

Acting Edition

Exotic Deadly: Or the MSG Play

by Keiko Green

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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EXOTIC DEADLY: OR THE MSG PLAY received its world premiere on April 13, 2023, at The Old Globe (Barry Edelstein, Erna Finci Viterbi Artistic Director; Timothy J. Shields, Audrey S. Geisel Managing Director) in San Diego, California. The production was directed by Jesca Prudencio, with scenic design by Yu Shibagaki, costume design by Hahnji Jang, lighting design by Cha See, and sound design by Fan Zhang. The production stage manager was Chandra R. M. Anthenill. The cast was as follows:

ACTOR 1 (AMI)	Anna Mikami
ACTOR 2 (EXOTIC DEADLY)	Eunice Bae
ACTOR 3	Trevor Salter
ACTOR 4	Amy Kim Waschke
ACTOR 5	Michelangelo Hyeon
ACTOR 6	James Seol

EXOTIC DEADLY: OR THE MSG PLAY was developed with support from the O'Neill Theatre Center's National Playwrights Conference, Atlantic Theatre Company, UC Santa Barbara's Launch Pad, UC San Diego, and Chance Theatre.

CHARACTERS

Casting note: All actors should identify as Asian/Asian-American. The specifics of “what kind of Asian” or “how much Asian” are not super important. The pressures of the model minority myth and the outlawing/disgust towards Asian foods by Western culture affects all people of Asian descent. You can break up roles differently, but here is a suggestion:

ACTOR 1 – Female. 20s.

Plays: **AMI**, an awkward, fourteen-year-old over-sharer with ADHD who just wants to stay invisible. Lots of energy. This is her story until the story takes over. Until then, she’s a manic Zach Morris on the brink of a dark identity crisis. She doesn’t really identify with the Asian culture that is literally pumping through her veins. Loves her family, hates her family.

ACTOR 2 – Female. 20s–30s.

Plays: **EXOTIC DEADLY**, a timeless (yet youthful) rebel. Unpredictable. The embodiment of MSG. Like a chestnut, she’s prickly, yet surprisingly sweet. But years of being misunderstood takes its toll. She used to be something else. Then something else and something else. What does authenticity even look like anymore?

ACTOR 3 – Male. 20s–30s. He represents family: our ancestors, our brothers. The flawed, surprisingly sensitive sweetheart. His eyes are warm, even as he teases you. The first to laugh at the joke at his own expense, even when the other guy goes too far. He’ll be a great dad one day.

Plays: **OJICHAN/JAPANESE SCIENTIST, KENJI, SEXY DOCTOR, BILL THE NEUROLOGIST, HUSBAND OF LADY WHO READ AN ARTICLE**

ACTOR 4 – Female. 30s–40s. A bit of a chameleon with comedy chops, who plays a lot of maternal figures: The mom who shows her love through her actions, not her words. The annoyed aunties who work on their feet day in and day out for a brighter future (for someone else). The Midwestern teacher who really just wants you to do your golly-darned best!

Plays: **MOM, CHINESE RESTAURANT LADY, JAMHOLDER, ASIAN WOMAN, KAZUKO, LADY WHO READ AN ARTICLE**

ACTOR 5 – Male or nonbinary with comedy chops. 20s. The lovable, hunky buffoon. The well-intentioned, popular kid at school who accidentally did a number on your self-esteem. We’re meeting him at his peak, and his peak looks great, especially in slo-mo. Keanu from *Bill & Ted*.

Plays: **VIDEO GAME VOICE, DR. LYLE, BEN, SCHOOL NURSE, ASIAN MAN, BENKEI, 7-ELEVEN CLERK**

ACTOR 6 – Male or nonbinary. 20s–40s. Can smoothly move between buffoonery and some Iago-level Shakespearean monologue, all with an egg roll in his mouth. The other popular kid at school, but also represents the dangers of the world. The funny, charming folks with maybe not so great intentions...

Plays: GOOD MORNING SUBURBIA HOST, MATT, MAN'S VOICE, MR. AJINOMOTO, PRODUCER, DR. STEELE, YELP REVIEWER

SETTING

Locations change frequently and should be hinted at rather than fully realized.

TIME

1999, 1947, 1968

AUTHOR'S NOTES

A slash / indicates the next line begins for overlap.

A (word in parentheses) is whispered.

A [word in brackets] is not spoken at all.

The 1999 sections in the U.S. should feel inspired by *Saved by the Bell*, *Wayne's World*, *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* – but mixed in with *Dragon Ball* and *Legend of Zelda* and *Sailor Moon*, etc. etc. This play is through the eyes of a fourteen-year-old girl, so it can move at the speed of hormones and chaos.

The Japan/Rock Bottom sections can be a little darker, a little sadder, a little scarier.

This play is as fictional as the “scientific proof” that MSG is bad for you.

For my Mom, Mariko Green, and my Ojīchan, Shinobu Toshima.

(Preshow:)

*(**OJICHAN**, a Japanese man in his thirties, is in a lab coat. He measures ingredients. Checks his notes. Looks at ingredients. Checks his notes. Goes to the fridge. Gets out something. Looks at something else. Checks his notes. Gets a dropper and pulls the tiniest bit of liquid out. Holds it up to the light. Checks his notes. On and on and on.)*

*(On another part of the stage, we see **AMI**. She's munching on some shrimp crackers.)*

(She notices us.)

AMI. Riveting, I know. This is my Ojichan – or grandfather. I was two when he died.

Here's a picture of him holding me when I was a small baby. If you're interested.

*(Projection: **OJICHAN** holding a baby.)*

You can see in the picture how delicate he is with me. I remember he had soft, careful hands. A scientist's hands.

But sometimes memories aren't even real. I only *feel* like I remember him, but really I've just looked at pictures, and my brain did a $2+2=4$ without me even knowing it, and so I can almost remember something that I definitely *definitely* actually don't remember at all. It's all just math. And Asians *are* in fact very good at math. I mean, look at *him*.

(We watch him work for a little while.)

I feel like I don't know him at all.

I have the facts. He's a biochemist. Later, he'll go on to teach at Tohoku University in Sendai. He'll have a family. I don't know. Mom says that he was a brilliant scientist, but he lost it all because he drank too much and smoked too much.

And then one day, Ojichan died before I even learned how to talk. Or how to remember.

I dream of him sometimes. Like when I fall asleep eating too many salty snacks. Mama says, "When people die they watch over you from heaven and they offer help in any way they can." And then I'm like – wait but we're not Christian, do we even believe in heaven? And she's like, "Well, Christians can't just have *everything*." And I'm like so you don't believe in reincarnation?

And she's just like, "I don't really know, go away, you're bothering me." So I guess it's all pretty arbitrary what we believe. Anyway, it sure doesn't feel like anyone's watching over me.

But when I dream of him, it's always like this. In a lab in Tokyo, years and years ago. Squishing droplets together in the name of science, making god-knows-what.

(OJICHAN *drops a single droplet onto a petri dish. It glows gold.*)

(1960s Japanese pop rock, a la "Akiko Wada.")*

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(AMI tosses the bag of shrimp crackers offstage.)

But anyway, who cares about that stuff. Welcome to the FUTURE!

(Robot sounds. Techno. AMI does the robot.)

1999! Y2K! Almost. The internet is going to explode the world at midnight New Year's Day! Oh, and I'm alive now, yay! Some suburban town – it doesn't really matter what town because we all sound like we're from the same place now because this is a post-*CLUELESS* world, which *like totally changed how we talk like forever*. We have cell phones, but they're big, and the games suck. And some people don't get to have them anyway because some people have super uptight moms. This is 1999, friends. The days of Blockbuster and frosted tips! And the reign of Britney is just beginning.

(AMI turns on the TV. It's a music video from 1999, some upbeat pop with lots of dancing. She knows most of the choreography.)

And here I am in the kitchen. Here's my mom. Say "hi," Mom.

MOM. *(Entering.)* Hello. News.

(MOM changes the channel to Good Morning Suburbia.)

AMI. We're about to fight. Oh, and my brother Kenji is watching.

KENJI. *(Entering.)* "Wazzuuuuuuup!" I love that commercial.

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AMI. Dad left a long time ago, so it's just us.

KENJI. You need to stop fighting her all the time.

AMI. Oh, yes! The fight. I've begged Mom to stop making me cute little bento boxes because I don't like how the kids look at me when I bring those in.

And they have a very strong smell? In sixth grade, Claire MacKenzie said my lunch smelled like farts?

So this is *the* point of contention every friggin morning.

Mom, just give me a turkey sandwich.

MOM. No.

AMI. Please.

MOM. No. You need vegetables.

AMI. I'll take a pickle.

MOM. THE SODIUM.

KENJI. Dude, drop it.

AMI. MOM!

MOM. Fine.

AMI. Really?!

MOM. Yes!

But only if you can defeat me.

AMI. Oh shoot.

(MOM and AMI battle. Very Dragon Ball.)

MOM. SNEAK ATTACK!

(She throws an energy ball or something that sends AMI flying.)

AMI. AAAAHHHHHHH

VIDEO GAME VOICE. *(Offstage or prerecorded.)* VICTORY.

KENJI. Dude. You gotta watch out for sneak attack.

AMI. And so we watch *Good Morning Suburbia* –

MOM. – the news.

AMI. Like we always do.

(**GOOD MORNING SUBURBIA HOST** and **DR. LYLE** appear, either on the TV somehow or elsewhere onstage.)

GOOD MORNING SUBURBIA HOST. Wow, Carl. Looks like it's gonna be a real scorcher! Next up we have Dr. Lyle here to tell us about his new book.

AMI. But today we'll stop watching because –

MOM. Sshh I like this doctor.

DR. LYLE. Thanks for having me.

GOOD MORNING SUBURBIA HOST. So tell us about your book.

DR. LYLE. Well, it's an exploration I've done mostly on my own, honestly with very little help or support from anyone else. Oh, except my beautiful wife, Rachel, of course!

(**DR. LYLE** points and winks at an audience member.)

GOOD MORNING SUBURBIA HOST. Aw, there she is!

DR. LYLE. She did the writing and revising and researching.

Anyway, I didn't do a ton of reading on the subject, but I *feel* really strongly about it. It's called, "MSG and the poisoning of Ameri–"

(Click. **MOM** turns off the TV.)

AMI. Mom, I was watching that!

MOM. You watch too much TV. Focus on your school.

AMI. School's fine!

MOM. You should take Latin. For the SATs.

AMI. I'm doing okay, you know.

MOM. Be more like your brother.

KENJI. Yeah, be more like me.

AMI. No, you're a dorkus.

KENJI. Psshhh.

MOM. You used to be so smart.

AMI. I'm still smart.

MOM. Exceptional.

AMI. Mom, I'm still smart! I just don't have to like *show off*.

MOM. Where's your lunch box?

AMI. Oh sorry, it's in the car.

(MOM sighs with deep disappointment and exits.)

Gah, what's up her crah?

KENJI. It's just the thing on TV.

AMI. Mom loves Dr. Lyle.

KENJI. No, the...wait, do you seriously not know about...?

AMI. What, the – the MSG?

KENJI. *(Covering her mouth.)* SSSHHHHHHHHH.

AMI. What is it even?

KENJI. Just. Be cool. Okay, so...

(KENJI whispers into her ear.)

AMI. It comes from where? And it does what?! And it's in WHAT?!

KENJI. Here's an article.

And it's old too.

*(He hands **AMI** an article.)*

(Honk honk!)

That's my ride. See you at school.

(And he's gone. She reads.)

AMI. Kenji's article dates all the way back to 1968. About MSG. How it comes from Japan.

How it kills people. Destroys their lives.

That there's all this...this...SCIENCE.

*(**MOM** enters and packs lunch. **AMI** pockets the article.)*

Mom comes back in and packs up my lunch box. Her hands move quickly and efficiently. Like a scientist's hands.

MOM. Here you go, Ami.

AMI. I'm going by Amy now.

MOM. ...You know, you don't have to...

AMI. ...What?

MOM. Here you go.

AMI. What were you gonna / say?

MOM. Have a good day at school!

AMI. I think she thinks I'm crazy. But I think she's crazy, so.

*(**MOM** exits.)*

On the bus, on my way to school, I'm turning over what I just learned in my head. Over and over. About all those poor people...

*(Two American customers at Bamboo Panda,
BEN [brown hair] and MATT [blonde hair].
But kinda Bill & Ted.)*

BEN. Matt, I have huge news.

MATT. What is it, Ben?

AMI. I should mention this is a fictionalized account. This is not – it's *definitely not* Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. Not at all.

BEN. You know my girlfriend Gwyneth.

MATT. Of course, Ben. Everyone knows your girlfriend Gwyneth Paltrow.

AMI. Yes, Gwyneth Paltrow and Ben Affleck were dating in 1999. But again, this is not based on them. These are just regular old Americans with similar names. Anyway.

BEN. I'm going to propose, Matt.

MATT. Wow, Ben Anflank. That's really really exciting, I'm so happy for you! I remember when you two met in that one movie and then she won an Oscar.

BEN. Yeah! Anyway, I'm excited to propose to her directly after eating this meal, at one of our favorite restaurants, Bamboo Panda.

MATT. Wow, that's so exciting! I'm so glad we're able to spend this meal together. You're my best friend.

BEN. You're *my* best friend, Matt Dermon.

(They high-five.)

*(CHINESE RESTAURANT LADY enters with
twenty plates of food. Maybe she smokes a
cigarette.)*

CHINESE RESTAURANT LADY. Here we are! (*Sinister.*) Are you sure you want every single item on the menu?

BEN. It's like we always say

BEN & MATT. "HOW DO YOU LIKE THESE APPLES!"

(They high-five.)

CHINESE RESTAURANT LADY. (*Exiting, sinister.*) Fantastic...

MATT. Dig in!

BEN. Don't mind if I do!

(BEN takes one bite and starts coughing. He falls to the ground, clutching his throat.)

MATT. Ben! What's wrong?

(BEN starts convulsing.)

Is there a doctor in the / house?

SEXY DOCTOR. (*Appearing out of nowhere.*) I'm a doctor.

MATT. You have to help him.

SEXY DOCTOR. I'm trying!

MATT. He's trying to say something!

BEN. Matt. I love you, man. You're like a brother to me ever since that movie we wrote and also starred in together.

MATT. I know.

BEN. Tell Gwyneth...

(BEN tries to high-five Matt, but instead...he dies.)

MATT. Nooooooooooooooooooooo!

SEXY DOCTOR. It's the hardest part of this damn job.

MATT. What did he die of, Doc?

SEXY DOCTOR. Oh? Um. You know. Chinese Restaurant...
umm Syndrome?

(Confident.) Chinese Restaurant Syndrome.

MATT. Wow Doc, that sounds totally medically sound and definitely real.

SEXY DOCTOR. We've got to get Americans off of this terrible drug, before they all overdose.

MATT. Overdose? Overdose on what, Doc?

SEXY DOCTOR. M. S. G...

MATT. *(Echoes.)* G...

SEXY DOCTOR. *(Echoes.)* G...

MATT. *(Echoes.)* G...

*(MATT and SEXY DOCTOR start slowly
backing up into the darkness. BEN rolls
offstage also.)*

SEXY DOCTOR. *(Echoes.)* g...

MATT. *(Whispers.)* g...

SEXY DOCTOR. *(Whispers.)* g...

BEN. *(Whispers.)* g...

(They exit.)

AMI. And that's why Ben and Gwyneth never got married.

Because he overdosed on MSG.

Again, not the celebrities Ben Affleck and Gwyneth Paltrow, but this totally could have happened to some other people named Ben and Gwyneth, and that's really really sad.

So I guess my people are friggin MSG people. Humiliating.

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