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Dramatic Publishing

“YOU LOOK AT ME AND ONLY SEE THE THINGS I CANNOT DO, THINGS I CANNOT BE;
BUT I CAN TASTE THE COOL SPRING WATER AND KNOW WHAT MONTH IT IS.
I CAN SMELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE SMOKE OF HICKORY AND APPLE WOOD.
I CAN SEE THE SHARP STING OF HONEY, AND I CAN TASTE THE SUNRISE.”

THE TASTE OF SUNRISE

DRAMA BY SUZAN L. ZEDER



AATE DISTINGUISHED PLAY AWARD WINNER
ASSITEJ/USA OUTSTANDING PLAY AWARD WINNER
SUNNY AWARD FOR BEST PLAY
—Columbus Theatre Critics Association

THE TASTE OF SUNRISE

A MOVING PREQUEL TO *MOTHER HICKS*

Drama. By Suzan L. Zeder. Cast: 4m., 5w., including 1m. Deaf actor required and 1m. Deaf actor strongly suggested with doubling, or up to 21+ (5m., 6w. including 1m. Deaf actor required and 1m. Deaf actor strongly suggested, 10+ either gender). The play takes place in the mind and memory of the adult Tuc as he journeys through his childhood from the fever dream that took his hearing, to the language of nature which he shares with his beloved father, to the Deaf school where his mind explodes with the discovery of sign language. Along the way Tuc meets the mysterious Nell Hicks, who heals with herbs and singing spells. He also meets Roscoe, who gives Tuc his name-sign and cultural identity, and Maizie, a wild child of Deaf parents, teenaged and pregnant with a head full of movie palace dreams. After the death of his father, Tuc must navigate the perilous path of loss, love and language as he struggles to weave a family out of wishes and explores the moral ambiguities of our times and the cultural complexities of Deafness with humor and compassion. Time is memory. Multiple locations. 1920s rural midwest costumes. (Inquire about restrictions regarding shortening the text.) Some doubling possible. Expansion of cast possible, particularly for students in the school for the Deaf and interpreters if the production uses shadow signing. Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: TL6.

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by
SUZAN L. ZEDER

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THE TASTE OF SUNRISE

Dedication

**The Taste of Sunrise is dedicated to Billy Seago
and the host of Deaf artists who have
graced this play with their
insight and support.**

THE TASTE OF SUNRISE

Production rights for this play are granted with the implicit understanding that it must be produced as written. With the exception of updating and localizing specific references, any cuts, changes, or alterations must be approved in advance and in writing by the publisher who will consult directly with the playwright.

From the Playwright

There is a scene in my play, *Mother Hicks* in which Tuc, a Deaf Man, turns to Girl and signs:

“You look at me and only see the things I cannot do, things I cannot be; but I can taste the cool spring water and know what month it is. I can smell the difference between the smoke of hickory and apple wood. I can see the sharp sting of honey, and I can taste the sunrise.”

The moment those words flew out of my fingertips onto the keyboard of my typewriter, I knew that someday Tuc would need a play of his own to tell us who he is and how he came to be. This is that play. It took me thirteen years to write it.

This is a play of two worlds, Deafness and Hearing. I inhabit only one of those worlds. This is a play of two languages: English and American Sign Language. I speak only one of those languages. It is therefore with profound gratitude that I thank all of the Deaf artists who have touched this play with their wisdom and their grace. They have let me borrow pieces of their lives, they have shared the depth of their thoughts, feelings and memories. They have done me the inestimable honor of trusting me with both their anger and their hope. I have provided a time and place for this play and a host of characters drawn from careful research, but it is the Deaf actors, and teachers, and historians, and students from Seattle to Washington D.C., who have given Tuc his voice and his soul. This is your play, not mine!

If you decide to produce this play it will not be because it is easy, inexpensive or because it fits comfortably into a usual production structure. I encourage you to seek partnerships, co-productions, and relationships between Deaf and hearing artists to create something together that neither could do as well alone. If you decide to produce this play it will be because it touches something within you that demands that you stretch yourself and your community beyond your usual resources; because these words need to be spoken, these signs need to be seen, because Tuc's life needs to be shared with others who only see what people cannot do and cannot be. My life has been profoundly changed by every production of this play that I have seen. I hope yours will be too.

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Characters*

Tuc A Deaf man in his late teens or twenties**
Jonas Tucker Tuc's father, 30's.
Emma Flynn Housekeeper for Jonas Tucker
Nell Hicks Midwife, 30's
Townspople
 Clovis P. Eudy
 Izzy Sue Ricks
 Patrons of the Soda Fountain 1 & 2
Dr. Alexis Graham Teacher at the Central Institute for the Deaf
Dr. Grindly Mann Superintendent, Central Institute for the Deaf
Roscoe Deaf boy at the School for the Deaf.
Audiologists 1 & 2
Maizie A wild child of the 20's, 16 years old.
Students at the Deaf School
Hunters 1 & 2
Nurse & Doctor Illinois State Home
Voices of Tuc, Maizie and Roscoe***

Setting

Tuc's Farm, Township of Ware, Central Institute for the Deaf,
Dug Hill, Illinois State Home

Time

1917 - 1928

* Cast size may be as small as eight, but must include actors who can sign for all speaking characters, and voice for all signing characters. Optimum cast size is nine to assist with interpreting.

** Tuc will play himself at a variety of ages. In some productions one or more young actors have been used for Tuc as a child. In others, the adult Tuc has played himself at all ages.

*** Maizie and Roscoe's signed lines should be voiced by the same ensemble member consistently.

The Taste of Sunrise

By Suzan L. Zeder

Act One

The play takes place in the mind and memory of TUC, a young Deaf man.

The set consists of a large open raked space, surrounded by higher platforms to accommodate the various locations of the play and to allow the signers, who interpret the spoken words of hearing characters in sign language, the closest proximity to the action*.

On top of the highest platform is an abstract wooden structure which will indicate a tree in the subsequent action.

There is a cyclorama upon which to paint the colors of the sky.

The many locations of the play are suggested by minimal set pieces and a few props. These seem to appear out of the air with the same grace and ease TUC displays as he tells his story in the visual, spatial language of sign. Time is memory, without literal boundaries as day folds into night and years pass in a single gesture.

AT RISE:

(Pre-show music fades. Lights dim to black. A moment of silence.)

(Lights up on TUC. His hands and face are clearly visible. Nearby is JONAS in partial shadow.)

(TUC signs "Wind". The sound of wind is heard. JONAS looks at his own hands.)

* It is my intention that all spoken words of all characters are also signed by other ENSEMBLE MEMBERS and that all signed speeches are voiced.

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(TUC signs "Water". The sound of flowing water is heard. JONAS moves his fingers tentatively.)

(TUC signs "Bird". The sound of birds are heard. TUC moves his hands in a sweeping gesture like a bird soaring. JONAS copies the gesture, their hands almost touch . . . almost.)

(JONAS follows his hands off-stage as TUC reaches toward him.)

(TUC claps his hands together and there is the sound of thunder. TUC signs out front as ENSEMBLE MEMBER voices.)

TUC: Long ago, I remember sound.

(TUC claps his hands again and there is another peal of thunder.)

(Lights and sound create a fever dream. There is the echoing sound of a small child crying. JONAS rises and crosses upstage.)

(Lights up on two chairs which indicate a small bed. EMMA enters with a sheet. JONAS paces, holding a muslin bundle. This bundle will be treated as if it is a very small, very sick, child.)

**Fever burning in the night
Lightning shatter
Thunder crack
Voices echo,
Echo
Echo
Deep inside my mind . . .**

JONAS: He just keeps screaming and screaming!

EMMA: I've stoked the fire! Wrap him in another quilt.

(JONAS places the bundle, "BABY TUC," in the bed as

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EMMA covers him up.)

JONAS: It's hot as Hades in here!

EMMA: Doc Gunner said to burn the fever out.

(NELL HICKS enters and knocks.)

That will be the doctor!

JONAS: Finally!

(EMMA crosses to NELL and mimes opening a door. NELL enters the playing space.)

EMMA: Don't you see the red flag on the door? That means we got Scarlet Fever here.

NELL: That's why I came.

EMMA: We've been waiting for Doc Gunner.

JONAS: Who is it, Emma?

EMMA: Are you a nurse?

NELL: Midwife, but I've seen my share of fever.

JONAS: Please, hurry!

EMMA: Mr. Tucker, I've never seen her before in my life.

JONAS: Emma, my boy is burning up. I ain't about to sit around and watch him die.

(NELL crosses to the bed.)

NELL: Bring me a basin of cool vinegar water.

(JONAS turns upstage slightly and fetches a basin.)

Put out the fire!

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- EMMA: What?
- NELL: Get rid of these blankets and quilts . . . *(NELL pulls a small bottle out of her pocket.)* Dose him strong with Belladonna.
- EMMA: Deadly nightshade?
- NELL: It's for the fever!
- JONAS: Here's the water!
- EMMA: Doc Gunner said to starve a fever . . .
- JONAS: He's going to be all right, isn't he?
- (NELL looks at him with worry and throws the sheet to EMMA.)*
- NELL: Dip this sheet in well water, and bring it back here wringing wet.
- EMMA: But Doc Gunner said . . .
- NELL: The boy's dying! Do as I say!
- JONAS: Do as she says!
- NELL: Hold on, hold on little one; we'll get you cooled down.
(NELL holds the BABY, sits on the bed and sings.)
- TUC: **Fever burning.
Lightning flash.
Thunder crack.
Inside body, smoke,
Voices echo into smoke.**
- EMMA: She's singing! Why in God's name is she singing?
- (The song is a haunting, pure tone. TUC's signing mirrors the cresting and gradual abatement of the fever. Fever lights change to cool tones.)*

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TUC: **Singing spell
Children ride her voice away
Past the burning
Past the pain
Sound, cool as water
Sound of final grace
Sound beyond sound
Into silence, into . . .**

NELL: Fever's broke.

JONAS: What do we do now?

NELL: Wait. Wait and pray.

(NELL exits as JONAS keeps vigil.)

TUC: **Jonas Tucker, father, mine.
Mother died when I was born
Father always carry me
To the fields. To the town
People see and say
"There goes Jonas Tucker and his little Tuc."
Now, Father sits by my bed waiting
Watching
Waiting.**

(EMMA enters.)

EMMA: Mr. Tucker, is there anything you need before I go home?

JONAS: You go ahead, Emma. He's sleeping again.

EMMA: Your supper's keeping warm on the stove. *(Looking at the shape on the bed.)* Still hasn't made a sound?

JONAS: No.

(There is a low rumble of thunder.)

JONAS: I heard voices just now.

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EMMA: *(Archly)* That . . . woman was by to see about the boy. She left some bitterroot tea and ox blood soup to build his strength. I told her he was sleeping.

JONAS: I never got a chance to thank her properly. I didn't even get her name.

EMMA: The whole town's talking about her. Her name is Hicks, Nell Hicks. Some say she's from Jonesboro, others from Mound City. Some say she's got a husband on the riverboats, others say he's a snake oil salesman on the run.

JONAS: What does she say?

EMMA: Nothing. She don't say nothin' about nothin'. All anyone knows is she has rented a room above the pharmacy. She's looking for work, midwifing or nursing or whatever.

JONAS: All I know is she saved Tuc's life and I'm grateful.

EMMA: She nursed the Collins boy, sang to him, and he woke up blind. She also left this bundle of Devil's wort and purple sage for you to burn; she says it's to ease his breathing.

(There is another rumble.)

JONAS: You'd best get home to your family before the storm breaks.

EMMA: Mr. Tucker, I'd think twice before I'd burn that stuff near the boy.

JONAS: Thank you, Emma. I'll see to Tuc, before he wakes up frightened by the thunder.

(There is another rumble. JONAS crosses to the bed. EMMA exits.)

JONAS: It's all right, son. I'm here. You're all right. You're . . .

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(As the thunder rolls again, JONAS stops short and looks at the bed.)

JONAS: . . . sleeping. *(JONAS claps over the bed. He leans down and claps.)* Tuc? Can you hear that, son? Tuc! Come on Tuc! TUC!!!!

TUC: **Father shouting long ago
I hear his voice in memory.**

(TUC snaps the sheet on the bed open and tosses it high in the air.)

Years pass since the fever night.

(During the following speech, TUC becomes himself as a young boy.)

**Ten years pass.
I am a boy with legs to run and arms to hold
and eyes to see
and ears . . . to keep my hat from falling down!**

(JONAS and TUC wrestle and play. EMMA enters.)

EMMA: Jonas Tucker, that boy is getting too big for you to tote him around on your back like a baby possum!

JONAS: Emma, the menfolk are going on a honey hunt!

(JONAS picks up a pail as he and TUC stalk across the stage in search of bees. The sound of buzzing is heard. TUC points.)

You got the eyes of an eagle, son. Now follow the bee line straight to the . . .

(The wooden structure on the upper platform becomes the "honey tree". JONAS and TUC cross to it carefully. JONAS teaches TUC how to harvest the honey. TUC reaches into the hive and brings his hands slowly up in the air holding an imaginary honey comb.)

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JONAS: Feel 'em on your hands. They'll tell you if they're angry. *(With a bit of awe)* Can't hear that buzzin' to scare you none. You're a natural born bee man, son.

(TUC makes a gesture of thanks to the bees.)

That's right, thank the bees!

Let's go home.

(JONAS and TUC cross to a chair.)

TUC: **In father's chair, we sit together.
Many jokes and stories he tells to me.
His body talks to my body.**

(JONAS mimes telling a story to the child in his lap.)

**Father talk has no need for words.
Talk how? Breath.
Talk how? Heartbeats.
Talk how? Mind thoughts.
Words too small for everything we say.**

(Lights change, as NELL enters carrying a muslin bundle and a basket of yellow flowers.)

NELL: That's Arnica Montana for sprains and bruises, and Chamomile blossoms for sleep.

(JONAS and TUC cross down to NELL.)

JONAS: Good day to you, Nell Hicks.

(Two sharp shafts of light come up on IZZY and EMMA on the platforms directly above.)

IZZY: I saw her in town, big as life, and I said, "why Nell Hicks, you've been away . . ."

JONAS: *(To NELL, overlapping)* You've been away.

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- IZZY: And she said . . .
- NELL: *(To JONAS)* I have.
- JONAS: What brings you out our way today?
- NELL: We're gathering a basket full of sunshine.
- JONAS: We?
- IZZY: And I swear she had a baby with her.
- EMMA: A baby?
- NELL: *(Indicating the bundle)* This is May -ry.
- JONAS: Mary?
- NELL: It's not Mary and it's not Marie, it's May -ry.
(TUC looks at the basket.)
- EMMA: What baby?
- IZZY: Some say it's a foster child she's raising. Some say it's her own.
- EMMA: What does she say?
- IZZY: Nothin' about nothin'
- EMMA: Now, don't that beat all!
- JONAS: She sure is a beautiful child.
- NELL: That she is, Mr. Tucker.
- IZZY: *(Overlap w/ NELL)* I rented her my guest house at the

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south end of town.

NELL: *(Overlap w/ IZZY)* I rented the Ricks house at the south end of town.

EMMA: You rented her a house?

JONAS: You rented a house from Izzy?

IZZY: A house is a house, Emma.

NELL: A house is a house.

(Lights out on IZZY and EMMA.)

JONAS: Midwife business must be booming.

NELL: There's always babies and those who need nursing.

(TUC dips his finger in the honey and offers it to MAY-RY.)

JONAS: Tuc!

NELL: She's a little young for honey, Tuc, but I could use some for a honey cake.

JONAS: We're taking this for barter at the store, but we got plenty to share.

NELL: Much obliged, Mr. Tucker. Much obliged, Tuc.

(TUC repeats the gesture of thanking the bees.)

JONAS: Don't thank us, thank the bees.

NELL: Much obliged, bees.

(NELL repeats the gesture and exits as JONAS and TUC continue on the path to town.)

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TUC: **From Father's shoulders
I see as far as I can see.
Everyone in town
Looks small to me.**

(As JONAS and TUC make a wide circle around the playing area, TOWNSPEOPLE stand on the upper platforms and wave as they go by.)

JONAS: Morning, Miz. Ward.

ALMA: That poor unfortunate boy.

JONAS: Hello, Mr. Eudy.

CLOVIS: Deaf as a fireplug.

JONAS: Howdy, Miz Ricks.

IZZY: Dumb as a post.

EMMA: It's not kind to stare at him, just because he's afflicted.

(EMMA crosses down to join JONAS and TUC.)

JONAS: Tuc and I'll get the fertilizer at the Feed and Grain, while you do the shopping at the General Store.

EMMA: Let me take Tuc with me, Mr. Tucker.

JONAS: Why?

EMMA: Show your father, Tuc.

TUC: *(Struggles to speak in a very distorted voice)* Ice cream cone.

JONAS: *(Very surprised)* Ice cream cone?

EMMA: We've been practicing at home, haven't we, Tuc? Clovis P. Eudy has just put in a brand new soda fountain and I thought Tuc and I might . . .