We Go By Many Names

By Mika Higgins-Woo

Character Descriptions:

This play explores an unfortunately common struggle that many people of color, including myself, face: getting mixed up with someone who is of the same or similar race or ethnicity as you. In addition to highlighting this issue, the play emphasizes the hurt that this common microaggression causes people -- in this case adolescent girls -- *especially* when they are as different as possible in all other ways. It is because of this latter point that I created characters that are as different from each other as possible in terms of personality, hobbies and interests.

OLIVIA: Student athlete. Varsity track team. Sporty, outgoing, confident.

MAYA: Stereotypical “nerd.” Extremely interested in science. On the quiet end of the spectrum.

MINA: Activist. Writer, leader, journalist. Not afraid to stand up for what she believes in.

GRACE: Musical kid. Plays the electric guitar in a punk rock band that rehearses every day.

Lights up on four Asian teenage girls sitting on blocks arranged in a semicircle, facing the audience. Each girl is of a different Asian ethnicity (this script says Korean, Japanese and Chinese, but it can be changed for casting purposes). Each girl has a non-descript blank mask in their hands.

ALL: We go by many names.

OLIVIA and MINA: Although we have our own.

MAYA:*(stands up)* Maya.

OLIVIA:*(stands up)* Olivia.

MINA:*(stands up)* Mina.

GRACE:*(stands up)* Grace.

MINA: Yet, for some reason we get called-

MAYA and OLIVIA: -other names.

OLIVIA: Names of people whom we know only by sight.

ALL: By sight. *(each girl accent the mask in their hands)*

GRACE: Sight is what people know us by.

MINA: We are clumped together-

OLIVIA: -forcefully, monotonously.

MINA: We are told that we are similar, interchangeable-

MAYA: -yet we have nothing in common.

GRACE: Nothing except our faces,

MINA: our dark hair,

MAYA: our single-lidded eyes

GRACE: and our flat noses.

OLIVIA: That's it.

MINA: *(steps forward)* I know what to expect on the second or third day of school. Once we've all played our little ice-breaker learn-each-others'-names games the teachers remember me as

"that Asian kid" only to teach their next class to remember the one Asian kid there the same way. I've learned to expect to be called Olivia or Maya or Grace in the next class.

OLIVIA, MAYA, GRACE: *(steps forward)* Which are *our* names-

MINA: -not mine. And to have to correct them and politely remind them, again, that no, sorry, my name is Mina and that Maya is in the other English class.

GRACE: That my name is Grace and that Mina is in the other math class.

OLIVIA: That my name is Olivia and that Grace is in the other gym class.

MINA: That my name is Mina and Maya is in the other bio class.

ALL: We stay silent-

GRACE: -and polite

MINA: -smiling,

OLIVIA: -demure,

MAYA: -tight-lipped.

GRACE: But what we want to say is

ALL: No!

MAYA: *My* name is Maya

OLIVIA: Olivia

MINA: Mina

GRACE: Grace

ALL: …and the girl that you just mistook me for? That's the other Asian girl you teach.

Everyone sits down. A pause.

GRACE: It just cuts so deep-

OLIVIA: -that what you know me for isn't my track times

MAYA: my bio research

MINA: my newspaper articles

GRACE: or my electric guitar performances.

ALL: You don't even know me enough to differentiate me from her.

Everyone points to a person to the side of her still not looking at one another and stomps once simultaneously on "her."

MINA: Like you take the time to learn Ashley apart from Emily even though they both have blonde hair and blue eyes-

OLIVIA: -and Joan from Julie even though they have brown curly hair,

MINA: -but you can't tell us apart.

MAYA: We're so "exotic and unique" that you just mix us up because we stand out.

GRACE: Well, if we're so unique then why are we mistaken for each other?

MAYA: Why do you recommend we hang out because-

OLIVIA: -"we'd have so much in common"?

MINA: Or think that we're cousins because-

GRACE: -"you swear you can't look that much alike and not be related."

ALL: Why?

All girls stand up on "why."

OLIVIA: Once I decided to try to talk to one of my teachers. I took a deep breath and I went up to him and asked why he called me Mina. He replied he knew I was Grace. It was just at a quick glance I looked like Mina.' I'm Olivia. *(sits down)*

MINA: My friend Madison genuinely thought that I was embarrassed that my twin sister was Maya and that's why I never mentioned it. I've never even met Maya before. *(sits down)*

GRACE: In first grade, Mina and I were playing together. Our teacher came up to me and asked if some girl could join our game and that maybe we could teach her a little bit of Chinese while we were at it. I'm Korean. Mina's Japanese. *(sits down)*

MAYA: Once I was shopping with classmates on a school trip and at some point the store became a little too crowded. The shopkeeper came up to Maya and me, who happened to be standing next to each other examining sweatshirts, and politely asked us to leave the store

because he was afraid we'd spread COVID-19 to his other customers. We were the only Asian people there. But he asked, so we left. *(sits down)*

GRACE: And everytime,

MAYA: none of us corrected them.

MINA and OLIVIA: Everytime,

GRACE: it's not our problem,

OLIVIA: It *shouldn't* be our problem,

ALL: and yet it is.

MAYA: Because everytime, I just feel so hurt, like *teachers*, the people who you're supposed to *trust*, can't even remember who you are! Can't tell you apart from people who are so vastly different in every way besides one.

OLIVIA: Because everytime, I just want to bang my fist on the table and yell.

MINA: Because everytime my classmates shoot me looks like "why aren't you standing up for yourself?? That's not your name!" and I just want to shout that they don't understand. No one does.

GRACE: Because every time I feel this guilt like "am I not unique enough? Why is the only defining feature about me my looks? Why doesn't anyone know me for anything other than where my parents grew up? Is it because I didn't give them anything else to know me by? Don't I owe that to them??" When I don't. I don't owe anything to anyone.

ALL: We don't owe anything to anyone.

They all sit down with a thud. A pause.

MAYA: The sad thing is-

OLIVIA: -that this isn't unusual.

MINA: This happens all the time.

MAYA: In fact, I bet it has happened at least once to every Asian girl at my school.

GRACE: It's happened to my cousins, my sisters, my mom-

OLIVIA: Why's that?

MAYA: It’s just sometimes-

MINA: -it’s just too much.

GRACE: It’s unfair.

OLIVIA: And all I want to do is-

MINA: -talk to someone.

MAYA: Talk to someone who would understand.

ALL: But no one ever understands.

Each girl repeats this phrase, getting increasingly frustrated and upset. Anger builds. The noises slowly grow louder and louder until everyone is yelling. Out of the chaos:

ALL: *(still yelling, but now in unison)* No. One. Ever. Understands!

All the girls throw their masks on the ground suddenly. Screaming stops. Everyone’s head goes down.

After three seconds of not looking at each other, the heads snap up and they see each other for the first time in the play. A pause.

GRACE and OLIVIA sit down, so that the only people remaining are MAYA and MINA.

Hallway talk sound effects play in the background and MAYA and MINA bump into each other like they are walking in the hallway. They freeze, still facing each other.

MAYA: *(turning out to the audience)* Usually if I ran into Mina in the hallway, I’d just apologize and move on to my next class. But this time, she started to talk to me. *(turns back to MINA)*

MINA: *(turning out to the audience)* Usually if I ran into Maya in the hallway, I’d just walk past to meet my friends at the other end of the hallway. But this time, something was different. I just needed someone…different to talk to this one time. So I closed my eyes and opened my mouth. *(turns back to MAYA)*

MINA: Hey. Um…your name is Maya right?

MAYA: Uh yeah, you’re Mina?

MINA: Yeah! I’m actually on my way to English with Mr. Henkin right now -- *(casually adding)* he always calls me Maya.

MAYA: No way! Same! I mean- uh - of course he doesn't call me Maya - but -um - he calls me Mina. *(point towards Mina; awkward laugh)*.

MINA: Ugh, literally *so* annoying.

MAYA: I know. God, it makes me so angry sometimes.

MINA: The worst. Don't even get me started. (*pause)* Where are *you* going?

MAYA: I'm on my way to Bio with-

MINA: Mr. Smith?

MAYA: Yeah.

MINA: Oh my God, once, he called me Maya and Grace in the same day.

MAYA: Stop, that's literally so relatable.

MINA: I know right! And once, my friend Madison over there *(points out into the distance)* thought that we *(point to MAYA and then to herself)* were twins. And I was like hello? We don't even look alike!

MAYA: Yeah, what? You're Japanese right? I'm Chinese. Ugh, that's so annoying, sorry.

MINA: Tell me about it.

MAYA: Listen, I have to go to class now but we should totally hang out sometime.

MINA: Uh yeah sure. What's your phone number? *(pulling out phone)*

MAYA: 518-884-4567

MINA: Oof, two 4's? Your Chinese parents must not like that!

MAYA: Eh it's fine, there are two 8's.

MINA: Fair point. I'll text you later….Olivia!

MAYA: Maya!

MINA: Joking, joking.

MAYA: Oh boy. See you around.

They high five and turn around to face the audience. This is the first time the audience has seen either of them smile...they both sit down and freeze.

Spotlight on OLIVIA as she stands up.

OLIVIA: So there is this thing that our school does where we are grouped into discussions by our race. "Affinity groups," they call them. They're for us to 'talk about our feelings and experiences away from the pressure of peers who don't look the same.'

GRACE: *(stands up)* But it's annoying cause, like, just because we look the same doesn't mean that we are going to have the same experiences or feel the same way about them.

MAYA: *(stands up)* We've had these affinity groups ever since we were in sixth grade.

MINA: *(stands up)* And usually we don't talk about anything, like, *real* in them.

OLIVIA: Just another free period to be honest.

GRACE: But now they're trying this new thing where there are no teachers there to "guide us" or whatever, so I guess it's not all bad. Today I got an email from the head of school saying that instead of assembly, I should head to room 501 for an 'affinity experience.'

MINA: I was the first one in the classroom…. when people started showing up one by one everyone kinda just made eye contact and pulled out their phones, waiting for the period to begin.

OLIVIA: I headed to the room, glad to get out of assembly, and I walked into a room of Asian girls staring at their phones. Shocker.

GRACE: I got there last, it was kinda awkward because though we're always in this meeting together none of us really know each other at all.

MAYA: Once we were all together around a table no one spoke for a while.

All the girls sit down on their blocks.

OLIVIA: So, um, hi… I'm Olivia.

MINA: Uhhhh hey, I'm Mina.

GRACE: Um… I'm Grace.

MAYA: Maya!

OLIVIA: This is kinda awkward.

(awkward stares and giggles)

GRACE: I mean, at least we get to skip assembly right?

MINA: But I mean, like, maybe they're on to something.

OLIVIA: What do you mean?

MINA: Well, like, maybe it would be good to have a space to talk about little things without everyone just staring and not getting it, right?

GRACE: Uhhh, what do you mean "little things?" I don't think any of us have, like, anything in common.

MINA: No, I don't mean like interests or like extracurriculars or anything like that. I meant like things that have to do with being Asian.

OLIVIA: Okay sure yeah, but I still don't get that either -- like, 'hello, I'm Grace, my parents immigrated from China.' Wow. So enlightening. And like I don't even really think that's true for everyone here either...

MAYA: Yeah but I think I understand what you're *(pointing at Maya)* saying. Like this meeting *exists* so we can talk about the little things at school that friends and teachers wouldn't understand.

OLIVIA: Okay….but really??? "Little things?" You guys are saying these things like we're like aliens and like we have weird little alien tics or something.

MAYA: No, but like teachers making mistakes and that stuff…you know what I mean?

OLIVIA: Not really…

MINA: You're telling me that you've *never* been called Grace…or Mina by a teacher or friend before?

OLIVIA: I mean, yeah like all the time, but like it doesn't really matter that much to me you know, like it's not really the basis of a discussion. Like ok…I'm being called a different name…but the people that know me know my real name and that's what matters, right?

MAYA: But you never feel hurt that your teachers don't know your name, or don't care enough to learn it?

GRACE: That's exactly how *I* feel! I see what you're saying now..sometimes I just wanna be like 'uh *no* dude I've known you for like all year….get it right.'

OLIVIA: Yeah I guess you're right, but I wouldn't ever like *do* anything about it…

MAYA: Why not though? Like environmental club has rallies like basically every other day…why can't we do something for a change? Is speaking out really only applicable to reducing, reusing and recycling? They want us to make the most of this affinity space, right?

MINA: Oh my gosh! Why don't we start a protest? Like a walk-out! Everyone can just stand up and walk out of class at a predetermined time and then we can march in the hallways with signs and stuff??! That would be awesome.

OLIVIA: Uhm? No thanks. I didn't even really like this affinity space thing in the first place, you would have to pay me *money* to make a scene in the middle of class.

GRACE: Yeah ok I agree. I've come around to a meeting like this, but we don't really have to *do* anything about it. Like can't we just commiserate and then go back to math class or whatever?

MINA: You guys are not getting it! We can commiserate all we want, but if we want *change* then we have to fight for it. Imagine. Maybe the teachers don't even know what they're doing is hurting us! Think about it as letting them know they've been jerks.

MAYA: At what expense though? I love this space, and I agree that, like, we should do something about this problem and everything but like…I still *like* these teachers. Like even though they get my name wrong I think they're still good teachers, you know?

GRACE: No I get what you're saying. Like I wouldn't want to *embarrass* them in front of everyone for doing something that maybe they didn't even understand was wrong. I feel like that's just mean.

MAYA: Not to mention like risk my reputation, you know? Like some of these teachers are writing my college recs! I don't want them to know me as the-kid-that-made-the-scene-that-one-time….

MINA: Was it "mean" when *any other* movement in history publicly stood up for what they believed in? Protesting is the universal way to make demands and get what you deserve!

OLIVA: Okay yeah but, like, what if we *don't want* to make "demands"? We just want to - I don't know - let them know. There's a difference.

MINA: Guys! We should be standing up, not hiding! You're shrinking into the stereotypes that they're putting you into!

MAYA: Okay okay, let's calm down. Whatever we end up doing, *if anything*, should come from all of us. So let's not break our affinity, or whatever, over a stupid argument.

GRACE: Yeah I agree. What it sounds like is that we all want to do, or at least are okay with doing, *something*, but we don't all want to do something as big as a protest or something like that. We should find an in-between!

MAYA: Okay yes. Let's brainstorm!

MINA: Alright fine. But maybe this can be the first *step.* Once it works, maybe we can work up to a protest? Or at least a rally?

GRACE: Maybe. For now, though, let's just figure out the first thing. The period's almost over anyways.

OLVIA: Guys. I just had a good idea. What if we, like, post something on Instagram about it? You know, to like spread awareness or whatever.

MAYA: Hmmmm okay! That seems like a good first step! Confrontational *(gesture to Mina)* but not face-to-face.

OLIVIA: And it can, like, reach a bunch of people not even in our school that way!

GRACE: Right! Like I feel like most movements are escalated on social media nowadays anyways! This could be the start of something bigger. And then, Mina, if it *does* get bigger after this, you can find your people to rally with!

MINA: Alright. This sounds like a good plan. But what are we going to have on the post? Just a picture of us? A political manifesto? What's the vibe?

OLIVIA: Well, if our point is that everyone is different and that we should be treated like different people, maybe it would be cool to do something like..I don't know..post pictures of each of us doing something we love to show that we are all different people with, like, different interests?

MINA: Oooh ok, and then we could maybe add a picture of us together at this meeting? It could have a caption saying something like "umm hello? We are all Asian -- sure -- but we are different people *just like everyone else*. AND we all *look* different too if you even take a second to look at our faces!"

GRACE: *(laughs)* Maybe phrase it differently but yeah, that could be cool.

OLIVIA: Okay, okay….everyone text me a picture of themselves doing something they love. My phone number is 518 884 4567. Mine can be me playing volleyball.

All girls pull out their phones and start swiping on their phones to find the right picture.

MAYA: Oh that's perfect…here's me playing piano at a recital.

GRACE: Did you get mine? It's me playing the guitar.

MINA: I'll do one of me at my model congress debate tournament.

GRACE: Wait, you guys, all of these photos are so cool! This is such a good idea! Here, I'll make a group chat.

OLIVIA: Okay okay….let's take a pic of all of us for the end of the post right now.

MINA: Yeah okay, everyone lean in!! *(pulls out phone, takes picture)*

All the girls' heads drop and the lights go out. They face the audience and stand up.

ALL: We go by many names.

MAYA: Maya

OLIVIA: Olivia

MINA: Mina

GRACE: Grace.

ALL: But now -

OLIVIA: - we go by *different* names....*(Everyone reaches out and holds hands while facing the audience. Suddenly they stomp on the masks together.)*

ALL: ...together.

Blackout.