



# UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT  
AT ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY • NOVEMBER 2001

## speaking in tongues

translating an australian drama  
for its american debut



# The Director Speaks

THE DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

by Mark Clements

**T**he themes for *Speaking in Tongues* are big. It is a play about relationships and fidelity, which is really what most plays are about: people connecting, not connecting, people finding a way to speak to others, trying to find forms of communication. That's in the title, *Speaking in Tongues*. There is no sort of religious connection; it's just about different languages, different people trying to express themselves in different ways, trying to find a voice.

This play is incredibly challenging, because each act has a totally different narrative tone. The narrative doesn't form a linear structure, the scenes do not fall in chronological order. They skip around all over the place as well. You think the play's going in one particular direction, then it does something else. The play transcends naturalism, and it goes into a territory, where the playwright looks at relationships in a generic way.

This play shows people who are just living their lives, and then suddenly something happens in their lives that forces them to react in a different way. They re-evaluate their lives, what they

stand for, what they believe in, and they don't always come up with the answers. There are no villains in the piece, and yet there are no heroes in a way. I think that's kind of how life is for most of us: we make good decisions and we make bad decisions and we do that on a daily basis.

My original production was set in Australia. Where we're going now is somewhere like Jacksonville, Florida. It's not really relevant, because it never gets referred to in the play. It's useful for the actors and the creative team to give it a context. It has to be a place where it's hot, where it's summer at the time of the play, with this reoccurring theme of heat and humidity. It has to be somewhere where somebody can drive out of the city and within 15-20 minutes, be in terrain where they can get lost in the dark, fall prey to something, fall into things, be bitten and stoned by things, and be at high risk. It has to be a place that is a big city that has a small town feel to it.

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allows the audience  
to be smart.**

**The audience can't  
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outcome of the play.**

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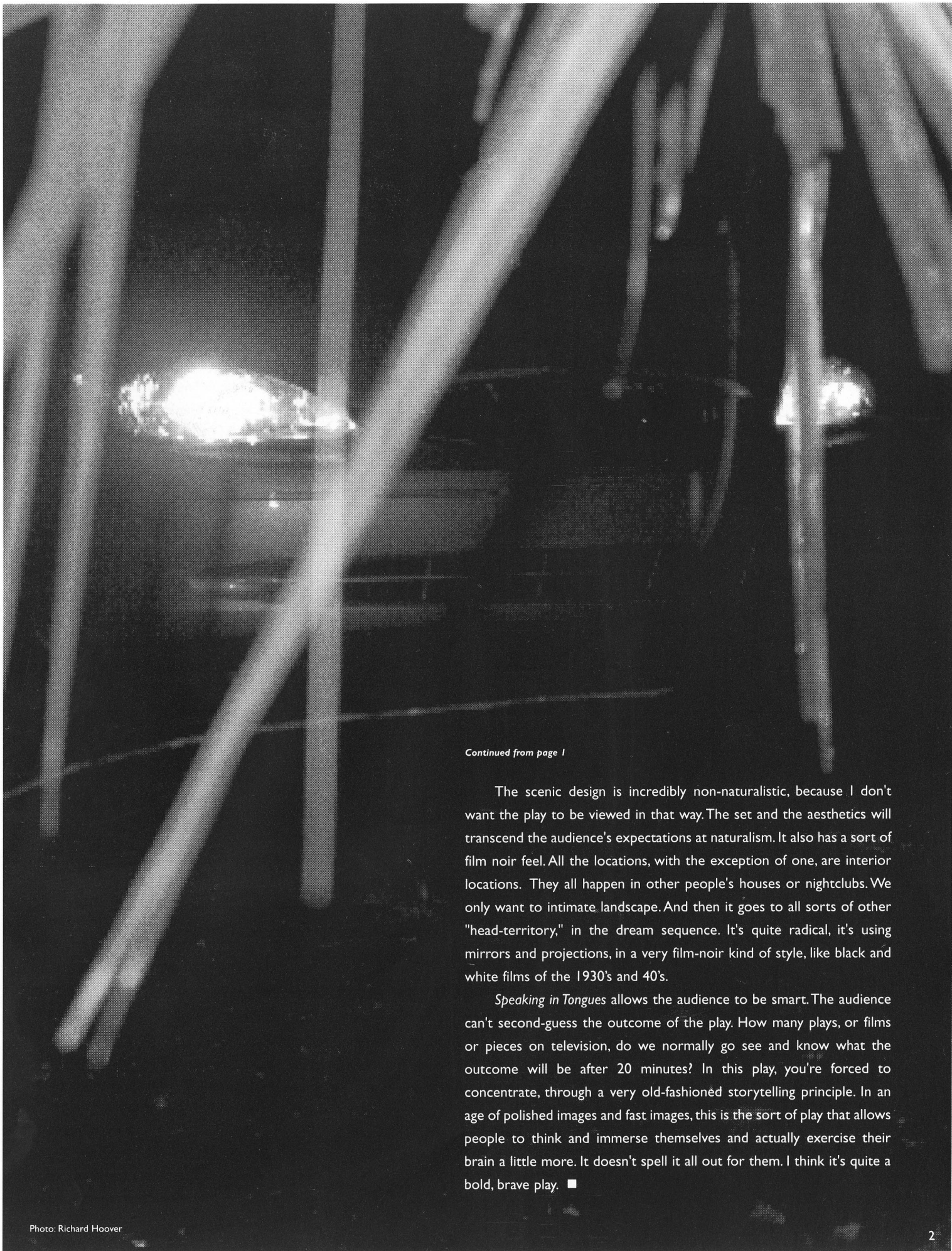
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The scenic design is incredibly non-naturalistic, because I don't want the play to be viewed in that way. The set and the aesthetics will transcend the audience's expectations at naturalism. It also has a sort of film noir feel. All the locations, with the exception of one, are interior locations. They all happen in other people's houses or nightclubs. We only want to intimate landscape. And then it goes to all sorts of other "head-territory," in the dream sequence. It's quite radical, it's using mirrors and projections, in a very film-noir kind of style, like black and white films of the 1930's and 40's.

*Speaking in Tongues* allows the audience to be smart. The audience can't second-guess the outcome of the play. How many plays, or films or pieces on television, do we normally go see and know what the outcome will be after 20 minutes? In this play, you're forced to concentrate, through a very old-fashioned storytelling principle. In an age of polished images and fast images, this is the sort of play that allows people to think and immerse themselves and actually exercise their brain a little more. It doesn't spell it all out for them. I think it's quite a bold, brave play. ■





# Fragments of Speech

THE PLAYWRIGHT'S PERSPECTIVE

by Andrew Bovell

**S**peaking in Tongues was written in 1996 but its genesis lay in earlier experiments with form. It began in 1992 when the Melbourne theatre group Five Dollar Theatre Company commissioned me to write a short piece for a season of plays entitled "Suitcases in a Thousand Room Hotel." The resulting piece, *Like Whiskey on the Breath of a Drunk You Love*, used various theatrical techniques such as split scenes and simultaneous dialogue. Two married couples, Leon and Sonja, and Jane and Pete, shared an undefined yearning I didn't attempt to make explicit. I was happy to let it sit beneath the surface with the idea that somewhere down the track I would come back and explore it more deeply.

Later I was commissioned by another Melbourne theatre group called Chameleon to write a short play for their season, "Tidal Wave." This piece, *Distant Lights From Dark Places*, explores a chain of connection between four isolated figures, Valerie, Sarah, Nik and Neil. It also used parallel narrative, split scenes and simultaneous dialogue. I also experimented with fragmenting language and created a kind of shared dream landscape between the four characters.

Ros Horin directed *Whiskey* in a season of short plays at the Stables Theatre in 1992. Sometime after that she approached me with the idea of a doing a season of *Whiskey* and *Distant Lights* and commissioning a third piece to accompany them. Instead, I suggested writing a full-length play to bring the two short ones together. And so the idea for *Speaking in Tongues* was born.

**Speaking in Tongues is an emotional labyrinth. It's like a tightly woven piece of fabric:**

On the surface the two plays had little in common. They were stylistically different and tonally at odds, yet the characters in both plays shared the same sense of yearning. They were all searching for a sense of clarification in their emotional lives. I made the decision not to attempt to make the pieces similar but to incorporate their differences, believing that this could create an unexpected and surprising dramatic structure.

First I went back to Leon, Sonja, Jane and Pete. This became the first two scenes of *Speaking in Tongues*. I then followed their lives beyond the rigid parameters set down in the original piece. As a structural principle I used the theatrical conceit in which each character encounters the others. This gave it a satisfying sense of completion.

*Distant Lights* remained virtually unchanged and forms the central part of *Speaking in Tongues*. The challenge was to make the connection between the two pieces more explicit. Taking two characters from *Whiskey*, Leon and Jane, and having them witness crucial events played out or alluded to in *Distant Lights* achieved this. Leon and Jane were able to make further sense of their own lives while also allowing me to set up what was to come in

the drama. From this point on, the destinies of all eight characters were linked and this sense of interconnection between disparate people emerged as a strong theme in the work.

For the third and final act, I took Leon from *Whiskey* and brought him into the world of *Distant Lights* by making him the policeman who was investigating Valerie's disappearance. In the earlier play, Valerie's story is told through a series of phone messages she leaves for her husband John. While writing it I had often wondered what it would be like for a man to come home to discover those messages, given that his wife disappeared on that night. His final revelation in the play is disturbing and reverberates back through the play. For me, it reveals something about the moral weakness to which we are all susceptible simply by virtue of being human. The tragic consequences of such weaknesses are what this story is about.

*Speaking in Tongues* is an emotional labyrinth. It's like a tightly woven piece of fabric: Take any two strands and follow them and you will end up in quite different places. I find that this shape allows me to understand the world I live in a way that the carefully plotted line of cause and effect found in naturalism no longer does. But quite beyond all my thoughts about form, shape and structure, I really just set out to tell a compelling and haunting story about human fallibility. ■

**Take any two strands and follow them and you will end up in quite different places.**





# Language of Light

THE LIGHTING DESIGNER'S PERSPECTIVE

by Brian MacDevitt

**S**peaking in Tongues explores the idea that everyone's connected in the subconscious. The play has an undercurrent of shared consciousness, which I find very interesting. The connections between the characters come to a peak in the second part when they all share a dream. They're all in different places, and one character says, "I have this dream," but then everybody describes the dreams--one of which is something that really that happens to one of the characters.

So, there's this chain-link between everybody, and it's not just in a "soap opera" way. There's a deeper need and want in people's heart driving their behavior. One guy is completely, tragically wrapped up in the love of a woman, but she remembers him only as "this guy." She didn't take their relationship seriously and she ruined his life by treating it as a non-incident. This play also has a shared undercurrent of loneliness and sadness. There are a lot of disconnected and connected moments, but I think the play tells us that we really are connected, even sharing that disconnected feeling.

The most alluring part of this play for me is how it's technically put together. It's a mystery and it's a drama, which I really appreciate. There's this great satisfaction when you start piecing together and making the connections that are in it. As a designer, though, I feel that in everything I do, I want to find compassion for people in the play. For example, I just saw this movie, and I felt completely transfixed by it. Then when it was over, I really didn't find myself invested

**...I knew that the lighting would need to take part in changing space in an instant, so that we could move from a bar**

in any of the characters, so I felt robbed. With *Speaking in Tongues*, it's hard, since right from the beginning of the play, all four people in the play are cheating on each other-- an audience can find more compassion for someone who's being cheated on than for someone who's cheating. The lighting will have a strong style, but I want to make sure that we don't alienate the audience and that we can keep some warmth between the characters. It's mostly the actor's job to create compassion for the characters, but it's also something that I want the lighting to help with.

My first impression for the lighting design was that it needed to be in a dark

**to a hotel to an apartment without anybody actually leaving the space or moving in space.**

space. There's a lot of mystery to it. It definitely lends itself to a film-noir feeling. Lighting can treat people well, and it can treat them poorly. I don't think that it should always be pink and rosy. In a comedy, for instance, the lighting won't comment on the nasty aspects, but with this play I think we can. We can find the different dynamics in that, through the light's angle, intensity, and color.

In the planning phase, I knew that the lighting would need to take part in changing space in an instant, so that we could move from a bar to a hotel to an apartment without anybody actually leaving the space or moving in space. The set design is kind of a house of mirrors, so we'll have the opportunity to connect and disconnect visually as well. Two people may be right next to each other on the stage, and we could create two completely different spaces to connect them.

When it's all said and done, though, the language of this play paints a very thorough story. There are so many of the scenes where you can walk away from it thinking, "I remember a scene on the beach," or "I remember a scene in the swamp," and in all these places where the play never took place. It's either some character's retelling of it or someone's second hand knowledge of certain things. With that full of a verbal picture, I try to find a single element--the most essential light, angle, or color-- rather than embellish it with ideas. It doesn't need to be complete from the lighting point of view because the language is so complete.





# Abstractions

THE SET DESIGNER'S PERSPECTIVE

by Richard Hoover

## ON DEVELOPING A DESIGN

The process starts with the script and I have to ask myself questions like: What are the dynamics of that script? What are the themes? Who are the characters? Where are we? What time of day is it? What's the texture? I read the play, and attended a reading of it with live actors. I like to hear play scripts read, because theatre is a performance media (as opposed to a novel), and I took abstract notes on how I responded to it. Then I met Mark Clements, the director. We went through the beats of the scenes, the scenes within the parts. There are three parts, like three acts, and he just said what he felt was going on, what the superficial meaning was, what the literal meaning was.

We talked about why two things are next to each other. That's one of the simple principles of abstractions: if you put two things next to each other that don't relate, they seem to relate sometimes. Also, we wanted to use glass, since it can do more than one thing, it can reflect and be seen through. Mark has done this play before, so it's very easy for him to say, "I want it to be minimalist. I want glass. I want projections." I like working with a director that has done the play before, because why reinvent the wheel?

I went away and came up with some ideas, but they weren't abstract enough for Mark. So I asked him, "What do you mean

by abstract?" He said, "Like buildings in New York." So then I sat in my house for ten days and made ten models. I thought to myself, "I want to play with abstraction. I'll just forget the play for a while and just have fun." So it was basically me with scissors and mat knives and hot glue, white cardboard, and some Plexiglas.

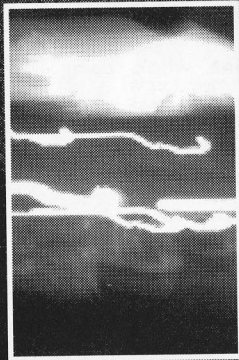
Then I rebuilt the six models that I liked, Mark saw them and picked one. He said, "We're involved in an abstraction of forms, so I really want to have these walls pivot out." Then I did another model, and we revised that over an intense week, and by the end of the week we had a design.

## ON COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

The world in the script struck me as being much like a radio play. It's like two people talking with miscommunication or direct communication in some entertaining way. The dialogue is in a form where it is simultaneous, and then it becomes "normal," and then it dismembers again. Through the play, you're getting clues and bits and pieces. These bits, somehow come together, like music, but not necessarily in a logical way. They don't tell you, "the hero made it to the castle and killed the dragon and saved the damsel." This dialogue is different. This is modern language, it's innuendo or suggested bits. That putting together and dismembering of the language is one of the strong dynamics in the piece that's very fascinating to deal with.

## ON AFFECTING THE AUDIENCE

There's a question in the play and the idea is to put that question into the minds of the audience. That's what it's all about. It's about the audience, not about the event. The event that I hope happens is that the audience members go out at the end of the performance, and on their way, they discuss it and say something like, "Honey, I don't have a clue about that play, but that's just like our relationship." ■







# Activities

DISCOVERING YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE

## Before you go

*Explore how the connection between people affects communication.*

▪Think about the many different ways we communicate today, and how we use technology to communicate. Who do you contact using the telephone, beepers, pagers, and email? Are these the same people you talk face to face with on a regular basis? How is your relationship affected by the form of communication?

▪With a group of friends, play the "telephone game." While sitting in a circle, one person whispers a message to the next person, and each person takes turns passing it on to the next. At the end, share the different messages.

▪Did the message stay the same? How did it change? Why did it change? What effect does it have when it the message changes?

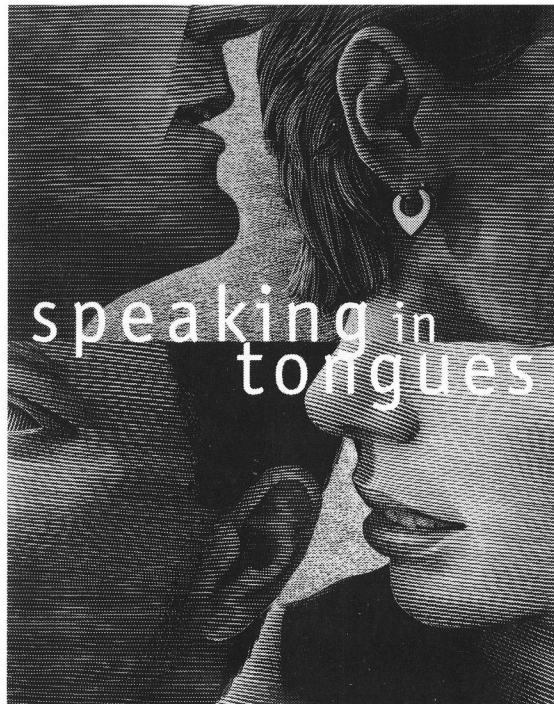
▪Rent the movie "Rashomon." This movie, set in ancient Japan, provides the same story from the perspectives of three different people: a man, a woman, and the bandit who attacks them in the forest. After watching the film, review the following issues:

▪Who was telling the truth? How can you tell? Is everybody telling the truth, or is everybody lying?

## At the theatre

*Watch and Listen for connections between the characters.*

▪Listen to what the characters say, about their experience and their relationships with other characters. How do they express their sense of connection through words? What other verbal clues are there about the characters' relationships, beside what they say about each other?



Artwork: Scott McKowen

▪Watch for clues in the production design elements that establish connections or divisions between characters. How does the lighting create a connection or a separation between characters? Does the sound design bring the characters together or make them seem distant? What do you think the set designer is trying to say about communication and relationships by presenting a set design with reflective glass and projected images?

## After the show

*Create a work of art that explores the connections and disconnections between people.*

Develop a story with two or more people in which at least one of them is unsure of the nature of their relationship. Like Andrew Bovell, you may choose to demonstrate a friendship, or a romantic relationship, or a doctor/client relationship, or maybe some other type of relationship. As you create your own work of art, which could be a play, a short story, or a drawing, think about some of the following questions:

▪What is the main connection between the characters?  
▪What prevents them from feeling connected?  
▪Are they able to identify the barrier to their connection?  
▪What do they do to keep their emotional connection strong?

**Send your work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the people who created *Speaking in Tongues*.**

### Mail it to:

Education Department  
Roundabout Theatre Co.  
231 W. 39th St., Suite 1200  
New York, NY 10018

### Or email to:

Phila@roundabouttheatre.org



# When you get to the Theatre:

## Ticket Policy

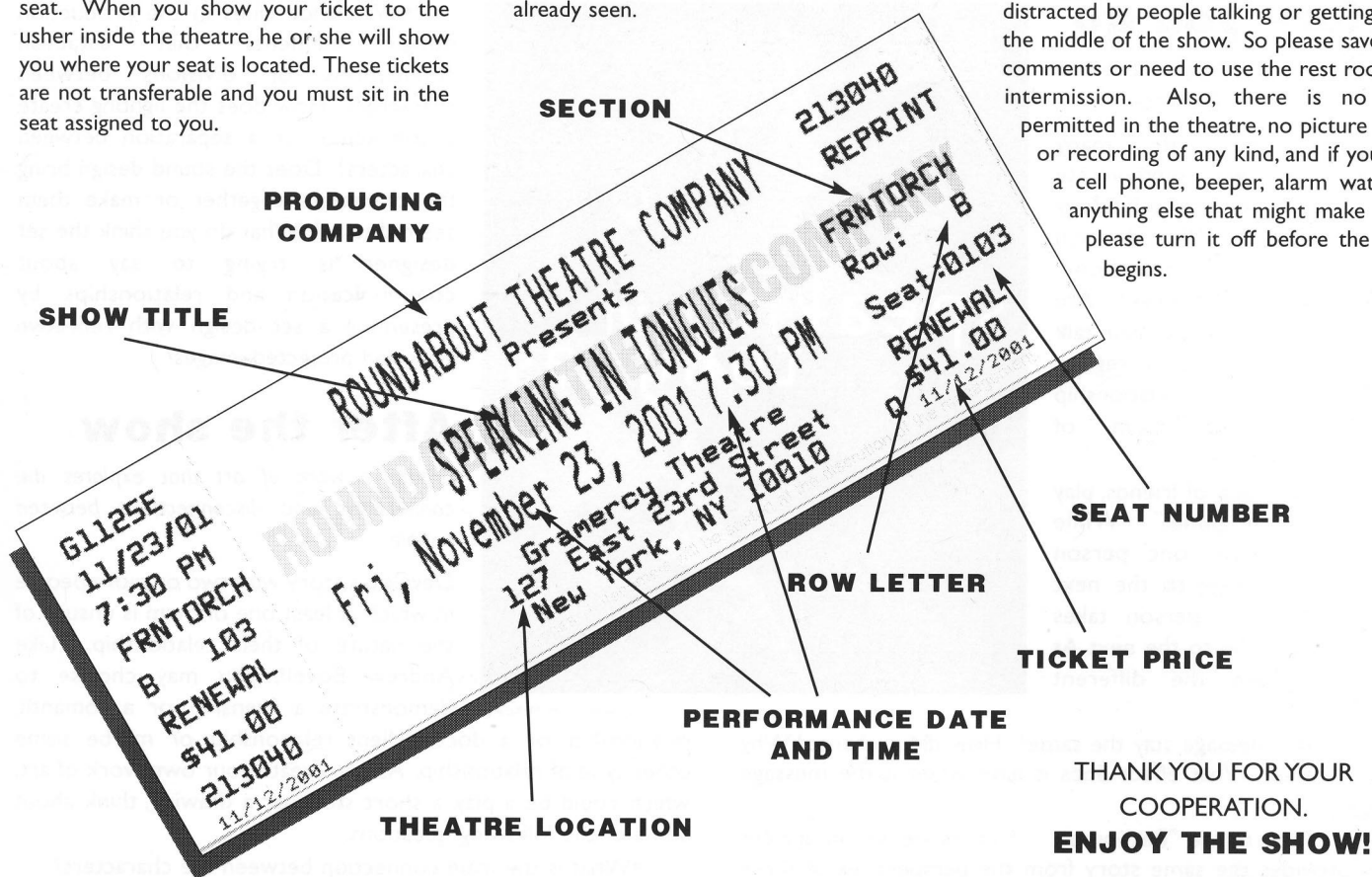
As a student participant in **Page To Stage** or **Theatre Access**, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

## Programs

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

## Audience Etiquette

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION.  
**ENJOY THE SHOW!**

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