

GHOST

By Katarzyna Müller

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American Blues Theater

“Alarming rise in Americans with Long Covid symptoms”
March, 2024

“Long Covid can impair quality of life more than advanced cancers”
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GHOST

Synopsis

On the Southwest Side of Chicago, a woman is trapped in a body that won't cooperate with her mind. While her sisters struggle to manage her illness and a decaying bungalow, she survives with a vibrant imagination that takes her to places her body can no longer go.

Inspired by the playwright's experience with Long Covid.

Characters

GHOST - 30s, female.

Her past is irrelevant to her present.

OLDER - 40s, female, the ghost's older sister.

She married (and divorced) her prom date and moved two miles south to the suburb of Oak Lawn.

YOUNGER - 20s, female, the ghost's younger sister.

She left to study at a succession of prestigious universities, then returned for graduate school at the University of Chicago.

Settings

The front porch of an inherited bungalow.

A bedroom in the same bungalow.

The inside of GHOST's mind.

Casting note

The best person for the role has taken any path (whether biological or otherwise) to gender identification.

*Dedicated to anyone who has felt invisible
in their illness or disability*

SCENE 1

SFX: crickets, cars, and stray dogs.

SFX: two gunshots in the distance.

A summer night in Chicago.

A bungalow. Front steps. A porch.

YOUNGER sits on the top step.

Her fingers are wrapped around a mug.

The metal screen door opens.

OLDER enters and pulls off a medical mask.

She stretches.

It's loaded.

OLDER

What -

YOUNGER

The dishwasher.

OLDER

Oh.

YOUNGER

I can't believe how many dishes two, three people can -

OLDER

It's broken.

YOUNGER

Pause.

YOUNGER cont.

The dishwasher is broken.

OLDER

Motherfucker.

YOUNGER

Sorry I shoulda -

OLDER

No, no. It's not your job to babysit me in the kitchen.

YOUNGER

She didn't plan to live here long so she didn't -

OLDER

Yeah.

YOUNGER

- fix anything that was broken.

OLDER

Nobody fuckin' listens to me.

YOUNGER

You told her to fix the dishwasher?

OLDER

I told her to sell this fucking house! When Dad died, I told Mom, *sell* it.

YOUNGER

Mom loved this house.

OLDER

Then she died. And now we're stuck with it.

YOUNGER

The realtor said -

OLDER

Fuck the realtor!

YOUNGER

- a fresh coat of paint, some new curtains, plant a few flowers.

OLDER

Fuck. The. Realtor.

YOUNGER

It was a rational decision.

OLDER

Rational. Mm-hm. There is nothin' rational about our lives right now.

OLDER lights a cigarette and inhales.

She blows out smoke slowly.

Yyyyyyup.

YOUNGER sips from the mug.

No way we're makin' money on this house.

YOUNGER

Everyone's making money on real estate now.

OLDER

Yeah, but ... here? People wanna get *out*, not get *in*.

As though on cue, two more gunshots.

Hear that? That's not exactly the sound of money rollin' in here.

YOUNGER

My professor, you know, my dissertation chair?

OLDER doesn't know.

OLDER

Uh-huh. Sure.

YOUNGER

She bought a condo in Hyde Park for \$200,000. Now it's worth, a lot more. Something like \$500,000.

OLDER

No shit! A half million bucks?

YOUNGER

That's what she told me.

OLDER

Hm.

YOUNGER

What.

OLDER

Maybe she was tryin' to impress you.

YOUNGER

I said she was my *professor*. My *dissertation chair*. She doesn't need to impress me.

OLDER

You ever sleep with one of your teachers?

YOUNGER

What. No!! Why would I - ?! Absolutely not!!

OLDER

"The lady protests a lot." Is that the quote? I'm tryna remember from high school. I think it was Shakespeare. I always liked Shakespeare.

Pause.

Well? You gonna correct me?

YOUNGER

“The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”

OLDER

Macbeth?

YOUNGER

Hamlet.

OLDER puts out her cigarette.

OLDER

All rightee then. I'm gonna go in and wash those motherfuckin' dishes.

YOUNGER

I'll do it.

OLDER

Tonight?

YOUNGER

I'll do it in the morning.

Pause.

OLDER

You know that everything's dirty. Spoons, cereal bowls ...

YOUNGER

I said I'll do it.

Pause.

OLDER

I guess we could get some Egg McMuffins, eat 'em in those little yellow wrappers -

YOUNGER

Jesus Christ. I said I'll do it!

Pause.

OLDER searches for a positive end to the conversation.

OLDER

You cold?

YOUNGER

Cold?

OLDER gestures towards the mug.

OLDER

You're drinkin' hot tea in July.

YOUNGER

It relaxes me.

OLDER

Well, good night.

YOUNGER

Good night.

OLDER puts on her mask.

She hesitates, her hand on the screen door.

OLDER exits.

YOUNGER sips.

SFX: a dog barks down the street.

Lights fade.

SCENE 2

Night.

A room.

A hospital bed.

But this is not a hospital.

We see the details of a home. Books, clothes, a floral duvet cover, posters taped to the wall.

This is a childhood bedroom hastily transitioned into an adult's sick room.

A woman enters.

A living ghost.

She wears loose pajamas.

There is music.

Chopin, Nocturne No. 2 in E-Flat.

Da dum, da da daaaa da

Da DUM, dadadada DA dum

GHOST moves with the music, in a joyful, free-form ballet.

She feels the notes in every ounce of her body.

Chopin transitions into Chicago house music: Move Your Body, by Marshall Jefferson.

Thump thump thump thump

*GHOST dances in perfect sync to the beat,
aggressive and precise.*

Thump thump thump thump

*“Move your body
It’s gonna set you free
Move your body
It’s gonna set you FREE”*

The music starts to fade.

*Exhausted, in pain, GHOST lowers herself to the
floor.*

She pulls herself into a fetal position.

BLACKOUT

Scene 3

The next morning.

The front porch.

OLDER leans over the metal railing.

She smokes.

The screen door creaks open.

YOUNGER appears, pulls off rubber dish gloves.

YOUNGER

You said you were gonna quit.

OLDER

When?

YOUNGER

At Dad's funeral.

OLDER

We say a lot of stupid things when we're grievin'.

Beat.

YOUNGER

Are you grieving now?

OLDER

Not right this second.

YOUNGER tries to speak.

Oh *puh*-lease don't say that grief is a *journey* and grief is a *circle* or some other bullshit thing that's round. Grief is a one-way street. You get on it, and you fuckin' stay on it.

YOUNGER

Smoking isn't healthy.

OLDER

Well, duh.

OLDER smokes.

YOUNGER

Have you actually tried to quit? There are so many new ideas out there.

OLDER

Like?

YOUNGER

Water.

OLDER

Water.

YOUNGER

Studies show that if you drink a ton of water, it flushes out the toxins. Then your body recalibrates itself. You know, chemically.

OLDER

Yeah right Miz P - H - D in twentieth century repressed lesbian poetry.

YOUNGER

Queer.

OLDER

What?

YOUNGER

The word is queer. And it's not poetry. It's Lorraine Hansberry and Shirley Jackson and -

OLDER

I know! I just, don't think that you have the background to be talkin' about chemistry.

YOUNGER

I was trying to be helpful.

OLDER

I know.

OLDER smokes.

Everyone smokes in Paris, right? I don't know. I've never been. Do they? Is it still legal there? Inside bars, I mean.

YOUNGER shrugs.

When you were there. Was everyone smokin' in bars?

YOUNGER

I didn't go to the bars.

OLDER

Oh my God. Why do you always have to be so *specific*? I don't mean only bars. Restaurants? I assume that you ate when you were there.

YOUNGER

I wasn't paying attention to the people. I was there for -

OLDER: Research.

YOUNGER: Research.

OLDER takes one last drag.

She tosses the cigarette on the concrete porch.

She grinds the butt with her heel.

OLDER

So tell me. What kind of research did you do on dead women?

YOUNGER

You make it sound like -

OLDER

What. What?

YOUNGER

I'm not an undertaker.

OLDER points back at the house.

OLDER

Maybe choose your words more carefully.

YOUNGER

That's not, that's not what -

OLDER

She can hear you.

YOUNGER

You said dead women. Those are *your* words, not mine.

OLDER

She can hear you!

YOUNGER

She can't hear us when we're on the porch.

OLDER

The window is open.

YOUNGER

Do you want me to close it?

OLDER

No, leave it open. The oxygen's good for her.

YOUNGER

I really don't think that she can hear us. The wind is blowing, hm, I think *this* way, and if we talk *here*, then the sound would carry in the opposite direction.

OLDER

So you're an expert in physics too?

YOUNGER

No.

OLDER

Mm-hm.

YOUNGER

Look, there's an easy way to test this. You talk outside and I'll go inside.

OLDER

You're gonna stand in her room?

YOUNGER

Sure.

OLDER

Next to the bed?

YOUNGER

Yes.

OLDER

Make sure you're standin' right next to where her head is.

YOUNGER

OK.

OLDER

No, not standing. Like, lean your head down next to the pillow. By her ears. By her face.

YOUNGER doesn't move.

She's not ready to see GHOST today.

YOUNGER

Maybe she's sleeping.

Maybe.

OLDER

It's hard to tell -

YOUNGER

I know.

OLDER

- when she's laying there like that.

YOUNGER

Pause.

We can't do this forever.

Pause.

I know.

OLDER

GHOST enters.

Only the audience can see her.

Music swells.

Sophie Ellis-Bextor's Murder on the Dancefloor.

GHOST's body becomes loose and limber, as she throws herself into the music.

Like Barry Keoghan in the last scene of Saltburn.

*"If you think you're getting away
I will prove you wrong
I'll take you all the way
Boy, just come along
Hear me when I say"*

“Hey

*It’s murder on the dance floor
But you better not kill the groove*

*Hey hey
Hey hey*

*It’s murder on the dance floor
But you better not steal the moves
DJ, gonna burn this goddamn house right down”*

GHOST dances.

Lights fade.

Music continues.

END OF PLAY