

THE WORK

An opera in two acts, sung in English Music by Jeanine Tesori Libretto by George Brant Based on *Grounded* by George Brant First performed October 28, 2023, at Washington National Opera

PRODUCTION

Michael Mayer Production
Mimi Lien Set Designer
Tom Broecker Costume Designer
Kevin Adams Lighting Designer
Jason H. Thompson and Kaitlyn
Pietras Co-Projection Designers
Palmer Hefferan Sound Designer
David Neumann Choreographer
Paul Cremo Dramaturg

Grounded Educator Guide
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WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BRING WAR HOME? DOES HOME START

to seem like a battlefield of its own? And do enemy combatants begin to resemble, from a distance, your own friends and family? These are all questions explored by *Grounded*, a new opera by two-time Tony Award-winning composer Jeanine Tesori, with a libretto by playwright George Brant. Commissioned by the Met, developed by the Metropolitan Opera / Lincoln Center Theater New Works Program, and adapted from Brant's eponymous play, *Grounded* follows Jess, a hotshot fighter pilot whose unplanned pregnancy takes her out of the cockpit and lands her in Las Vegas, operating a Reaper drone halfway around the world.

The opera arrives at the Met in a bold staging by acclaimed director Michael Mayer that evokes the technological and military apparatuses in which Jess finds herself trapped. Using a vast array of LED screens that present a variety of perspectives on the action, including the drone's predatory view from high above, the production chronicles how Jess, portrayed by mezzo-soprano Emily D'Angelo, struggles to adjust to this new, 21st-century way of doing battle as she fights to maintain her sanity—and her soul—when ordered to rain down death by remote control.

This guide approaches *Grounded* as a work that wrestles with the ethical quandaries and psychological toll of modern warfare, especially as they intersect with questions of gender and family. It will enable students and educators to gain deeper knowledge of the history and politics of military drone technology, and struggles for women's inclusion in the armed forces. The information on the following pages is designed to provide context, deepen background knowledge, and enrich the overall experience of attending a final dress rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera.

ABOUT THE METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE



The Metropolitan Opera is a vibrant home for the most creative and talented singers, conductors, composers, musicians, stage directors, designers, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers from around the world. Founded in 1883, the Met first opened in a lavish opera house at Broadway and 39th Street that, while beautiful, had significant practical limitations. Almost from the beginning, it was clear that the stage facilities of the original theater could not meet the Met's technical needs. But it was not until the Met joined with other New York institutions in forming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that a new home became possible. The new Metropolitan Opera House, which opened at Lincoln Center in September 1966, was a technical marvel of its day, and has remained an architectural landmark ever since.

Each season, the Met stages more than 200 opera performances in New York, welcoming more than 800,000 attendees. In addition to presenting the indispensable masterpieces of history's great composers, performed by the world's finest singers and directed by visionaries from throughout the theatrical world, the Met is committed to ensuring that opera remains a living art form by commissioning and staging vital new works that tell modern stories and engage with the issues of today. The Met is also a leader in new media distribution initiatives, harnessing state-of-the-art technology to bring performances from the Met's iconic stage to millions of people worldwide.

A GUIDE TO GROUNDED

This guide includes a variety of materials on Jeanine Tesori's Grounded.

The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *Grounded*

A Timeline: The historical context of the opera's story and composition

A Closer Look: Brief articles highlighting important aspects of Jeanine Tesori's Grounded

Student Critique: A performance activity highlighting specific aspects of this production

CHARACTER	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Jess A fighter pilot	mezzo-soprano	A hotshot Air Force F-16 pilot, Jess finds her purpose in flight. When she becomes unexpectedly pregnant and gets reassigned to operate a Reaper drone from a Las Vegas trailer, her home and military worlds start to collide.
Also Jess Jess's alter ego	soprano	An embodiment of Jess's splintered psyche, Also Jess comments on the action and, at times, hovers above Jess as if she is having an out-of-body experience.
Eric A cattle rancher	tenor	An unassuming rancher, Eric meets Jess in a Wyoming bar, and they have a daughter, Sam. He tries to provide a sense of normalcy when Jess's military work begins to take a toll on her psyche.
Sensor A drone operator	baritone	A 19-year-old video game junkie, the Sensor is responsible for helping Jess operate the Reaper drone and perform surveillance for their missions.
Commander Jess's superior	bass	An experienced combat veteran, the Commander encourages Jess to terminate her pregnancy and later assures her that she is most useful to the war effort as a drone operator.

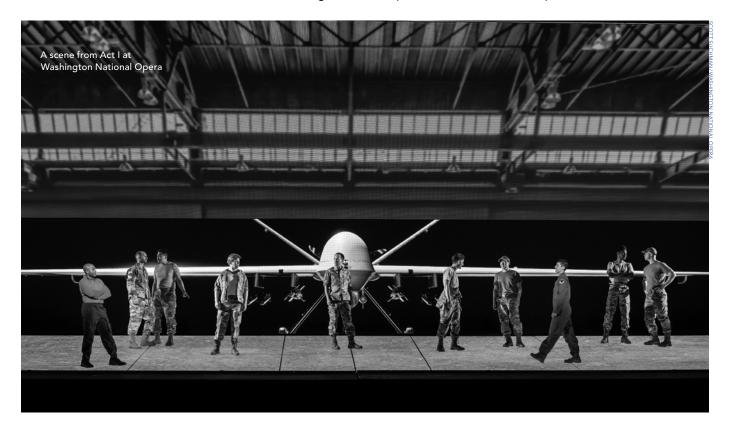
Synopsis

ACT I: Jess appears, led by a prison guard while a fighter squadron chants. An accomplished F-16 fighter pilot, she has waged war in Iraq, finding freedom in the skies. While on leave, she frequents a local bar near Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming. There she meets Eric, a cattle rancher, who nearly gets himself into trouble with the airmen at the bar. He and Jess make an unexpected connection, and she spends the night at his cabin.

Back in the cockpit, Jess becomes distracted during a flight mission as her thoughts wander back to Eric. She is also nauseated. Jess realizes that she is pregnant and informs the Commander, who encourages her to have an abortion. Jess refuses and returns to Eric's cabin to deliver the unexpected news.

Five years pass. Eric reflects on the birth of their daughter, Sam. Jess, meanwhile, yearns to return to combat. She seeks out the Commander, who offers her the opportunity to operate a missile-carrying Reaper drone, requiring her to work from a remote base outside Las Vegas. She and Eric decide to make the move. She takes her place in an air-conditioned trailer next to the Sensor—a boyish 19-year-old gamer—who operates the drone's multiple cameras and introduces her to the Kill Chain, a group of off-site strategic advisors who direct Jess's actions through her headset.

At their home, Eric—who has taken a new job as a blackjack dealer at a local casino—sings Sam to sleep. Jess and the Sensor complete their second mission.





ACT II: Jess takes Sam to the mall to purchase a new dress for school picture day. Besieged by salespeople, she becomes increasingly paranoid, suspecting that she and Sam are being followed by security cameras. As the mall fades away, Jess finds herself back in the trailer with the Kill Chain. They pursue a suspected enemy combatant, and Jess is disappointed when another team reaches the target first. She then realizes that the casualties are in fact American troops and swears to avenge their deaths. She begins to dissociate, her psyche splitting into an alternate self called Also Jess.

Back at home, Eric tries to joke with Jess, but she remains cold and distant—unable to "clap off the game." Jess and the Sensor meet with the Commander, who gives them their new assignment: They are ordered to track and eliminate a notorious enemy target known as the Serpent. Jess soon becomes obsessed with her prey, a mysterious figure who drives incessantly through the desert, never leaving his car and preventing himself from being positively identified and eliminated. As she pursues the Serpent, Jess begins to imagine herself as the target. One night, driving alone, Jess nearly collides with an oncoming car; she crashes, exits the vehicle, and wanders into the desert. There, she comes upon a bizarre and haunting site: a huge field of unmarked white crosses hammered in the sand.

When she finally arrives home, Jess fears that something has happened to Sam. Angry and concerned, Eric notices that Jess is distant and asks her to go to couples counseling with him. He also asks her to take off her flight suit. Once he falls asleep, she puts it back on and imagines her life as if from above.

Once again in the trailer, Jess is determined to be the one to annihilate her nemesis. She successfully tracks the Serpent to his home, and, when he finally reveals himself, a victorious Jess prepares to take the long-awaited shot. Just then, she sees him wave his daughter away from the car. Jess focuses on the young girl, who is near Sam's age.

Defiantly ignoring the outraged voices on her headset, Jess steers the drone off course, crashing it. But her victory is short-lived, as she discovers another drone has been shadowing her, and she can only watch in horror as its Hellfire missiles obliterate the Serpent and his daughter.

Following her failed mission, Jess has been court-martialed. Alone in a prison cell, she finally achieves peace.

The Play Grounded by George Brant

Jeanine Tesori's opera is closely based on George Brant's eponymous play, which premiered in 2012 and eventually opened at the Public Theater in New York City in a production directed by Julie Taymor and starring Anne Hathaway. But there are several differences between Brant's original play and his libretto for the opera. Most obviously, *Grounded* was written as a one-woman play—that is, no other characters



appear in the action of the work. Some are mentioned and ventriloquized by the protagonist, like her husband Eric, the Commander, and the Sensor, but none speak themselves. The main character also remains unnamed in Brant's play; whereas she is identified as Jess in the opera, she is only the Pilot in the play.

In addition to including Eric, the Commander, and the Sensor as fully fledged characters, some even with their own arias, the opera deviates from its source text in the creation of Also Jess, who embodies Jess's split psyche. Further, in the play, the Pilot and Eric spend three days together at his cabin after meeting at a bar, rather than just one night; Eric works at a hardware store and not as a cattle rancher; and the Pilot stays in touch with Eric while away on a mission via webcam, and even informs him of her pregnancy while she is still abroad. Other aspects of the play remain—for example, a mall scene, Eric's attempts to teach his wife to "clap off" her

workday, and the vision of American soldiers dying that drives Jess to single-mindedly focus on her mission to eliminate the Serpent (called Number Two in the play).

The play *Grounded* also incorporates a number of scenes that did not find their way into the opera. In one instance, the Pilot goes through an extended training process in which she first learns to operate the Reaper drone she has been assigned to fly. In another, she and Eric attend a couples counseling session—an event merely suggested in the opera. The opera also puts dramatic emphasis on Jess's car crash, after which she wanders into the desert at night and encounters a chilling scene of white crosses buried in the sand. In the play, the Pilot never crashes her car but instead drives directly into the desert—almost as a routine—to visit these unmarked graves, a clear symptom of her ongoing dissociation.

The Creation of Grounded

1961 Jeanine Tesori is born in Port Washington, New York.

1969 George Brant is born in Park Ridge, Illinois.

1983 Tesori graduates from Barnard College with a degree in music.

1991 Brant graduates from Northwestern University with a degree in acting.

1995 Tesori makes her Broadway debut as the dance-music arranger for a revival of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying.*

1997 Tesori composes the score for *Violet*, an Off-Broadway musical. She wins an Obie Award for the work, which also garners a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Musical and Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Musical.

1999 Tesori contributes incidental music to a production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at Lincoln Center Theater, directed by Nicholas Hytner. She wins the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Music in a Play and receives her first Tony Award nomination for Best Original Score.

2000 Tesori composes the score for the musical theater adaptation of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. The show transfers to Broadway in 2002, and Tesori earns her second Tony Award nomination for Best Original Score.

2004 Tesori composes the score for the musical *Caroline*, or *Change*, with a book by playwright Tony Kushner. She receives her third Tony Award nomination for Best Original Score.

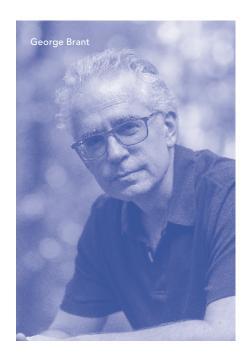
2006 Tesori contributes incidental music to a production of Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children, in a new translation by Kushner.

2008 Brant graduates with an M.F.A. in Writing from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin.

Shrek the Musical opens on Broadway with music by Tesori, earning her a third Tony Award nomination for Best Original Score.

2011 Tesori's one-act opera A Blizzard on Marblehead, with a libretto by Kushner, premieres at the Glimmerglass Festival.

2012 Brant's one-woman play *Grounded* wins the National New Play Network's Smith Prize and is produced at the San Francisco Playhouse and the Borderlands Theater in Tucson.



2013 Fun Home, a musical based on illustrator Alison Bechdel's eponymous memoir with music by Tesori, premieres at the Off-Broadway Public Theater. The following year, the work is named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. In 2015, Fun Home opens on Broadway, ultimately winning Tony Awards for Best Musical and Best Original Score.

The Lion, the Unicorn, and Me, a family opera by Tesori with a libretto by J. D. McClatchy, premieres at Washington National Opera.

Brant's play *Grounded* wins the Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and is produced at the Gate Theatre in London. The play subsequently receives over 175 productions in 24 different countries and is translated into 16 languages.

2015 Grounded opens at the Public Theater in a production directed by Julie Taymor and starring Anne Hathaway.



2019 Tesori's opera Blue, with a libretto by Tazewell Thompson, premieres at the Glimmerglass Festival, followed by productions at Dutch National Opera and English National Opera.

2021 The musical Kimberly
Akimbo, with a score by Tesori,
opens Off Broadway. It wins the
Drama Desk Award for Outstanding
Musical, Lucille Lortel Award for
Outstanding Musical, and New York
Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best
Musical. In 2022, the production
transfers to the Booth Theatre on
Broadway and garners Tony Awards
for Best Musical and Best Original
Score, marking Tesori's sixth
nomination and second win.

2023 The opera Grounded, commissioned by the Met and developed by the Metropolitan Opera / Lincoln Center Theater New Works Program, premieres at Washington National Opera.

2024 *Grounded* premieres at the Met, opening the company's 2024–25 season.

The Grim Reaper

Jeanine Tesori's opera *Grounded*, based on George Brant's award-winning play of the same title, tackles a phenomenon that has become pervasive but is rarely discussed: drone technology. "Drone" is shorthand for a device more formally designated as an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV), or remotely piloted vehicle (RPV). In simplest terms, drones are aircraft operated without any onboard crew or passengers. They can be employed in a variety of settings beyond warfare—for example, taking aerial photography, tracking storms and weather systems, searching for missing persons, delivering goods, and even providing entertainment through colorful light shows.

Drone technology was initially used during the First World War. American forces developed an aerial torpedo called the *Kettering Bug*, while the British worked on a small radio-controlled vehicle called the *Aerial Target*. Both were tested, but neither





was used in combat. In the 1930s, a biplane nicknamed the *Queen Bee* was used by the Royal Navy for anti-aircraft target practice. The radio-controlled aircraft could fly as high as 17,000 feet and travel a maximum distance of 300 miles at more than 100 miles per hour.

Drones were not widely used in active combat until the Vietnam War, although they were less frequently deployed as weapons. During the 20-year conflict, UAVs were used by the U.S. military for decoy missions, surveillance and reconnaissance, psychological warfare like dropping leaflets, and intercepting signals, among others. In more recent military conflicts—especially the American War on Terror following September 11, 2001; the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine; and in the cycles of violence among various militaries and militias in the Middle East and Africa—the use

of UAVs has expanded exponentially, including widespread use for targeted attacks and battlefield reconnaissance and targeting. In the United States, the MQ-1 Predator, the first widely used member of the modern generation of large, sophisticated, and tremendously lethal drones, was developed in the 1990s for precision strikes using Hellfire missiles.

In this capacity, drone technology has two crucial advantages: first, it eliminates the threat of danger for the pilot and crew since they are removed from the actual scene of battle; and second, these vehicles can operate for up to 42 hours consecutively, allowing missions to continue unabated while different teams take turns operating the device. (In 2022, the U.S. Army tested a solar-powered, ultra-long endurance drone, the Airbus Zephyr 8, that remained in flight for 64 consecutive days before crashing.)

In the 21st century, drones have increasingly been used for targeted attacks—including in countries where the United States is not officially militarily involved, and their use expanded drastically as the War on Terror dragged on. President Barack Obama ordered ten times more counter-terror drone strikes than the Bush administration, including hundreds in Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia—often resulting in civilian deaths. From 2004 to 2013, the U.S. carried out approximately 455 drone strikes in these three countries, resulting in an estimated 4,061 combatant and civilian deaths. (You can watch an interactive graphic detailing every drone strike in Pakistan between 2004 and 2015 at drones.pitchinteractive.com.) The number of drone strikes continued to increase and peaked during the Trump administration before falling drastically after the election of Joe Biden and his withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan.

The U.S. military currently uses more than 8,000 UAVs, some of which can take up to 170 people to operate and maintain. In the U.S. alone, more than 5,000 public safety agencies use drones for various purposes, and the Federal Aviation Administration reported in 2023 that it had registered 871,000 drones and 307,000 certified remote pilots. Drone warfare also comes with a hefty price tag: One Global Hawk Drone costs about \$103 million, while a Reaper drone of the type operated by the Kill Chain in *Grounded* costs roughly \$30 million.

Women at War

Although only recently permitted to participate in active combat, women have made significant contributions to the U.S. military since its inception. Even during the American Revolution, women joined the effort alongside the Continental Army, accompanying soldiers and helping to mend clothing, nurse the wounded, and prepare weapons. The Civil War led even greater numbers of women to contribute to the Union cause, with about 3,000 serving as nurses during the conflict. In addition, it has been estimated that approximately 1,000 women, disguised as men, fought for both the Union and the Confederacy.

Technological advances of the 20th century, as well as the increased scale of overseas military combat, required more women than ever to fulfill administrative duties. While more than 3,000 American nurses were deployed to British-operated hospitals in France during World War I, World War II saw women serving in a wide range of roles, including as telephone, radio, and switchboard operators and translators, in addition to other clerical jobs. The U.S. Navy especially was able to exploit a loophole that enabled women to take on noncommissioned officer and noncombat roles; as a result, approximately 12,000 women served as "yeomanettes."

It was during this period that all branches of the U.S. military enlisted women

for the first time through the newly created Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and Women Airforce Service Pilots (Army), Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (Navy), Marine Corps Women's Reserve (Marines), and Women's Reserve (Coast Guard). In total, nearly 350,000 American women served in uniform during World War II, while 432 were killed in the line of service and 88 were taken as prisoners of war (POWs).

Following the end of the Second World War, President Harry S. Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948. This law finally made it possible for women to enlist as full, permanent members of all military branches. It was not, however, without its limitations. It limited the number of women who could serve to just 2% of each branch, as well as the number of women who could become officers. The law further stipulated that pregnant women would be involuntarily discharged from service. The Army established an extension of this regulation in 1949 forbidding women with dependents from service and discharging enlisted women with children under 18. Crucially, the

act applied exclusively to white women. President Truman thus issued the Integration of the Armed Forces executive order just a month later, allowing Black men and women to serve alongside their compatriots in all military branches.



Above and right: Women working for defense contractor North American Aviation's plant during World War II



Women continued to serve in Korea and Vietnam. During the three years of the Korean War, 120,000 women took up active-duty positions both abroad and at home, and in the Vietnam War era, the number of women serving in military and civilian roles around the world swelled to more than 265,000. Just two years after the end of the 20-year Vietnam War, pregnant women were allowed to remain in the military. It was not until 1994, under President Bill Clinton, that women were finally permitted to serve in all positions, with the exception of direct ground combat roles. In 2013, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced that this exception would be lifted and, as of 2015, women are now able to serve in direct ground combat.

As of 2022, women make up 17.5% of all active-duty members (228,996 total), 17.1% of all active-duty enlisted (182,388 total), and 19.7% of all active-duty officers (46,578 total). They constitute 20.7% of the Navy, 15.6% of the Army, 9.4% of the Marine Corps, and 21.4% of the Air Force. In 2017, technical sergeant Courtney Farley became the first woman enlisted with the Air Force as a Global Hawk drone pilot.

Opera Review: Grounded

Have you ever wanted to be a music and theater critic? Now's your chance!

As you watch *Grounded*, use the space below to keep track of your thoughts and opinions. What did you like about the performance? What didn't you like? If you were in charge, what would you have done differently? Think carefully about the action, music, and stage design. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about the opera and this performance at the Met!

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Jess appears, led by a prison guard, while a fighter squadron chants.	$\Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond$	* * * * *	***
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Jess muses on the freedom of flight.	$\Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond$	$\Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond$	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
At a bar near Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming, Jess meets Eric, a cattle rancher.	* * * * * *	* * * * * *	***
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Jess spends the night at Eric's cabin.	$\Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond$	***	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Back in the cockpit, Jess becomes distracted by thoughts of Eric—and nausea.	* * * * *	$\Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond$	***
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Jess informs the Commander that she is pregnant.	$\Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond \Diamond$		***
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Jess visits Eric to tell him the news.	***	***	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Five years later, Eric reflects on the unexpected birth of their daughter Sam.	***	***	* * * * * *
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Jess expresses her desire to return to combat.	***	***	***
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
The Commander reassigns Jess to operate a Reaper drone from Las Vegas.	* * * * * *	* * * * * *	* * * * * *
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
In a trailer with the Sensor, Jess joins the Kill Chain.	\$\frac{1}{2} the thick the thi	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Back at home, Eric sings Sam to sleep.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$	* * * * * *	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Jess and the Sensor complete their second mission.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Jess takes Sam to the mall to purchase a new dress.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
As the mall fades away, Jess vows to avenge the deaths of American soldiers.	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$	\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$	***
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Eric tries to joke with Jess, but she is cold and distant.	 ☆☆☆☆☆	 ☆☆☆☆☆	~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			n n n n n
The Commander orders Jess and the Sensor to target the	* * * * *	☆☆☆☆☆	* * * * *
Serpent. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:		NNNN	NNNNN
WIT OF HAION OF THIS SCENE.			
Jess, Eric, and Also Jess go about their daily routines.	***	***	***
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			

ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
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