

No Believers

By Roberta D'Alois

Running time 90 minutes

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Characters: 2 F 4 M

JACOB MIRTADO, M, ages from 9 to 33, inquisitive, serious, Catholic priest.

SUZANNE DOMANDA, F, ages from 8 to 32, intelligent, risk-averse.

DAVE HARPER, M, 35, SUZANNE's boyfriend. Not exactly lazy.

BISHOP SOLELEO, M,50's, Catholic diocese bishop, Jacob's superior. Rule-bound and kind.

AWESTA, F, ages from 25 to 34, Afghan. It's not always apparent whether she is appearing as a spirit or as flesh and blood. Spiritually minded and realistic. Witty sense of humor. Also appears in several other roles noted in the script.

SAYED HUSSEIN, M,50's , Afghan. Has seen more changes than anyone could be expected to see and still survive. A survivor.

Note: The roles of Awesta and Sayed should be performed by actors of Afghan or South Asian descent.

Time 1985 to 2002

Locations: San Francisco and Afghanistan

CASTING NOTE (taken and adapted from Chuck Mee)

In this play, as in life itself, any female character can be played by a woman in a wheelchair. Any male character can be played by an Indian man. And that is not the subject of the play. There is not a single role in this play that must be played by a physically intact white person.

SYNOPSIS *The Flesh Is Willing*

Images of death and destruction have driven Suzanne back to the church she left years before. Jacob, a priest who recognizes Suzanne as his former high school crush, imagines similar tragedies after the Bamiyan Buddha statues are destroyed by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Awesta, an Afghan immigrant urges Suzanne and Jacob to act. As the truth about the statues' destruction is revealed by a refugee, Sayed, events that seemed like dreams unfold into redemption.

Note to theatres:

Effects, video screens and other effects may be utilized in as simple or as complex a manner as feasible. There is nothing about this play that requires anything more than a black box studio would offer.

SCENE 1

1985

Setting: San Francisco

Faint SOUNDS of explosions as from a great distance.

SAYED and AWESTA are praying. JACOB, 12, and SUZANNE, 11, are each in bed in separate areas of the stage.

None of the characters see or hear each other.

JACOB

Oh merciful God protect me from my sins.

SUZANNE

Dear God, and Jesus, please make the Night Stalker go away and not come to our house and keep us safe and keep all the people safe.

Please make Mom not be so sick and get better.

And please make sure my dad doesn't go to hell even though he left.

SOUNDS dissipate.

JACOB

I know something bad will happen if I sin.

V.O AWESTA

Find the right path and you will be free from suffering.

JACOB

That was weird. (BEAT) God if that was you please tell me what to do. Really tell me.

SUZANNE

Dear God, God don't let me die till I'm old. And please find me a puppy.

JACOB

And God please send me a puppy.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 2

1995

Setting: The Bamiyan region of Afghanistan

LIGHTS UP on two giant stone Buddha statues from the Bamiyan area of Afghanistan. (The Buddhas can be as elaborate or as simple as possible, through a live set, projections, photos or other means.)

AWESTA, 26, enters, obviously speaking to a tour group. Other actors in different garb may play tour members.

AWESTA

As you can see these monolithic stone structures have existed for thousands of years and will likely outlive us all. They were carved in 400 BC by unknown sculptors, but it is thought that the excavation of the rock and the completion of the statues involved the knowledge of engineering concepts we now know to be correct and extremely practical. (Beat) Prior to 1990, this valley was a popular tourist spot for Afghan and outside visitors. Its remote location and beautiful vistas were a magnet to adventurous tourists from throughout the world.

AWESTA (appears to) shepherd the tour group offstage but does not exit.

AWESTA

May all who are burdened have their burdens lightened. May all those who suffer be released.

I'm not exactly a Buddhist, like I was born with it, but the religion comforts me. I thought if I could endure suffering, if suffering was normal, not a tragedy, then I would have something to live for. My parents were not pleased. They believe we can know God, receive direct knowledge of God through our prayers and actions. You would think with this inclusive feeling they would understand that I too want to know God, but I also want meaning in my life on earth. We all pray, why does it matter that they pray in Arabic and I in English, that I seek enlightenment and peace while knowing I must suffer?

BLACKOUT

SCENE 3

San Francisco, 1995

LIGHTS up on JACOB, 22, and SUZANNE, 21 on opposite sides of the stage. They do not see or acknowledge each other.

SOUND of rumbling as heard from a great distance.

JACOB

Lord give me faith. I want to do your will and not my own. Please let my fear not infect the world.

SOUNDS dissipate.

V.O. AWESTA

Find the right path and you will be free from suffering.

JACOB

God I want YOU to talk to me! Please!

SUZANNE:

God don't let me die in my sleep, make sure I'm awake so I'll know I'm really dead. And send me to heaven right away.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 4

December 2000 Early morning. San Francisco.
SUZANNE and DAVE in their apartment. They
are watching a video of Tchaikovsky's
Nutcracker.

SUZANNE

(humming)I wish I could dance.

DAVE

You dance great!

SUZANNE

I mean fancy dancing. Ballet, or that Russian dance, the costumes...

DAVE

I can teach you. C'mon. Seriously.

DAVE rises and begins humming the Russian
dance. "Russian Dance" from the Nutcracker
plays. He dances clumsily, but in the way the
dance is often portrayed - squatting and kicking.

DAVE

See. Practice now you'll have it down by Christmas.

SUZANNE

(BEAT) Can you feed the cat?

DAVE

I fed her.

SUZANNE

She's still hungry, look at her. Come on.

DAVE

She looks fine. Good. Healthy.

SUZANNE

Shes licking her lips like she does, she wants more.

DAVE

I gave her the whole can, she left a bit on the plate, look.

SUZANNE

But she's walking around the dish, like she always does. LOOK.

DAVE

I'll give her some more later. If she's hungry.

SUZANNE

She's hungry now.

DAVE

Hon, I'll take care of her later. Don't be stressed.

SUZANNE

I know. OK.

SUZANNE exits.

DAVE

(calling after SUZANNE) You'll be fine, she'll be fine.

SUZANNE (O.S)

Are you ready?

DAVE

Yeah, let's go.

BLACKOUT

LIGHTS UP on SUZANNE sitting up on an exam table speaking with AWESTA/NURSE.

AWESTA/NURSE

Everything looks fine, 12 weeks along, shouldn't be any problems.

SUZANNE

Will it hurt?

AWESTA/NURSE

Oh they give you something to relax you, it'll be fine.

SUZANNE

Will it hurt?

AWESTA/NURSE

There's a little discomfort, they'll give you something.

SUZANNE

It's not my fault.

AWESTA/NURSE

No one is/

SUZANNE

/I wouldn't have waited so long I had to find a doctor that would take my insurance. I usually go to St. Mary's, that wasn't going to work.

AWESTA/NURSE

It's fine, the doctor will be in shortly. You've signed everything, you're good to go. Blood type, emergency contact, religion, this says you're a Buddhist? I haven't met a lot of Buddhists in ...situations like this.

SUZANNE

I , kind of, I used to...If I need a regular, a priest can you call one?

AWESTA/NURSE

(BEAT) Just sit tight, nothing's going to happen, nothing. (BEAT) All right then.

SUZANNE

Can you tell my boyfriend I'm doing OK? His name is Dave, he's in the waiting room?

AWESTA/NURSE

There's no one out there.

SUZANNE

Are you sure?

AWESTA/NURSE

Now just hold still, I'm sure he's in the rest room, or getting a coffee. It's going to be a little while. Don't fret.

AWESTA/NURSE exits.

SUZANNE

Fucking Dave, fucking life, fucking stupid/ This is Ok, Ok, I'm going to be OK. Not damned to hell. Buddhists don't have hell. I'll just have to come back as a pinworm. It's all OK. God I wish my mom

SUZANNE gets up from the table, calls out the door of the exam room.

DAVE! DAVE! (BEAT)

Are you listening...Tell me it'll be OK.

SUZANNE whispers to herself.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 5

March 2001

SETTING: The same Bamiyan region of Afghanistan,

A blackout. SOUNDS of rumbling as from a great distance. Lights fade up to reveal SAYED HUSSEIN carrying a large black box on his back. He traverses the stage, lays down the box and exits.

LIGHTS UP on two giant stone Buddha statues from the Bamiyan area of Afghanistan.

SOUNDS continue and become louder - explosions, gunfire and explosives as the statues are destroyed.

SOUND of TV news, describing the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. (Can be a video clip, YouTube sound, voice over, etc.)

LIGHTS fade out on the Buddhas and fade up on:

JACOB, 30, sleeping at one end of the stage; SUZANNE, 29, and DAVE, 31 sleeping in another.

San Francisco, March 2001

JACOB's room is spare and has the suggestion of financial poverty while SUZANNE and DAVE's room suggest pretty things and cleanliness. The two sides do not see or acknowledge each other.

SOUND of rumbling continues as heard from a great distance.

SUZANNE

(reacting to rumbling sound) What the fuck?

DAVE

What?

SUZANNE

I heard., didn't you hear, that weird sound...

DAVE

(BEAT) ...You worried it was an earthquake? I'd know if it was, and it wasn't. You OK?

SUZANNE

Never mind, let's go back to bed.

JACOB

Nam ho range kyo, nam ho rengo kyo/

JACOB slaps himself.

JACOB

Not these prayers, not again. Lord Jesus Christ forgive me. Send me your prayers!

Lights fade on JACOB , SUZANNE and DAVE. LIGHTS UP on SAYED sitting in a makeshift cell - dirt, rocks etc.

SAYED

(praying in Arabic)

END OF SCENE

SCENE 6
May 2001

SAYED and AWESTA/WIFE on one side of the stage; SUZANNE on the other.
SUZANNE in a Catholic church in San Francisco; SAYED and AWESTA/WIFE in a small dark room with a dirt floor. The two sides do not acknowledge each other.

SUZANNE

I can't stop dreaming. I see the smashed faces, stone and dirt, statues, they're only statues right? (BEAT) But the noise, the grit, the rubble, I, I remember, I go back, I was 7 when it started. "It." I called them "it." Starts the same way, every time. My head starts to thrum and I hear sounds, water and screaming and sweaty feelings about how I will be in the ground, body rotting but undead in spirit. My dreams tell me that's how it will be, disembodied but awake. Boom boom boom the pounding goes on and nothing helps. It's happening again, the Buddhas are broken and I can't stop thinking that's me someday, that's me, my body will be dead, smashed and unknowing, but my soul will be alive. Endless dark or life eternal why don't we KNOW? (BEAT) I wish the songs of my childhood offered me peace.

SAYED

I will be at peace if you can get out. Here. (Hands AWESTA an envelope) Go to Kabul, go. Don't be foolish! Take our daughter and go!

SUZANNE sings.

SUZANNE

LULLAY, THOU LITTLE TINY CHILD,
LA LA LULEE LULLAY.
LULLAY THOU LITTLE TINY CHILD,
LA LA LULLEE, LULLAY.

I know something else is going to happen. Please Lord spare me, I'm sorry, I didn't mean... spare everyone, forgive all my sins. Help me, help the Buddhas, the people there. The pictures are horrible, the smashed faces, aren't they living spirits?

AWESTA/WIFE

We must find a way to go. Together.

SAYED

It is too dangerous, I'm still under suspicion.

AWESTA/WIFE

After what you have done for them? They have to let us, you, there are aid camps, Red Cross, they must help.

JACOB enters the church.

SUZANNE
God lives in us all please spare me, spare
them, fix me, them, help my mom, she
can't breathe sometimes. Spare her, fix
them, fix me.

JACOB
Dear Lord, why did you put me on earth
when I don't understand? You love all
sinners; have mercy on me a miserable
sinner. Lord, hear my prayer. Lord hear
my prayer.

AWESTA/WIFE
I'm not leaving/

SAYED
/Please. I can survive if I know you are safe.

AWESTA/WIFE
I won't find peace without you/

SAYED
/Go.

AWESTA/WIFE
I am safer here than you will be. Please, you must leave before something worse/

SAYED
Worse? Worse than fear, shadows, hiding, whispering every moment?

SOUND of rumbling as from a great distance.

SAYED
No!

SAYED exits with AWESTA/WIFE as SOUND
of rumbling fades out.

SUZANNE
I, hello, Bless me Father/

JACOB
/I'm sorry, do you need something?

SUZANNE

Oh. I thought I might be in trouble, this isn't my church, I don't usually go to church, I stopped a long time ago.

JACOB

It's not my church either. It's near my office.

SUZANNE

You have an office?

JACOB

I work for the diocese.

SUZANNE

Like a job-job?

JACOB

Yes, many priests have jobs with the Church.

SUZANNE

Wow. I had no idea. (BEAT)

JACOB

You live near here.

SUZANNE

Yes.

JACOB

You're from here?

SUZANNE

Yes. Am I in trouble? Sinners are allowed to go to church, right? Isn't that the idea?

JACOB

I'm sorry, of course you look familiar, that's all.

SUZANNE

I see. Well...

SUZANNE

I won't keep you from your prayers.

JACOB

Miss, I don't want to disturb you.

SUZANNE

I'm sorry it's just weird. A priest, with a job, I hope your prayers count. (BEAT) Pray for me anyway? For everyone?

JACOB

I will pray for you. The world is always in my prayers.

SUZANNE

Could you pray for the Buddhas? The Bamiyan Buddhas? They were smashed, I can't help it, it's awful, please pray for them. And me. And my mom.

JACOB

You, have you seen/

SUZANNE runs out.

JACOB

Our Lord in heaven. save us from sin from our weakness. Have mercy even for those who destroy. May I be called to help them if it is your wish.

LIGHTS up on SAYED.

SAYED

Save them before me. Always them.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 7

June 2001 Bishop SOLELEO's office, San Francisco

SUZANNE enters.

SUZANNE
I want to see the priest who works for the Bishop.

AWESTA/RECEPTIONIST
(laughs) Father Jacob. Who is here, please?

SUZANNE
A needy parishioner.

AWESTA/RECEPTIONIST
All right.

RECEPTIONIST exits. JACOB enters.

JACOB
Hello? Oh.

SUZANNE
I know this is weird but I, you, I know you, right?

JACOB
Yes.

SUZANNE
So it's not weird, you look familiar, right?

JACOB
It was a long time ago. You hated calculus.

SUZANNE
Oh my God. Sorry. Oh jeez. The collar, the short hair, yeah, you're different. So, it's OK, you're a priest, not gonna hit on me? Again?

JACOB
I'm a priest. I've taken vows We're fine.

SUZANNE
All right then, so...could you do a home visit?

JACOB

Is someone in your family ill? You might want to go to a parish priest/

SUZANNE

/I told you, I think I did, I go and pray but I don't have a church.

JACOB

What is it that you need?

SUZANNE

I want to talk to someone who knows what its like to be scared.

JACOB

(laughs)

SUZANNE

Ok, someone who won't laugh at me.

JACOB

I'm sorry, I don't know anyone who's not scared sometime.

SUZANNE

But you're a priest, you're going to heaven, you do good works. I'm just a regular person, I do all kinds of crappy stuff and now the Bamiyan Buddhas are smashed and I know something terrible is going to happen.

JACOB

What do you know about the Buddhas?

SUZANNE

Nothing, except it's an evil world where they could be destroyed and I know it's just the harbinger of something more terrible. Harbinger.

JACOB

You should pray. Pray that something better is in store for all of us. I'm sorry.

JACOB exits.

SUZANNE

(Calls after JACOB)

Please, I know you can help me.

RECEPTIONIST/AWESTA enters.

SUZANNE

Do you know him? Well? I mean, it's weird but I think he can help me.

RECEPTIONIST/AWESTA

He'll understand sometime, maybe not now.

SUZANNE

I know he's a priest, I'm not after him or anything.

They both laugh.

SUZANNE

So could I leave my number? Maybe/

AWESTA/RECEPTIONIST

/Of course.

AWESTA/RECEPTIONIST takes number.

SUZANNE

Thanks.

SUZANNE exits.