



SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS

BY BESS WOHL



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



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SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS was developed and originally produced by Ars Nova (Jason Eagan, Artistic Director; Renee Blinkwolt, Managing Director) in New York City, opening on March 23, 2015. It was directed by Rachel Chavkin; the set design was by Laura Jellinek; the sound design was by Stowe Nelson; the costume design was by Tilly Grimes; the lighting design was by Mike Inwood; and the production stage manager was James Steele. The cast was as follows:

TEACHER Jojo Gonzalez
JOAN Marcia Debonis
JUDY Sakina Jaffrey
ALICIA Jessica Almasy
NED Brad Heberlee
RODNEY Babak Tafti
JAN Erik Lochtefeld

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This play was inspired by a silent spiritual retreat I participated in at the Omega Institute in upstate New York. Like that retreat, much of the action of the play happens without words.

Because of that, I have provided extensive character descriptions. This is to help the actors and director navigate the play and to provide texture and depth to what they do.

Much of what is in these descriptions will obviously remain a mystery to the audience — that's okay by me. The audience should always be able to follow the main story lines, but should also have a little bit of room to make — and revise — their own assumptions about who the characters are.

CHARACTERS

Note: Everyone in this play is in some kind of agony. In this way, they are not unlike the rest of us. They have come to this retreat in the hope of finding some kind of relief. This desire should feel very immediate and present throughout the action of the play.

The **TEACHER** is played by a disembodied, androgynous voice with a strange, slightly accented way of talking. The androgynous tone might be the result of some kind of sickness, or might be just the way the teacher sounds. Either way, it sounds throaty and scratchy. The accent is somewhere between affected and foreign. The voice is amplified through a microphone. And. Pauses a lot at. Odd moments.

JOAN, late forties, wears a lot of clothes and jewelry from India. She is a therapist and sex educator in colleges, high schools, and in private practice with couples. She likes to focus on pleasure rather than on fear or “don’ts.” For example, she asks her teenagers, “Okay, I know you are having sex, now how can we make it more fun?” She meets with her private clients in a sunny office full of framed photos of her dog, Small Fry, and a small ceramic dish of Werther’s Originals on her coffee table. She really loves Werther’s Originals. She has a roll of them in her pocket right now. It’s about pleasure, people.

She is also incredibly, mind-bendingly, soul-crushingly angry and she has been since about the age of six, when her parents got divorced and her mother told her, “Daddy doesn’t love us enough.” She first discovered she was pretty in college, and then promptly got raped by a frat boy. She became bulimic. Now, she meditates and does yoga.

At times, her rage still bubbles to the surface in little ways, in spite of her efforts to breathe through it. She might compliment you on a haircut when you know it’s terrible. She might say you look healthy and well-rested when you know you’ve gained weight. She might spend five minutes brushing her teeth. She might write a really mean anonymous comment on a blog. She might become obsessed with hating a stranger. She might leave, just when you need her the most.

JUDY, maybe fifty, is Joan’s partner. She works at *O* magazine as a top editor in the art department — a few times a year, she finds herself in the same room with Oprah. She’s the kind of person who only needs

four hours of sleep per night. She gets a lot of email. She wakes up and walks on the treadmill while watching Fox News. She finds that building up a healthy rage in the morning helps her greet the day.

She likes control. She likes to be in control of her image. Her wardrobe is all big silver jewelry and Eileen Fisher in neutral tones, although for this particular weekend she has brought mostly Lululemon. She makes a good living. She eats a lot of grilled fish. She's direct. She grew up with three brothers. She always felt she had to prove herself equal to the boys. She has had a recent diagnosis of ovarian cancer, and, as the doctor said, she "will not have a good outcome." This is a serious problem for her sense of control.

Her soft spot is Joan. She and Joan met at a Buddhist lecture series in Manhattan. Judy had thought about exploring spirituality because she had an intermittent eye tic doctors told her could be stress related. It was embarrassing. People on the subway thought she was winking. She and Joan went out for green juice — she'd never had green juice before — and she never looked back. Now, she's not really that into spirituality anymore, knows she should meditate, never has the time, but she's here because, simply put, she loves Joan madly. She loves how Joan eats. She loves how Joan smells. She loves the heat Joan gives off when she sleeps. She is very afraid Joan will leave, just when she needs Joan the most.

ALICIA is around thirty-ish, strawberry-blonde (sometimes more strawberry, sometimes more blonde) from Southern California. She is the kind of person who manages to make a lot of noise even when she's "in silence." She has zippers on her clothes and bag. She has wrappers that must be unwrapped. She has bracelets that jangle. She sips loudly. She breathes loudly. She has shoes with heels that click. She shakes out her hair and scratches her head and adjusts her bra and it's an entire three-act play. It's because she likes being watched.

She was a child actor and beauty pageant star. Born in Arizona, her parents moved her to L.A. when she started getting commercials. She was on a few episodes of *Party of Five* as a friend of Lacey Chabert's character. That was pretty much the high point. Most recently, she was in a commercial for a nationwide wireless company, where her role was to act really surprised and say, "Gotcha!" Sometimes people recognize her from that, which she both kind of hates and kind of loves. These days, Alicia gets her performance fix by doing karaoke alone. She belts out "Someone Like You" with an intensity that would rival Adele's.

She didn't used to do this kind of pathetic embarrassing thing. Up 'til a few months ago, she was with Fred. Fred was a hedge fund guy who liked Alicia because she seemed unmoored enough to bend to his will. She was, and things worked for a very long time. But then Fred got bored of being with somebody who would bend to his will. (Alicia believes that Fred had undiagnosed ADHD.) There was a situation with a hooker. Alicia still didn't move out. This fact, among several others, still makes her burn with shame. Finally, Fred kicked her out. (She had started, out of unexpressed rage, brushing her hair and leaving the hairballs around the apartment, like a cat peeing on the walls.) The day she moved out, she gave Fred one last blow job upstairs while the U-Haul waited outside. (More shame.) She had to move in with her cousin who lives in Long Island City, where she discovered Fred had given her chlamydia. It was around then that a therapist she'd started seeing suggested she develop a spiritual practice. She doesn't have a lot of experience with any of this. But she needs something, anything, actually, to take away the pain of living without Fred, whom she still loves desperately, achingly, utterly. (Shame.)

She still spends a lot of time online stalking Fred. Texting Fred. Texting with her friends about Fred. Checking Fred's Instagram feed. Checking his Facebook page. Her heart is fucking destroyed over Fred. If what was happening on the inside was happening on the outside, instead of being a very attractive thirty-two-year-old (people think she's twenty-eight), she'd be a fucking quadriplegic. She's looking for something — or somebody — to make her feel okay again.

NED, somewhere in his forties, has had a severe run of bad luck worse than the worst country-western song. Here's what happened. First, Ned, ever the outdoor enthusiast, went rock climbing to try to clear his head, and he ended up falling and cracking his skull in eight places. (You can still see the scars. It's why he wears the hat.) He spent two years in and out of the hospital, during which time his identity was stolen, his house burned down due to electrical problems, and his wife, Dawn, got a tattoo. The tattoo was, in a way, the most upsetting part, because Dawn is not the tattoo type. She lost the baby weight. She got highlights in her hair. She started reading the newspaper and having opinions. Suffice it to say, this was all evidence of what should be blatantly obvious — Dawn had started fucking around — specifically with Ned's younger brother, Charlie.

Charlie, who was always the fuck-up. Charlie, a failed musician with a past heroin addiction who now sings in a band called Seedlings at kiddie music classes and birthday parties. Pretty soon, Dawn and Charlie had fixed up the house, kicked Ned out of it, and were living together with the kids.

Then things got worse. Ned's parents died. Then he started drinking. He tried to stop by joining AA. Then his sponsor, Elijah, went off his meds and walked into traffic on the Long Island Expressway. Soon after that, Ned's dog was hit by a car too.

You know when things are just so unfair that you feel like you might just have to grab a pitcher of kerosene and burn down the house a second time in order to make things right again? That's what Ned was feeling. So he bought a pitcher of kerosene and was about to burn down Charlie and Dawn's house, when something stopped him. A little voice inside. It told him there was another path. And led him to study a variety of meditation, self-help, new agey books, which helped him avoid committing homicide. And now, for the very first time, he has saved up enough money to go on a retreat — this particular retreat, with this particular teacher, whom he greatly admires. This year, Charlie and Dawn are expecting a kid. Ned is contemplating homicide again.

RODNEY, mid-thirties, ageless, fit, gorgeous, grew up in the Pacific Northwest, and teaches yoga in New York and the Hamptons (in the summer). He is married to a woman named Nadine who also teaches yoga. Rodney and Nadine have had articles about them in various local yoga magazines and are designing a line of vegan bags, wallets, and jewelry together, made of a substance that looks exactly like real leather. Rodney wears lots of man-jewelry but he is pulling it off.

Rodney met Nadine because she was his student. The truth is, Rodney has had sex with a bunch of his students over the years — both before and after being married to Nadine. (Eighteen. But who's counting. Certainly not Rodney.) In fact, he started his own yoga practice after being kicked out of one in the Bay Area due to sexual harassment. He pursues these women in part because once he has something, he never wants it anymore. He thought Nadine was different because she was extra-gorgeous and had that rich-person inaccessible thing that really got under his skin. Also, she had a trust fund which financed his East Coast yoga studio. Now he and Nadine have not had sex in three years.

When they try to talk about it, Nadine just bursts into tears and runs out of the room. Rodney thinks Nadine probably has some history of abuse in her past, which he is totally not responsible for and which, according to his therapist and his inner north star, he cannot take on. He has convinced himself that the kindest thing is to stay with Nadine, who is fragile, and satisfy his sexual urges on the side.

The truth is, all of the sex with young nubile yogis is really about his panicky fear of aging and death. Nadine makes him feel trapped, and this reminds him he's going to get old and die. His man jewelry does not include a wedding ring.

JAN, fifty-ish, is from a small town in Finland. He is pale and sweet, with a wide-eyed, continually curious air about him, like a little sprite or a woodland creature. He is a pastor at a small Lutheran church back in Finland, and his church has sent him on a one-year sabbatical to explore religious life around the world and figure out a way to appeal to more of the Finnish people, who have become increasingly secular. He always wears a small backpack, in which he carries a bottle of water, trail mix, sublock, and other necessities. He does exercises in the morning for his health. Jan likes to be prepared.

He came to religion later in life, after a personal tragedy — a son who died after a prolonged and terrible illness at the age of six. Jan's wife then moved to South America to study the Argentinian tango. Jan, who had been working in advertising, went back to school to study religion and philosophy, hoping that it might help him understand why things happen the way they do. It didn't explain much, but it did give him a new community. And a sense of purpose, to help others. Still, sometimes at night, when he starts to suspect he really can do nothing to help people, he wakes up seized with a sense of panic that freezes him like a solid wood board. He waits all night for the sun to come up, too scared to move a muscle. Then he takes a lot, lot, lot of pharmaceuticals and tries not to fall asleep in the middle of his sermon the next day.

He misses his son. He is hoping maybe this retreat will have an answer for him, where more traditional religious experiences have failed. He also greatly overestimated his familiarity with the English language.

Life is suffering.

—The Buddha

SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS

Day One

The sound of pounding, torrential rain. A great hall begins to fill up with people.

Six folding chairs in a row. Jan sits on one of them. He reads through a packet that contains a schedule, a map, a flyer, an introductory letter, etc.

Rodney enters, takes off his shoes, sits on the floor in front of his folding chair, and begins to meditate. Jan watches Rodney, then takes off his shoes as well.

Ned enters. He surveys the room and tries to decide where to sit based on the configuration, on his immediate feelings about Jan and Rodney, and on where he expects the teacher will be.

Joan and Judy enter.

JOAN. ... I said, very clearly, left at the second stop sign.

JUDY. I did not hear you say that.

JOAN. Well, how is that my fault // if I said something and you didn't hear it ...

JUDY. I'm not talking about fault, I'm just saying I don't think you said what you think you said.

JOAN. What do you think I said?

JUDY. I wasn't taking notes, Joan. I think we're supposed to take off our shoes.

JOAN. What do you think I said?

JUDY. I remember at least two stop signs going by with you saying nothing at all about a left. You were looking at the — birds or something —

JOAN. That was a hawk. You didn't even look up —

JUDY. I was trying to figure out where we were going.

JOAN. Fine, next time I'll just shut up and you can follow the GPS lady —

JUDY. (*Sitting.*) These chairs look terrible. Can I see that packet?

Ned realizes he should have taken his shoes off and awkwardly goes back to the door to do so. Joan hands Judy a packet and Judy starts to look through it. Joan is distracted by staring at Rodney — we're not sure why. She sits next to Judy. Points at Rodney.

What?

Joan shakes her head, "Nothing."

What.

JOAN. (*Whispers.*) He does the ...

Rodney looks over.

(*To Rodney.*) We love your videos. (*Off Judy.*) The yoga videos.

Judy smiles to Rodney. Rodney does a "namaste."

JUDY. The food here is vegan.

Joan smiles and squeezes Judy's arm, as if to say thank you. Judy nods and keeps looking through her packet.

The sound of a microphone setting up. The sound of somebody's throat clearing. Some strange breathing. Some small mouth sounds. Everyone finishes taking their seats. When the teacher speaks, it is as a disembodied voice, amplified from somewhere in front of them. [Note: The actors should imagine they are looking straight ahead at someone who is sitting or standing, holding or wearing a microphone, unseen by the audience because of the fourth wall.]

VOICE OF TEACHER. If it is all right with everyone. I would like. To begin. With a story.

Everyone nods, "Please, yes, go ahead." The sound of wet lips gently smacking into the microphone, which is a little too close to the teacher's mouth. Everyone settles in. Ned may get out a tattered notebook to take some notes.

There once was a little, green frog ... And this little frog lived in a well. One day, he was visited by another frog who had been out

traveling for a very long time. The traveling frog said — these are talking frogs mind you, in stories they are always very gifted frogs.

Everyone laughs at that, maybe a little too hard.

So, yes, the traveling frog said. To the frog in the well, “Your well is very nice. But you should see what I have seen. There is something out there called ... *(With drama.)* The ocean.”

A pause for that to land.

“What is it like?” asked the well frog. The traveling frog told him, “It is very. Big.”

The well frog crinkled his little frog nose: “Is it as big as one quarter of my well?” “Bigger,” said the traveling frog. “Is it as big as *half* of my well?” “Even bigger,” the traveling frog said. “You really must see it for yourself.”

So the two frogs traveled together, across the land. They became friends. They shared things. The way you do. When you are traveling with a fellow frog. They were really. Quite close.

Finally they approached the ocean. The traveling frog told the well frog to close his eyes. And he guided the well frog all the way to the shore. The waves lapped. Their little frog legs. “Now,” the traveling frog said, “open your eyes ... ” The well frog opened his eyes. He saw the vast ocean ...

Everyone sees the ocean, in his or her own way.

And he died on the spot.

A pause. Joan looks perturbed. Rodney looks like he knew it all along. Judy looks like she actually thought that was quite fitting and deep.

Now, I’m not suggesting you will *die* during our five days together. Although we all have to go sometime ...

The teacher laughs a small, snorty laugh into the microphone. The class reacts.

What I am suggesting is that when you see the ocean ... You may not be able to return. To the well.

Various reactions on what that might mean — good and bad. Ned makes a little “Mmm” sound. He tries to take a note in his notebook, but realizes his pen is broken. He looks around for help. There is none.

NED. *(Whispers.)* Crap.

VOICE OF TEACHER. In the meantime ... For our time together. A few. Simple. Ground rules. These rules are intended to create an environment of mutual respect with other groups and retreats currently underway at the Institute.

Remember. We are not alone. On this campus.

Smoking is not permitted. Open flame, incense, and scented candles are not permitted. Alcohol consumption is not permitted.

Cell phones are not permitted, except in the parking lot. Inside your vehicle. With all doors and windows completely closed.

Food consumption is permitted only in the kitchen and dining areas. Please do not bring food back to your room. This is for your own safety. There are many wild animals in the area. Including bears.

Joan yelps involuntarily. Everyone else looks a little unnerved — except Rodney. A snorty laugh from the teacher.

Clothing is optional. At the lake. But required in all other locations. All nudity must be in the spirit of respect, community, and adventure.

A series of awkward glances amongst the students. Rodney looks around enthusiastically. Jan sees Rodney smiling and smiles as well. Ned looks slightly horrified. Rodney's gaze lands on Judy, much to her amusement and to Joan's chagrin.

Room assignments are in your welcome packets. Plus a schedule of lectures and optional question and answer sessions in the evening, indicated as "Q and A." Please, if you do ask a question, try to ask it simply, succinctly, and refrain from telling me your entire life story.

The teacher sighs.

Other than what is on the schedule, you are free. To explore. Maps are provided.

Everyone shuffles around, looking through their packets. Ned puts on his nametag. He half-raises his hand to ask a question. The teacher ignores him.

In the event that you leave early or are for any reason dissatisfied or incapable of continuing. There are no refunds. No exceptions —

Alicia enters, running late, wearing headphones. She is drenched and holding a little wet paper map that is falling apart in her hands. Everything about her communicates that she has had a rough evening and she would really like everyone to know that. She sits. Starts to take off her many, many layers.

*Gets out her journal, some pens, a book, her thermos, etc. Stops. Looks around. Everyone is watching her. This may be because something like Natalie Merchant’s “These Are Days” is playing from her earphones.**

Timeliness is important.

Alicia gives a little wave, does a little namaste-style bow and mouths — or says — the words, “I’m so sorry.” Ned notices her and stops trying to ask his question. Alicia notices him noticing her. Or maybe he’s coveting her five multicolored pens. Or, most likely, trying to tell her that her music is still on. Alicia quickly turns it off, then enters a deep shame spiral.

Think of this retreat as a vacation from your habits. Your routines. Yourself. It is the best kind. Of vacation. Because after this. You don’t ever have to go back. To who you were.

This is both exciting and upsetting.

And in this spirit. For the length of this retreat. Unless otherwise specified. We shall be observing. Silence.

A gong rings. The sound of the microphone switching off. The sound of the pounding rain.

Night One

The lodgings for the students are rows of tiny connected cabins in the woods. They are each identical, and each contain two mats. The following Night One scenes happen concurrently:

Joan and Judy’s Room

Judy and Joan enter their cabin, lugging their things. Judy has packed as if it’s a business trip. Joan has an old duffel from college.

They begin to silently go about unpacking and setting up their things. As Joan puts her bags down, a bag of Werther’s Originals

* See Special Note on Songs and Recordings on copyright page.

SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS

by Bess Wohl

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In the overwhelming quiet of the woods, six runaways from city life embark on a silent retreat. As these strangers confront internal demons both profound and absurd, their vows of silence collide with the achingly human need to connect. Filled with awkward humor, this strange and compassionate new play asks how we address life's biggest questions when words fail us.

"A half-dozen troubled souls find that enforced silence doesn't necessarily bring inner peace in SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS, an enchanting play by Bess Wohl. As funny as it is, uh, quietly moving, Ms. Wohl's play is also a model of ingenuity. ... With one exception — the (unseen) guru running this spiritual retreat — the characters hardly ever speak. Both the humor and the pathos spring mostly from wordless interaction, which is testimony to Ms. Wohl's intrepid writing ..."

—The New York Times

"Disney has already grabbed her, and she's got history with Paramount, so playwright Bess Wohl isn't exactly a free agent. But with her theatrical know-how and offbeat imagination, recently on view in AMERICAN HERO ... this is a scribe worth fighting over. Her play SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS feels like a holiday outing, a minimalist piece of experimental theater that casts the audience as voyeurs in an entertaining adventure that gradually darkens into tragedy."

—Variety

"Though it employs very little dialogue, there's nothing quiet about SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS. Bess Wohl's luminous play uses silence to dig into the core of human pain, which, like everything unendurable, can also be very funny. ... The play asks — and admirably never quite answers — deep questions about how we connect with other people, a feat that the characters achieve through channels both profound and silly. Wohl isn't afraid to let the ridiculous rub up against the sublime, and it makes SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS as entertaining as it is transcendent."

—Time Out (New York)

Also by Bess Wohl
AMERICAN HERO

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