last time you called me, like *actually* called me on the phone – you weren't exactly doing so hot...

(**WES** looks down, uncomfortable.)

...next thing I know, you buy this crazy house.

WES. You're blowing it out of proportion.

ALEX. You couldn't get out of your car. Couldn't breathe.

WES. Uh huh.

ALEX. How many more plaques do you need on your walls?

WES. I lost the biggest artist on our label. I thought I was about to lose my job.

ALEX. I thought I was about to lose my brother.

WES. I hadn't had a hit in two years.

ALEX. So then why go out and buy a house like this?

WES. Like attracts like. Project success? Attract success.

ALEX. That sounds like a not-so-good idea.

WES. Alex, guys my age, once they think you've lost touch, you're done. I see them at dinner parties talking about wineries, their pet-grooming start-ups, marriages hanging by a thread. But thankfully, that's not going to happen to me.

ALEX. Because you're finally seeing a therapist?

WES. I signed a new artist. He's about to change everything.

ALEX. (*Jealous.*) Who?

WES. Heard of Defy?

ALEX. *Defy The Leader?*

(Then.)

You signed Defy The Leader? This guy?

(ALEX pulls up a track on his phone and plays Defy The Leader's sound.)

DEFY. *(From phone.)*

TRY TO STEP, AND YOU'LL FIND OUT, FIND OUT,

YA FEEL ME?

STEP TO THE PLATE, OOH, THAT'S A GRAND SLAM,

FEEL ME? FEEL ME?

(ALEX turns it off.)

WES. The Brooklyn music snob approves.

ALEX. I'm obsessed. I mean, he intimidates me.

WES. You can't take your eyes off him.

ALEX. He's like Durk meets Chance when Chance was good! And, he can sing.

WES. He's so talented.

ALEX. No wonder you bought Chateau Nervous Breakdown.

WES. We're trying to launch his next single...but it's complicated.

ALEX. This is why you can't have dinner?

WES. There's a video going around of him beefing with a rapper named NewWorld.

ALEX. Okay.

WES. Here, google "Defy" and "pretzel."

(ALEX searches for the video.)

ALEX. Why “pretzel”?

WES. They’re hanging outside a Wetzel’s Pretzel. Defy’s just sipping a lemonade when this guy NewWorld tries to step up to him.

ALEX. (*Watching.*) Okay. That’s the biggest lemonade I’ve ever seen.

WES. You can’t really hear what he’s saying cause everyone is yelling.

ALEX. Who’s that in the pink hat?

WES. Royce XL’s his money manager.

ALEX. Oh shit. Defy punched him.

WES. Security tries to break it up. And then...

ALEX. He *ate* his pretzel?

WES. He ate his pretzel. Well, the other guy wasn’t going to eat it.

ALEX. Damn.

WES. Someone pulled a gun. Police are involved. It’s a whole situation.

ALEX. That’s messed up.

WES. Whenever someone gets successful, everyone else either wants to ride the wave or watch it crash.

ALEX. I mean it’s a little messed up, like – to like assault someone.

WES. We don’t know what he said to provoke it.

ALEX. Is the guy hurt?

WES. It was one hit.

ALEX. One hit can hurt.

WES. It’s generating a lot of buzz. Defy’s streams are through the roof.

ALEX. So technically, your label is *profiting* off an assault.

WES. OK. You don't understand.

ALEX. Of course I do. How will you ever afford all the koi in your koi pond?

WES. I like this guy. I believe in his talent.

ALEX. Nice to see you believing in someone.

WES. I don't care who hit who. All that matters is what we do next. This is a make-or-break moment for his career.

ALEX. Could he go to jail?

WES. He could. Which is why we have to get this single out / like yesterday.

ALEX. (*Finishing sentence.*) Like yesterday.

(**ALEX** pulls out a laptop and starts building a beat loop. Music plays throughout.)

Defy can do anything. That's what I love about him.
You can't put him in a box.

WES. Can you stop that?

ALEX. I'm just trying something out here.

WES. (*Sharp, changing the subject.*) How are YOU, Alex?

ALEX. I dunno. Clara ended our engagement. I have this rash on my left thigh.

WES. What happened?

ALEX. I've been sleeping on Rishi's couch, and it's super scratchy.

WES. With Clara.

ALEX. I'm so into this beat.

WES. I asked you a question.

ALEX.

MAKE MONEY, MAKE MONEY, MAKE MONEY, MAKE SENSE.
MAKE MONEY, MAKE MONEY, MAKE MONEY, MAKE SENSE.
MAKE MONEY, MAKE SENSE.

WES. Can you just...stop?

ALEX. Work with me.

HE'S HARD TO REACH SYMPATHY THROUGH TYRANNY
IS ALL HE TEACHES - TO PRACTICE IT BEFORE YOU
PREACH

HE'S TELLING ME AND EVERYONE, "TO EACH HIS OWN"
I DON'T BELIEVE IT.

MY POPPA SAID "YOU'RE BETTER OFF WITHOUT ME, BOY
SO BEND THE KNEE." BUT I WAS BORN TO SHINE
AND STAND SO HEAVELY.

AND I KNOW IT'S BLEAK WHEN I TURN MY CHEEK
IT'S THAT SIDE OF ME THAT DOESN'T BELIEVE IN
SYMPATHY.

*(Music cuts out. It is legitimately good. Even
WES feels it, but tempers it.)*

WES. You just came up with that?

ALEX. You like it?

WES. It's earnest.

ALEX. Adele is earnest.

WES. Is Adele what you're going for?

ALEX. I'm just messing around with something - you know -
for your artist.

(WES shakes his head.)

Let me help you write a track for Defy.

WES. I don't want any problems.

ALEX. We'll do it together.

WES. We have our lanes.

ALEX. No, you have a highway. I have a one-pedal rickshaw heading for a sinkhole.

WES. You don't know how to collaborate.

ALEX. Because. I'm like so good at what I do!

WES. Last time I had you in the studio / it was a shit show.

ALEX. I wrote you *Vertigo*.

WES. Part of *Vertigo*.

ALEX. You used my hook, not that I got any credit.

WES. You hated the final product and said you wanted nothing to do with it.

ALEX. That sound engineer was such a dick.

WES. OK.

ALEX. He told people I was only there because I was your brother.

(Beat.)

Which was true, but still – *don't say it*.

WES. Alex, you *hate* the mainstream.

ALEX. That's not true. I love Tracy Chapman.

(Making a pitch, ALEX sings the first line of "Fast Car")

WES. You have literally *shit* on almost every artist I have ever released.

ALEX. Man, I'm done with all that.

WES. Yeah?

ALEX. I want to sell out. I just don't know *how*.

WES. I don't believe you.

(**WES** is busy texting.)

ALEX. I *used* to want my music to be transporrive.

Now, I just want to like pay my rent and survive the apocalypse.

WES. Hold on.

ALEX. Put down your phone. I'm going to eat your phone.

(**WES** turns, startled by **ALEX**'s command.)

Let me help you write a track for Defy. You don't even have to pay me for it.

(Then.)

Just help mom.

WES. So, you don't need money.

ALEX. (*Bluffing.*) I'm good.

WES. So what's this meeting about then, huh?

(**ALEX** hesitates, a little insecure.)

ALEX. Damien shared some of my solo stuff with his manager and...she said she wants to hear more.

WES. Alex, that's a big deal.

ALEX. Is it?

WES. Why didn't you tell me?

ALEX. I didn't want you to think that's like the *only* reason I came out here...

WES. Of course not.

ALEX. I also came here to see you.

WES. This is what you've been waiting for.

ALEX. I know.

WES. Don't fuck this up.

ALEX. OK. Too much pressure.

WES. Just – get a good night's sleep. Eat something. Come prepared.

ALEX. I don't know if I have anything yet that's like commercially viable. Which is why when you said you needed something, it just got me thinking, like, maybe I don't know, you and me...

(Then.)

We could try to cook something up. You know. Like we used to.

(WES types.)

I swear to God, Wes. Keep ignoring me, and I'm going to light your house on fire.

(WES puts away his phone.)

WES. Is it Rachel Davilla at Iron Res?

ALEX. Are you reading my emails?

WES. I know who Damien would send you to.

ALEX. I need this, Wes.

(A beat.)

WES. I'll see what I can do.

ALEX. Thank you.

WES. ...I'll see what I can do.

(ALEX hesitates, wracked with self-doubt.)

ALEX. But only do this for me if you think I have the talent.

WES. Sure.

ALEX. Your whole job is to evaluate talent.

WES. I'm not always right.

ALEX. You run a record label.

WES. I passed on Ed Sheeran.

(A huge sigh.)

I passed on Ed Sheeran.

ALEX. No.

WES. Don't ever tell anyone that.

(ALEX sings a lyric from an Ed Sheeran song.)

(WES literally holds ALEX's mouth shut.)

Alex, talent has never been your issue.

ALEX. What's my issue? I'm asking you. Sincerely.

WES. You're too emotional.

ALEX. That's it?

WES. You get these opportunities, but then you end up shooting yourself in the foot.

ALEX. I've just never had the right collaborator.

WES. What about Jae5?

ALEX. No, no, no. Don't bring up Jae5 / Please. I'm begging you.

WES. The top UK producer wants to produce your album.

ALEX. *(Blocking his ears.)* Stop. / Stop it. Na na na na na na na.

WES. He invites you to London, puts you up at The Savoy, and says, *"I want to make a pop album with you."* And you say, *"Nah, I'm thinking gospel."*

(WES laughs.)

ALEX. I fucking love gospel, bro.

WES. You're *not* gospel.

ALEX. I have *a little* gospel in me. A little.

WES. You have *zero* gospel. You're like *negative* gospel.

ALEX. I tried to do what he said, but it wasn't working.

WES. He told me you locked yourself in the bathroom.

ALEX. (*Ashamed.*) I know. I crashed out.

WES. Honestly, I think you scared him.

ALEX. I was so in my head. And the more I listened to his ideas, the worse I sounded.

WES. Did he say that?

ALEX. No. But I could feel it. I got so mad at myself for not trusting my instincts.

WES. You are not your feelings. You need to learn how to separate the two.

(**ALEX** bows. **WES** stifles his anger.)

ALEX. Thank you, Sensei. Where'd you get that? *The Art of War*?

WES. All you do is make fun of me, Alex.

ALEX. Yeah, but... It's like the one thing I'm good at. And *Gospel*.

WES. It's cool. I can take the hits.

ALEX. So nothing bothers you.

WES. Keep 'em coming.

ALEX. Remember when you were first starting to make beats?

WES. OK. OK. OK. OK.

ALEX. I still have the tape of you rapping in the alley...

WES. Don't you dare... Never show those to anyone.

ALEX. *(More taunting, making a voice.)*

YO, MY NAME IS WESLEY WES.

THIS IS A MIC CHECK. I'M DA BESS.

WEST COAST IS THE BEST COAST

I RHYME LIKE BUTTER ON -

WES. FRENCH TOAST

ALEX. FRENCH TOAST

ALEX. What about our song?

(ALEX performs a beatbox to start the beat.)

(More taunting, making a voice.)

YO, YO THEY DON'T KNOW

WHAT I KNOW.

BUT KNOWING TOO MUCH IS A

CURSE AND A ...

(WES picks up a call.)

WES. *(On the phone.)* Yo. **ALEX.** Blow.

WES. How is he? What do you mean? Why? OK. When?
Whatever he wants. OK. OK. Yeah. My place. OK.
Peace.

*(WES hangs up the phone. He looks concerned,
a quiet panic arises in him.)*

ALEX. What's up? What happened?

WES. Defy left the studio.

ALEX. Why?

WES. I don't know.

(Nervous.) He says he needs to talk to me.

ALEX. About what?

WES. I don't know.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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