



# PLAY GUIDE

# Water by the Spoonful

By Quiara Alegria Hudes  
Directed by Henry Godinez



**SETTING** Philadelphia, Present Day

## **CHARACTERS**

**ELLIOT ORTIZ**, 24, an Iraq vet with a slight limp, works at Subway, scores an occasional job as a model or actor, Yazmin's cousin, Odessa's birth son.

**ODESSA ORTIZ**, 39, aka Haikumom, a recovering drug addict, founder of [www.recovertogether.com](http://www.recovertogether.com), works odd janitorial jobs, Elliot's birth mother.

**YAZMIN ORTIZ**, 31, an adjunct professor of music, a pianist, Odessa's niece and Elliot's cousin.

**FOUNTAINHEAD**, 38, aka John, a computer programmer and entrepreneur, lives on Philadelphia's Main Line, wealthy.

**CHUTES&LADDERS**, 56, lives in San Diego, has worked a low-level job at the IRS for 20+ years, African-American. His real name is Clayton "Buddy" Wilkie.

**ORANGUTAN**, 31, a recent community college graduate, Japanese by birth, her real name is Madeleine Mays and before that Yoshiko Sakai.

**A GHOST**, also plays **PROFESSOR AMAN**, an Arabic professor at Swarthmore; also plays **A POLICEMAN** in Japan.

# SYNOPSIS

Iraq war veteran Elliot Ortiz has returned home only to find himself haunted by the ghosts of his past while his overachieving cousin Yaz seeks to define herself amidst the chaos of her family. Meanwhile, Elliot's estranged mother Odessa struggles to stay clean as she moderates a chat room for recovering crack addicts like herself.



*Elliot confronts his mother Odessa while she's with a fellow recovering addict.*

# THEMES

1. **Ghosts and Memory:** Many of the characters are haunted (both literally and figuratively) by the events of their pasts, and the play explores how people respond to and cope with tragedy.
2. **Drug Addiction and Recovery:** Through an online recovery community, the play takes a look at the struggles faced by addicts and those addicts who decide to get clean.
3. **Family and Community:** Especially with the character of Odessa, *Water by the Spoonful* examines how families and the communities that we belong to can influence our choices and help or hurt us.

# ELLIOT ORTIZ: MILITARY SERVICE

## Elliot Ortiz' Military Service

While most of Elliot's military service is outlined in *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue*, which comes chronologically before *Water by the Spoonful*, his participation in the Iraq War is still very important to the events of *Water*. Elliot, then Lance Corporal Elliot Ortiz, 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Armored Recon Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, was one of the first Marines to enter Iraq in 2003. He was 18. He was injured the next year and received a Purple Heart, and he returned to Iraq for a second tour of duty after his recovery.



*American soldiers in the Iraq war.*

## The Iraq War

The Iraq War, also called the Second Persian Gulf War (2003–11), was a conflict in Iraq that consisted of two phases. The first of these was a brief, conventionally fought war in March–April 2003, in which a combined force of troops from the United States and Great Britain (with smaller contingents from several other countries) invaded Iraq and rapidly defeated Iraqi military and paramilitary forces. It was followed by a longer second phase in which a U.S.-led occupation of Iraq was opposed by an insurgency. After violence began to decline in 2007, the United States gradually reduced its military presence in Iraq, formally completing its withdrawal in December 2011.

# POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

As a veteran of the Iraq War, Elliot Ortiz suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which in his case presents itself as appearances of a “ghost.” Because of PTSD, Elliot is literally haunted by his own past, as the ghost is a hallucination of the first person he killed in Iraq. PTSD is an increasingly common and accepted condition, especially in veterans, though PTSD can develop after any traumatic experience.



Actor Edgar Sanchez as Elliot Ortiz.

To understand the condition better, here’s what the National Institute of Mental Health has to say:

When in danger, it’s natural to feel afraid. This fear triggers many split-second changes in the body to prepare to defend against the danger or to avoid it. This “fight-or-flight” response is a healthy reaction meant to protect a person from harm. But in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), this reaction is changed or damaged. People who have PTSD may feel stressed or frightened even when they’re no longer in danger.

PTSD develops after a terrifying ordeal that involved physical harm or the threat of physical harm. The person who develops PTSD may have been the one who was harmed, the harm may have happened to a loved one, or the person may have witnessed a harmful event that happened to loved ones or strangers.

PTSD was first brought to public attention in relation to war veterans, but it can result from a variety of traumatic incidents, such as mugging, rape, torture, being kidnapped or held captive, child abuse, car accidents, train wrecks, plane crashes, bombings, or natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes.

# PTSD Signs & Symptoms

PTSD can cause many symptoms. These symptoms can be grouped into three categories:

## Re-experiencing symptoms

- Flashbacks—reliving the trauma over and over
- Bad dreams
- Frightening thoughts.

*Re-experiencing symptoms may cause problems in a person's everyday routine. They can start from the person's own thoughts and feelings. Words, objects, or situations that are reminders of the event can also trigger re-experiencing.*

## Avoidance symptoms

- Feeling emotionally numb; Feeling strong guilt, depression, or worry
- Losing interest in activities that were enjoyable in the past
- Having trouble remembering the dangerous event.

*Things that remind a person of the traumatic event can trigger avoidance symptoms. These symptoms may cause a person to change his or her personal routine. For example, after a bad car accident, a person who usually drives may avoid driving or riding in a car.*

## Hyperarousal symptoms

- Being easily startled
- Feeling tense or "on edge"
- Having difficulty sleeping, and/or having angry outbursts.

*Hyperarousal symptoms are usually constant, instead of being triggered by things that remind one of the traumatic event. They can make the person feel stressed and angry. These symptoms may make it hard to do daily tasks, such as sleeping, eating, or concentrating.*

It's natural to have some of these symptoms after a dangerous event. Sometimes people have very serious symptoms that go away after a few weeks. This is called acute stress disorder, or ASD. When the symptoms last more than a few weeks and become an ongoing problem, they might be PTSD. Some people with PTSD don't show any symptoms for weeks or months.

# DRUG ADDICITON

Many of the characters in *Water by the Spoonful* are struggling with drug addiction and the addiction recovery process. The online community moderated by Odessa is one dedicated to recovering abusers of crack cocaine, and Elliot struggled with addiction to painkillers after his injury in Iraq.

## Addiction

Addiction is a condition that results when a person ingests a substance (alcohol, cocaine, nicotine) or engages in an activity (gambling) that can be pleasurable but the continued use of which becomes compulsive and interferes with ordinary life responsibilities, such as work or relationships, or health. Users may not be aware that their behavior is out of control and causing problems for themselves and others.

The word addiction is used in several different ways. One definition describes physical addiction. This is a biological state in which the body adapts to the presence of a drug so that drug no longer has the same effect; this is known as tolerance. Because of tolerance, there is a biological reaction when the drug is withdrawn. Another form of physical addiction is the phenomenon of overreaction by the brain to drugs (or to cues associated with the drugs). An alcoholic walking into a bar, for instance, will feel an extra pull to have a drink because of these cues.

However, most addictive behavior is not related to either physical tolerance or exposure to cues. People compulsively use drugs, gamble, or shop nearly always in reaction to being emotionally stressed, whether or not they have a physical addiction. Since these psychologically based addictions are not based on drug or brain effects, they can account for why people frequently switch addictive actions from one drug to a completely different kind of drug, or even to a non-drug behavior. The focus of the addiction isn't what matters; it's the need to take action under certain kinds of stress. Treating this kind of addiction requires an understanding of how it works psychologically.

# DRUG ADDICITON (CONT)

When referring to any kind of addiction, it is important to recognize that its cause is not simply a search for pleasure and that addiction has nothing to do with one's morality or strength of character. Experts debate whether addiction is a "disease" or a true mental illness, whether drug dependence and addiction mean the same thing, and many other aspects of addiction. Such debates are not likely to be resolved soon. But the lack of resolution does not preclude effective treatment.

## **Crack Cocaine's Effects on the Brain**

Crack cocaine is a strong central nervous stimulant that interferes with, and causes excess amounts of, dopamine in the brain. A neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and movement, dopamine is the neurotransmitter released as part of the brain's reward system. As a result, the psychological effects can be extremely reinforcing; after having tried crack cocaine, the user will rapidly develop an intense craving for the drug since the chemistry of the brain's reward system has been altered.

## **Long-Term Effects**

Prolonged crack cocaine abuse causes a number of problems, including:

- Severe depression
- Irritability and mood disturbances
- Aggressive, paranoid behavior
- Delirium or psychosis
- Tolerance and addiction, even after just one use
- Auditory and tactile hallucinations
- Heart attack and heart disease
- Stroke
- Respiratory failure
- Brain seizures
- Sexual dysfunction (for both men and women)
- Reproductive damage and infertility (for both men and women)
- Increased frequency of risky behavior
- Death
- Addiction and withdrawal



# TREATMENT & RECOVERY

Drug addiction treatments include organized inpatient or outpatient treatment programs, counseling, and self-help groups to help you resist using the addictive drug again. Depending on your level of addiction, you may need steps to help you withdraw from using the drug (detoxification).

Therapies such as counseling, addiction treatment programs and self-help group meetings can help you overcome an addiction and stay sober.

## **Treatment programs**

Treatment programs generally include educational and therapy sessions focused on getting sober and preventing relapse. This may be accomplished in individual, group or family sessions. These programs are available in various settings from outpatient to residential and inpatient programs.

## **Counseling**

Individual or family counseling with a psychologist, psychiatrist or addiction counselor may help you resist the temptation to resume using addicting drugs. Behavior therapies can help you develop ways to cope with your drug cravings, suggest strategies to avoid drugs and prevent relapse, and offer suggestions on how to deal with a relapse if it occurs. Counseling can also involve talking about your job, legal problems, and relationships with family and friends. Counseling with family members can help them develop better communication skills and be more supportive.

## **Self-help groups**

Many, though not all, of these groups tend to use the 12-step model first developed by Alcoholics Anonymous. Self-help groups, such as Narcotics Anonymous, exist for people addicted to drugs, such as cocaine, sedatives and narcotics. The message is that addiction is a chronic disorder with a danger of relapse and that ongoing maintenance treatment — which may include medications, counseling and self-help group meetings — is necessary to prevent a relapse. Your doctor or counselor can help you locate a self-help group. You also can find listings for self-help groups in the phone book, at the library and on the Internet.

# SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNITIES

Much of *Water by the Spoonful* takes place in the online world: Odessa runs a website support community for recovering cocaine addicts, and many of the characters in the production are regulars in the chat room.

While addiction recovery is a different process for everyone who goes through it, self-help groups are a common feature of recovery programs. While many of these groups meet in person (like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous), there is a growing number of online communities that operate in a similar way. Websites will run chat rooms or message boards for the members to share their stories and progress with other members, developing online support systems for recovering addicts. In the same way that AA and NA stress the importance of taking recovery one day at a time, the online chat rooms become places for members to report on their day to day progress towards sobriety.

In *Water by the Spoonful*, much of the play happens in one of these online chat rooms. This presents an unusual challenge for staging the script: the characters talk to each other, but they do so through an online medium. If it were to be staged in a fully realistic way, the characters would sit in front of computers, but that would not be visually interesting. In her introduction, Hudes recommends:



*Elliot hacks into his mother's online community.*

*Unless specifically noted, when characters are online, don't have actors typing on a keyboard. Treat it like regular conversation rather than the act of writing or typing. They can be doing things people do in the comfort of their home like eating potato chips, walking around in jammies, cooking, doing dishes, clipping nails, etc.*

In Court's production, director Henry Godinez and the cast have chosen to explore how movement and contact can help make the relationships between the characters clear even when they are only interacting in the online world.

# FREE JAZZ

## **Music in *Water by the Spoonful***

Yazmin Ortiz is an adjunct professor of music, probably drawing from Quiara Alegria Hudes' own musical training. The Free Jazz movement and John Coltrane both feature prominently in the play, and Free Jazz and the musical concepts of consonance and dissonance influenced Hudes' writing style throughout the script.



Actress Yadira Correa as Yazmin Ortiz.

## **Free Jazz**

Free jazz is an approach to jazz music that was first developed in the 1950s and 1960s. Though the music produced by free jazz composers varied widely, the common feature was a dissatisfaction with the limitations of bebop, hard bop, and modal jazz, which had developed in the 1940s and 1950s. Each in their own way, free jazz musicians attempted to alter, extend, or break down the conventions of jazz, often by discarding hitherto invariable features of jazz, such as fixed chord changes or tempos. While usually considered experimental and avant-garde, free jazz has also oppositely been conceived as an attempt to return jazz to its "primitive", often religious roots, and emphasis on collective improvisation.

Free jazz is most strongly associated with the 1950s innovations of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor and the later works of saxophonist John Coltrane. Other important pioneers included Charles Mingus, Eric Dolphy, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Joe Maneri and Sun Ra. Although today "free jazz" is the generally used term, many other terms were used to describe the loosely defined movement, including "avant-garde", "energy music" and "The New Thing." During its early and mid-60s heyday, much free jazz was released by established labels such as Prestige, Blue Note and Impulse, as well as independents such as ESP Disk and BYG Actuel.

# FREE JAZZ (CONT)

## **Consonance and Dissonance**

Consonance and dissonance, in music, the impression of stability and repose (consonance) in relation to the impression of tension or clash (dissonance) experienced by a listener when certain combinations of tones or notes are sounded together. In certain musical styles, movement to and from consonance and dissonance gives shape and a sense of direction, for example, through increases and decreases in harmonic tension.

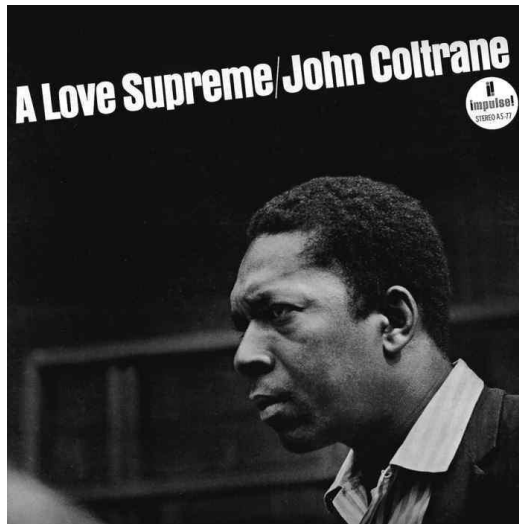
## **Improvisation**

Musical improvisation (also known as musical extemporization) is the creative activity of immediate ("in the moment") musical composition, which combines performance with communication of emotions and instrumental technique as well as spontaneous response to other musicians. Thus, musical ideas in improvisation are spontaneous, but may be based on chord changes in classical music, and indeed many other kinds of music. One definition is a "performance given extempore without planning or preparation." Another definition is to "play or sing (music) extemporaneously, especially by inventing variations on a melody or creating new melodies in accordance with a set progression of chords."

# JOHN COLTRANE

John Coltrane (1926 - 1967) was, after Charlie Parker, the most revolutionary and widely imitated saxophonist in jazz. Coltrane grew up in High Point, North Carolina, where he learned to play E-flat alto horn, clarinet, and (at about the age of 15) alto saxophone.

Throughout the 1950s addiction to drugs and then alcoholism disrupted his career. With time, he overcame these problems and his album *A Love Supreme* celebrated this victory and the profound religious experience associated with it.



Coltrane turned to increasingly radical musical styles in the mid-1960s. These controversial experiments attracted large audiences, and by 1965 he was surprisingly affluent. From autumn 1965 his search for new sounds resulted in frequent changes of personnel in his group. New members included Pharoah Sanders, Alice Coltrane (his wife), Rashied Ali (a second drummer until Jones' departure), several drummers as seconds to Ali, and a number of African-influenced percussionists. In his final years and after his death, Coltrane acquired an almost saintly reputation among listeners and fellow musicians for his energetic and selfless support of young avant-garde performers, his passionate religious convictions, his peaceful demeanor, and his obsessive striving for a musical ideal. He died at the age of 40 of a liver ailment. A videotape tracing his development, *The Coltrane Legacy*, produced by David Chertok and Burrill Crohn, was issued in 1987.

# STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How would you stage a scene in a play set in an online chat room? Why? Did Court's staging make the relationships between the characters clear to you?
2. Do you belong to any social media communities? How are they different from communities like your family or your classes in school?
3. What support systems do you have in your own life?

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