

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Juniper Productions

A Songfest for the Silly

by Whitney Weinstein

[Theatre Philadelphia](#) and [thINKingDANCE](#) continue our partnership, begun in 2018, bringing coverage and new perspectives to Philadelphia's vibrant theatre scene.

MUSICALS WITH FRIENDS is unadulterated fun, especially if you're an avid fan of musical theatre, laughing, and polls.

The evening's host, Elizabeth Meisenzahl (or Lize according to her Zoom name), describes the rules and expectations: three contestants are provided a song from a famous musical, then challenged to perform it as a dramatic monologue. Even more exciting, key lyrics have been removed. The live audience, directed to the Zoom chat feature, suggests word replacements, similar to the game of mad libs, except that instead of parts of speech, the prompts are questions, almost icebreakers. For example, Lize asks the audience for the most irritating roommate habit. After a pause for response, she reads the chat replies aloud before settling on one, such as sleep-talking. After the substitutions are selected, the performer goes offscreen to rehearse while viewers engage in musical-themed trivia. After all the monologues, audience members vote for the best overall performance. With that, Lize exclaims, "Let's play *MUSICALS WITH FRIENDS*!"

Coming to us from a call for artists or sought by the show's creators, meet tonight's contestants:

Name: LaNeshe

Song: "[Burn](#)" from *Hamilton*

Word question/suggestion: first thing you do in the morning when you wake up: pet my cat

Costume/prop: red glasses with flames

Best revised lyric: "The world has no right to my belly button."

Why we should vote for LaNeshe: "There was fire."

Name: RacQuel

Song: "[Out Tonight](#)" from *RENT*

Word question/suggestion: activity you've been doing in quarantine: sourdough bread making

Costume/prop: shot glass

Best revised lyric: "You can get in, too, if you slap yo' mama!"

Why we should vote for RacQuel: "Because there's always time for tequila!"

Name: Raluca

Song: "[Spoonful of Sugar](#)" from *Mary Poppins*

Word question/suggestion: worst part about commuting to work: putting on pants

Costume/prop: bottle of "elation" (a wine bottle labeled by a mad-libs inspired word for "intense emotion")

Best revised lyric/why we should vote for Raluca: "The robin re-tiles his nest."

Our alcoholic Mary Poppins couldn't quite win the crowd over like LaNeshe on fire and RacQuel getting tequila tipsy, who tied for a spot in the grand finale. The true star of the show, though, was Lize. Not only did she speak clearly and with vigor, but she integrated and engaged with the audience participants, generating major success in the interactive element. Don't know what an onomatopoeia is? Want to tell the group it's okay not to wear pants on your work commute? Without missing a beat, Lize was reacting alongside us, facilitating the inclusivity of all parts of the production, from typed messages to moderating to orchestrating the screentime ins-and-outs of the event's contestants. She spoke as confidently as if she was well-rehearsed, but her real-time commentary divulged her unscriptedness. The spontaneity of Lize and instant feedback from the polls only made the participation more enthralling. Somehow 10% of that audience voted that cereal *is* a soup?!

I enjoyed the spoken word renditions of the songs, though I sometimes missed the familiar melodies attached to the lyrics. When truly submerged in the performance, the contestants spoke rhythmically in a way that was almost as equally gratifying. The most rewarding aspect was emerging camaraderie between participants. Strangers empathized over quarantine-related issues in a cathartic way. In answering questions together (like identifying favorite food delivery services), commonalities surfaced, but so did lighthearted debates. *MUSICALS WITH FRIENDS* bestowed a fast-paced, entertaining opportunity to relate and chuckle over matters that can otherwise feel formidable. I left feeling bonded with new friends over private jokes, akin through our samenesses, both within and outside the Zoom performance.

In closing remarks, producer Sonya Aronowitz from [Juniper Productions](#) encouraged audience members to watch the season finale, which featured winning contestants from all previous episodes. After all the delightful amusement from this live-streamed, reality-show event, I will definitely be tuning in for Season 2 of *MUSICALS WITH FRIENDS*!

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[MUSICALS WITH FRIENDS](#), [Juniper Productions](#) in association with [Manayunk Theatre Company](#), 2020 Fringe Festival, September 23, October 4.

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