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First Flame

Created by Mariposa Fernandez

Written and Performed by Nana Boakye,

Elizabeth Boateng, Seung Kim, Jenny Soudachanh,
Skyler Alexander Susnick, and Jawad (Momo) Tazari

Music by Glenn McClure

Directed and Choreographed by Dr. Mark Broomfield

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Nana: College-aged, African man. Comes from a lower-middle class, two parent household in downstate New York. Finds motivation in performing.

Liz: College-aged, Ghanaian-American woman from the Bronx. Raised in a single-parent home with four siblings.

Seung: Korean-American, college-aged man with an aptitude for languages.

Jenny: Graduate student, Asian, cis-gender female. Born the youngest to two refugees in Queens, New York. Dedicated to supporting equity and fighting stereotypes by making intersectionality and individuality known to others.

Skyler: College-aged, white, gay, transgender man. Comes from an upper-middle class, single-parent household in Connecticut. Easy going and sincere.

Momo: College-aged man. Vegetarian and activist.



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I. JOURNEY INTO SPACES AND SOUNDS

SETTING: Urban street scene

[Cast enters theater from multiple entrance points. The percussionist begins to set the tone for the scene, musically. Eventually all members of the ensemble converge on blocks, stage right.]

NANA

My story walks out onto the open space and takes it all in.

SEUNG

Let me take you to a place where the heavy, humid heat of the sun beats down bricks of sweat onto my neck.

JENNY

I want to take you to a place where bright red cherry tomatoes sprout from their vines, where children in a grassy backyard run around a small tree not much bigger than themselves.

LIZ

I wanna take you to a place where the city folk are never smiling but go home and transform into the warmest, kindhearted people.

MOMO

Where the trees are tall and animals walk among the humans, stinky, wild chickens, and floral banana trees.

JENNY

Where the sun shines onto the pavement and where small feet slam against the ground in excitement.

LIZ

I wanna take you to a place where the streets are cold, where the youth cling to.

SKYLER

A place where I grew up. A place for “fringe kids.” A place filled with the sounds of video games and music.

LIZ

Where you can't escape the loud sounds of the 4 train.

NANA

The fruits are free for everyone to pick. Money isn't the key to survival.

JENNY

I want to take you to a place where mothers in their yellow, flowing sundresses holler at their children to be careful.

SKYLER

A place on the edge of the town's main stretch, in an old town building, a big open one made for trucks or salt or something.

JENNY

Where fathers are relaxing on chairs and sipping damp, condensing beers.

[Musical transition]

NANA

Where I'm from, you're either in or out so get with the program. There is no middle. Normally people think for themselves but in this place if you don't look like us then, "Homie, you needs to bounce."

LIZ

Where I'm from boys tap their knees, give life to the story of their weekly chase-down by cops from the 40th precinct.

SEUNG

한국에서 태어나서 한국인인데

I grew up in New York so I'm a New Yorker.

근데 뉴욕에서는 사람들이 나를 한국인으로 보고

And Koreans see me as an American.

But I'm really not either.

日本語も喋るけど、日本人じゃなくて

Je parle français mais je ne suis pas français.

Ik spreek een beetje Nederlands maar ik kom niet uit Nederland.

I'm all of these things together.

I'm just me damn it. I'm just me.

LIZ

Where I'm from you wouldn't survive a day. You better know which streets not to walk down when it's dark.

JENNY

I'm from screams of anger! Pleas of apologies and mercy are yelled across tiny matchbox-like rooms. I'm from subways and rails, where rats scurry and the odor of piss lingers in the air. Where I'm from—

SKYLER

—was just a means for me to get here, where I want to be. I'm all about my horizontal identities and communities. My vertical ones are secondary. Family of blood and family of choice.

MOMO

Where I am from is not where I've lived. It's a realm of abstraction, of unity, of all creation.
Not a place of division and discrimination, but solidarity and acceptance.

II. SELF-DISCLOSURES

[Musical transition]

NANA

Is having pride really that bad? I'm great. I'm reaching for the sky.
Cameras and flashing lights.
Kanye moments and quiet arenas as I drop the mike.

[Pause]

Recognize me when I walk.

MOMO

The world is crafted by how we act.
Because when you are assaulted, I am also attacked.
Humans alone do not experience pain.
Because all life on earth suffers for material gain.

[Pause and cross stage]

Because I like chicken, but not on my plate.
I love animals, not how they taste.
Because to kill for profit is unjust.
I do not consume carcass.

LIZ

Because she knows she can be great, and she will prove it to the world.
Where detrimental cycles are destined for people who look like her.
Bright minds tainted by the fast life.
Scamming and pushing weight on Bronx street corners.
She was raised by the true head of household who bears generations.
Optimistic in a world that denies her integration.
She is me.
And I refuse to allow my inner lioness to lose sleep over the opinion of sheep.
I shoot for the stars.

[out to the audience]

Never settle for the moon.

SKYLER

Because some days I could hardly look in the mirror.

Because there were times where sex turned into crying in Kyle's arms.

Because I wanted to love my body as much as my boyfriend does.

Because it was time to become myself.

To be reborn into my truer form.

Like a phoenix from its ashes.

I got top surgery.

JENNY

Because as a smile blooms on her face.

While rough, cracked skin grazes my collarbone.

My mother hands it to me.

Like a heavy chain that binds me to my family.

Because it reminds me.

Of applause and cheers in a room where shoulders brush together.

Laughter, hugs, tears.

And goodbyes.

Forever against my skin.

Because it is valued yet forgotten.

Because every time I come home.

I enter a warm embrace.

I wear the comforting necklace my mother gave me.

Everyday.

SEUNG

Because I was bullied for my weight,

Because I was vulnerable,

Because I was defenseless,

I spent hours and hours.

Worrying.

Freaking out, depressed, alone.

Crying myself to sleep.
 Until one day,
 A light bulb went off.
 Why did I care so much?
 Why did I need to listen to them?
 I accept myself for who I am.
 No more crying myself to sleep.
 No more depression.
 No more insecurities.
 No more loneliness.
 No more worrying.
 No more anything else.
 But just being me,
 I don't care what you think of me.

SETTING: Campus / The Green

[Conversational scene, structured improvisation, ensemble interacts with each other & audience]

NANA

I don't want to hear that everyone in Africa is dirty, hungry, and poor.

SKYLER

I'm getting sick of being asked my old name.

SEUNG

Don't say that Asian men aren't good looking or that we can't be manly.

LIZ

Yo! I'm tired of hearing black girls are only good in bed.

MOMO

Muslims are not Terrorists. Islam is not a religion of hate.

SEUNG

Stop getting surprised at how "good" my English is. I've lived here for over 15 years.

JENNY

Seriously, don't ask if I grew up with an Asian tiger mom.

[Overlapping dialogue, ensemble begins to interrupt each other, build up to a crescendo]

NANA
I am not wrong.

SEUNG
I matter and I exist.

LIZ
I need to hear only my voice in my head.

JENNY
Ask questions free of assumptions.

SKYLER
I'm valid.

MOMO
I want to hear that we challenge our assumptions every day.

ENSEMBLE
LISTEN!!!

NANA
I don't wanna hear it!

III. THIS STORY IS GONNA BURN

[Musical transition]

JENNY
I can tell you a story that's a cold spaghetti dinner eaten with chopsticks or a story that's hot like fire.

LIZ
This story is gonna burn you.

[Liz continues to say this line, rhythmically in sync with live percussion]

SEUNG
I want the story to burn me, to leave behind a mark.

SKYLER
I want the story to burn me. I want the story to burn me and give me chills.

NANA
I want the story to burn me. Like the accidental touch of an iron that has been left on too long.

SKYLER

The story of pain and struggle.

NANA

Like your first college breakup. Like your first failing grade.

MOMO

I want the story to burn you; I want you to feel the fire of the gathered crowd, the emotion in the spoken chant, the bitter taste of the mist of pepper spray.

SKYLER

The story of finding yourself in an unwelcoming world.

SEUNG

I want it to mark its territory.

I want it to stick and never let go.

MOMO

This story is going to burn you, because it is the truth. The truth hurts, and coming in contact with reality is scary, really scary.

SKYLER

The story of losing someone.

Someone you love.

Someone you need.

Maybe yourself.

MOMO

It says everything you have been afraid to express, and uncomfortable to hear.

NANA

I want the story to burn you. Like your skin rubbing against the track when you take that hard fall to the finish.

MOMO

That's good. It's good that you are uncomfortable, because things need to change.

SEUNG

Only when you're scorched,

Can you finally learn.

Restaurant Scene written by Seung Kim

SETTING: New York City sushi restaurant

[Musical transition. Seung narrates, Momo plays Jeremy, Nana plays Arthur]

SEUNG

Remember when we had sushi in the city with Arthur? And he kept on making racist jokes, comments on my facial features and lewd remarks about certain body parts. He never had sushi before, and neither did you, Jeremy. So when you went to the bathroom, I told Arthur to eat the entire portion of wasabi with his sushi roll. As soon as he opened his mouth to eat, I got excited. I was finally going to teach this racist motherfucker a lesson. But instead, as soon as he closed his mouth with the wasabi penetrating all of his taste buds, he began to scream and gag. Then, he threw up. I ran out of there, onto W. 55th street, struggling to catch my breath. When I went back inside, you had just come out of the bathroom, and you looked at me and said:

JEREMY

Seung! What have you done?

SEUNG

I felt guilty but in a sense, I also felt proud even though I hurt Arthur. Sorry, but not sorry.

Party Scene written by Nana Boakye

[Lights dim. Musical transition to an upbeat tempo. Ensemble breaks to the beat. Laughin', dancin', groovin', highfivin'. Liz and Skyler act out the roles of desired woman and close friend, as Nana narrates]

NANA

It was dark, the music was playing and everyone was dancing, moving to the sound of the beat. One of my closest friends made his way from the dance floor over to me and told me that he had spotted a girl that he really wanted to dance with. She was cute and I knew if I grabbed her she wouldn't turn me down. As he went on and on about how he should approach her, I just thought to myself, "Now would be the perfect time to seek my revenge." A couple of months earlier, he had gotten with a girl that I had told him I liked. He probably didn't know how serious I felt about the girl but it didn't matter to me. I began to plot in my head: now was the perfect opportunity to get my revenge. As he made his way over, I followed him quietly. Stalking him like a lion stalking its prey. I moved through the sea of people ever so smoothly so he wouldn't notice my presence. As he began talking to her, I reached over his shoulder and gently grabbed her hand. I slowly pulled her close and she offered no resistance. We began grinding to the music while he stood there in shock. Not because of what I did, but because it actually worked. 'Cause I'm smooth.

IV. REBEL REALNESS

Party scene continued, written by Liz Boateng

[Musical transition to a slow tempo]

LIZ

Who doesn't enjoy the soft sounds of intimacy.

The heat created as two people become one in a private embrace.
 Small drops of sweat running down your spine.
 As you encounter the overly pursued sense of pleasure.

LIZ & JENNY

They warn you it'll hurt at first.

LIZ

But you are blindly struck by vulnerability.
 The taste of yearning for more.
 Constantly lingering over your head.
 As you wonder why you had help in the revelation of your nakedness.
 But you're left to dress yourself.
 When it's all over.

Monologue written by Skyler Alexander Susnick

SETTING: Supercuts

[Ensemble forms a line. Skyler stage right. Skyler speaks, cast is posing and checking themselves out in an imaginary mirror]

SKYLER

My mother still misses her daughter.

I remember my first haircut after coming out like it was yesterday. I was terrified walking into Supercuts, for all appearances a teenage girl with a flat chest and masculine clothing. My hair was shoulder length at the time and I had a picture on my phone of a guy with a haircut I liked, longish but masculine. I showed the haircutter and she started. In the end it was still a little more feminine than I would have cared for, but I was too nervous to say anything and I liked it well enough anyway. For the first time in years I recognized myself when I looked in the mirror, something I hadn't even realized I was missing. I sat in my car in the parking lot and just looked at it in the mirror. If I was the type to cry out of happiness I would have.

Monologue written by Jenny Soudachanh

[Musical transition]

JENNY

Eyes and mouths everywhere.
 From the moment I pop out of the womb.
 To the moment I crawl and walk always saying.
 You should do this and you should do that.
 At home, on the street, in books, in classrooms, on TV.
 Expectations and entitlement.

Pulling me, dragging me.

Hands that cover my eyes, turn into lenses.

Chains made of lace pull me forward.

But I cannot follow as expected.

When I discover there is a world beyond the screen on my eyes.

When I question: why do I have to do this? Is this really me?

I stumble on purpose, make you pause and look back.

Why must I fantasize about another road I could have taken, a world not my own?

Why must I reflect on possibilities I could have taken?

But rejected because I believed them when they said, “That’s not for you.”

I want you to watch me, scream at me.

As I sever the rope and walk away,

As I choose to open my own mouth and look at the world with my own eyes.

I can do this and that.

I’m not who you make me out to be.

I’m not that someone.

I can do this.

SETTING: Starting line of a race

[Shift: Cast uses imaginary line, looking back in anticipatory poses, waiting for the baton, Finally, they break into cheering]

ENSEMBLE

[Whispering]

I can do this. I can do this.

JENNY

It hurts to inhale through your nose as sweat drips down your chin. There and—

ENSEMBLE

Keep going!

JENNY

But it hurts as the fatigue slowly seeps into your warming body.

ENSEMBLE

You can do it!

NANA

You've taken thousands of steps and each one carries a different memory. Then the instant replay. You fight to cross the finish line. Everything becomes a blur and all you can hear are the screams.

ENSEMBLE

Come on Nana you're almost there!

Move Nana he's right behind you!

Try to catch him, he's right in front of you!

NANA

You cross the line using every ounce of energy left in you. As you reach out for the medal you snap back to reality and just catch yourself reaching for air. Just distant memories now. Just tighten your laces and begin your warm up for the race ahead of you.

JENNY

The sun beats down on your skin creating hot sweat. Desperation streams out of your pores. But you slam your foot into the ground with your never-give-up spirit, feel the heavy weight of your body move forward, 'til you hit the finish line.

[Pause and out to audience]

Don't stop.

[Musical transition, percussive hip hop beat, interactive call and response, cast members engage audience, clapping as they walk off stage and through the house]

NANA

Now when I say don't, y'all say stop!

NANA

Don't!

ENSEMBLE

Stop!

NANA

Don't!

ENSEMBLE

Stop!

NANA

When I say won't, y'all say stop!

NANA

Won't!

Stop!

ENSEMBLE

Won't!

NANA

Stop!

ENSEMBLE

[Ongoing chant as they exit]

FIN