



# THE HOW AND THE WHY

BY SARAH TREEM



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THE HOW AND THE WHY  
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THE HOW AND THE WHY was originally produced by  
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Emily Mann, Artistic Director; Timothy J. Shields, Managing Director;  
Mara Isaacs, Producing Director.

THE HOW AND THE WHY was commissioned by Playwrights Horizons  
with funds provided by Kate and Samuel Weingarten.

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In addition, the following notice must appear in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play:

I, BEING BORN A WOMAN AND DISTRESSED  
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THE HOW AND THE WHY received its world premiere at the McCarter Theatre Center (Emily Mann, Artistic Director; Timothy J. Shields, Managing Director; Mara Isaacs, Producing Director) in Princeton, New Jersey, opening on January 14, 2011. It was directed by Emily Mann; the set design was by Daniel Ostling; the costume design was by Jennifer Moeller; the lighting design was by Stephen Strawbridge; and the sound design was by Robert Kaplowitz. The cast was as follows:

ZELDA KAHN . . . . . Mercedes Ruehl  
RACHEL HARDEMAN . . . . . Bess Rous

## **CHARACTERS**

ZELDA KAHN, 56

RACHEL HARDEMAN, 28

## **PLACE**

A senior professor's office in Cambridge, Mass.  
Later, a dive bar in Boston.

## **TIME**

Present. Late Autumn.

## **NOTE**

These women think and speak quickly. Respect their silences.

# THE HOW AND THE WHY

## Scene 1

*Zelda is behind an elegant mahogany desk, pouring over an unbound manuscript and checking it against a few heavy tomes open before her.*

*The office is dark, auspicious, and very masculine.*

*Rachel enters hesitantly through the open door.*

*She watches Zelda for a long time. Zelda remains oblivious.*

*Finally Rachel inches forward, with surprising silence. She stands in front of the desk like an errant pupil.*

*Zelda looks up and freezes.*

ZELDA. Oh my god.

RACHEL. Hi, I'm Rachel.

ZELDA. I'm Zelda. It's a pleasure to meet you. *(Rachel offers her hand. Zelda accepts it. Holds it a moment too long.)* Oh, I'm sorry.

RACHEL. That's okay.

ZELDA. Won't you sit?

RACHEL. Thank you. *(Rachel sits. Silence.)*

ZELDA. When did you arrive?

RACHEL. Just now.

ZELDA. Did you take the bus? Or the train?

RACHEL. My boyfriend drove me.

ZELDA. Oh, is he outside?

RACHEL. No, he went into town. He's going to pick me up in a bit.

ZELDA. Oh. Wonderful. (*Silence.*)

RACHEL. So thanks for seeing me. I hope I didn't freak you out or anything.

ZELDA. Freak me out?

RACHEL. By just calling, out of the blue.

ZELDA. You didn't freak me out. I've been waiting for that call for quite some time now.

RACHEL. I wasn't ready until recently.

ZELDA. Please, don't explain, that will only make things worse.

RACHEL. Make things worse?

ZELDA. For me, I mean, not for you. (*Beat.*)

RACHEL. (*Confused.*) I'm sorry, have I offended you?

ZELDA. What?

RACHEL. Do you want me to leave?

ZELDA. What? Are you insane? Please sit. (*Rachel doesn't move.*)

Or, if you prefer, I'll stand. (*Zelda stands up. Rachel doesn't know what to make of this. Maybe she laughs. Maybe she just sits in a chair across from Zelda. Zelda sits too.*) There. Isn't this nice? So. How should we begin?

RACHEL. Begin?

ZELDA. How would you like to proceed?

RACHEL. I ... I don't know.

ZELDA. I would assume you've given it some thought.

RACHEL. Of course, I've —

ZELDA. Do you have questions you'd like to ask me?

RACHEL. I have a million, but —

ZELDA. The way I see it, your areas of curiosity must be divisible into the historical, the biological, and the psychological.

RACHEL. Would it ... would it be okay if we just sat here for a second?

ZELDA. Of course. (*They sit in silence. Staring at each other.*)

RACHEL. I like your office.

ZELDA. Thank you.

RACHEL. It feels very ... masculine.

ZELDA. You mean it feels significant.

RACHEL. No, I don't. (*More silence.*)

ZELDA. So, did you take the train or the bus?

RACHEL. No, my boyfriend / drove me.

ZELDA. (*Overlapping.*) Your boyfriend drove you. That's right. I must have had a small stroke. That was a joke, though at my age I really shouldn't kid. Oh dear, you look frightened. Forget I said anything. You are very beautiful.

RACHEL. I know.

ZELDA. Oh.

RACHEL. I'm sorry.

ZELDA. No, that's — it's good that you know.

RACHEL. I'm sorry, I'm terrible at compliments.

ZELDA. I understand, so am I.

RACHEL. Plus, I'm so fucking nervous.

ZELDA. (*Quietly.*) So am I. Would you like a drink?

RACHEL. It's ten A.M.

ZELDA. Yes, I suppose that is a little early.

RACHEL. What have you got?

ZELDA. Champagne. Seems appropriate.

RACHEL. Okay. (*Zelda opens a cabinet to reveal a little refrigerator and full bar. She pulls out a champagne bottle.*)

ZELDA. My colleagues gave this to me the day I won a big honor in my field called the Dobzhansky Prize. I've been saving it for just the right occasion. (*Zelda pops the cork and pulls out two paper cups. She fills both a little too high and hands one to Rachel.*) L'Chaim.

RACHEL. What are we toasting to?

ZELDA. To life. (*They drink. Rachel looks around the office.*) I'm sorry it's such a mess. We're hosting a big conference here this weekend for NOORB — the National Organization of Research Biologists — it's like the Olympics of Biology — and we've been frantic, trying to prepare for it. (*Rachel just nods.*) You said you're a scientist too? On the phone?

RACHEL. Yes, I am. I'm a grad student at NYU.

ZELDA. Fantastic. Chemistry? Physics?

RACHEL. Biology, actually.

ZELDA. Biology. You're kidding. What are the odds? Molecular, I assume? That's the hot specialty these days. Inner space, as it were. Of which I am blissfully ignorant —

RACHEL. Evolutionary.

ZELDA. Evolutionary biology?

RACHEL. Yes.

ZELDA. As in, my field?

RACHEL. I know, right? *(Beat. Zelda stares at Rachel.)* So I, of course, know all about the NOORB conference this weekend.

ZELDA. You're a graduate student in evolutionary biology at NYU.

RACHEL. I am.

ZELDA. That is extraordinary. *(Uncomfortable silence. Rachel looks around the room.)*

RACHEL. Who said that?

ZELDA. Sorry?

RACHEL. That quote on your wall.

ZELDA. Ah. *(Zelda goes to her wall and pulls off a little wooden plaque. Reading.)* "My candle burns at both ends; // It will not last the night; // But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends — // It gives a lovely light!"

RACHEL. It sounds familiar. Is it Byron?

ZELDA. No.

RACHEL. Tennyson.

ZELDA. Vincent.

RACHEL. Who?

ZELDA. Edna St. Vincent Millay.

RACHEL. A woman wrote that?

ZELDA. You sound surprised.

RACHEL. It just sounds so ... ballsy.

ZELDA. She was, by all accounts. Vincent Millay.

RACHEL. Who is M?

ZELDA. Sorry?

RACHEL. "With love and admiration — "

ZELDA. Oh yes, M. Um, that would be Michael.

RACHEL. Who's Michael?

ZELDA. My ... boyfriend.

RACHEL. You have a boyfriend?

ZELDA. It's a little ridiculous, I know, at my age.

RACHEL. What does he do?

ZELDA. He's an oncologist.

RACHEL. He sounds smart.

ZELDA. He is.

RACHEL. So we both have smart boyfriends. There. That's something in common. *(Zelda smiles. They both relax. A bit.)*

ZELDA. Your boyfriend's name is?

RACHEL. Dean.

ZELDA. Is he very handsome?



RACHEL. I think so.

ZELDA. That's good. With a name like Dean it would be a shame if he weren't. *(The office phone rings.)*

RACHEL. Do you want to get that?

ZELDA. No, that's alright I — I'll just let them — in fact — *(Zelda picks up the ringing phone and replaces it on the receiver, effectively hanging up on the caller.)*

RACHEL. What if that was important?

ZELDA. Nobody calls this landline but pesky students. If it were important, they would know to call my — *(Zelda's cell phone starts to ring on the desk.)* Cell. *(Zelda checks the caller ID.)* I'm terribly sorry, would you mind if I just —

RACHEL. Of course. *(Zelda answers the call.)*

ZELDA. Hello? Hello, darling. It's not a great time, I'm with ... oh, I see, no that's alright, just tell me quickly ... I see ... yes, of course, Vienna it is then ... I'm looking forward to it, I really am ... yes, I'll call you later to discuss all the logistics ... alright, you too. *(Zelda hangs up.)* Speak of the devil.

RACHEL. Was that Michael?

ZELDA. Yes.

RACHEL. He's taking you to Vienna? *(Beat.)*

ZELDA. He is indeed.

RACHEL. When?

ZELDA. After NOORB.

RACHEL. That's so nice.

ZELDA. He's a nice man. *(For a moment Zelda is distracted. Lost. Rachel watches her, carefully.)* I'm sorry, I — this is really an extraordinary day. What were we just discussing? Before I — was it your research?

RACHEL. My research? No.

ZELDA. Well, perhaps it should be.

RACHEL. You want to hear about my research?

ZELDA. A good place to begin. A rather neutral topic, isn't it?

RACHEL. Not to me. *(Zelda stops. Puts her hand on her heart. Looks at Rachel.)* Are you alright?

ZELDA. I'm fine ... just give me a moment. I am so glad you said that. I feel the same way.

RACHEL. I applied to the NOORB conference.

ZELDA. You did?

RACHEL. I didn't get in.

# THE HOW AND THE WHY

by Sarah Treem

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Evolution and emotion collide in Sarah Treem's thought-provoking and sharp play about science, family, and survival of the fittest. On the eve of a prestigious conference, an up-and-coming evolutionary biologist wrestles for the truth with an established leader in the field. This intimate and keenly perceptive play explores the difficult choices faced by women of every generation.

*"Sarah Treem's play brims with ideas and emotional colors that eddy and refract like rivulets in a lively, plunging stream."*

—The Washington Post

*"... an exhilarating, intellectual evening out."*

—The Star-Ledger

*"A moving portrait of a woman meeting with equanimity an unexpected, often painful series of questions about the choices she made in the past."*

—The New York Times

*"Two absorbing hours with two finely formed, interesting, smart, and captivating women ... a very rare achievement indeed for women in and at the theatre."*

—The Feminist Spectator

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