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Dramatic Publishing

SONG FOR THE NAVIGATOR

**A Play by
MICHAEL COWELL**



Dramatic Publishing

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(SONG FOR THE NAVIGATOR)
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MICHAEL COWELL

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To my grandmother and grandfather,
Helen E. (Gilbert) and Roger G. Hass

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SONG FOR THE NAVIGATOR

A Full Length Play in One Act
For 5 Men and 2 Women*

CHARACTERS

- ILAEMAL** [ē·la'ā·mall'] a traditional Satawalese woman,
Gabby's aunt
- SAMAL** [sa·mall'] a navigator,
grandfather of Gabby and Tilifag
- GUTS** Gabby's high school roommate,
of local Hawaiian ancestry
- GABBY** a young man from Saipan, about 16
- MOTHER** of Gabby, originally from Satawal
- CRASH** a pilot for Missionary Airlines
- TILIFAG** [tē'lē·faġh] . . . the Satawalese cousin of Gabby, 17
- BUGOLIMAR** [boo·gō·lē·mar] a Satawalese man
- SOLANG** [sō·lang'] Chief of Satawal
- LITEIRANG** [lē·tey'reng] a young Satawalese woman
- CAPTAIN HERRING** captain of the field-trip boat

*This play was designed to have actors play more than one role:

1. Mother also as Ilaemal
2. Guts also as Tilifag
3. Crash also as Solang, and Captain Herring

The remaining roles are played by one actor.

TIME: A three-month summer period, in the present.

PLACE: Three different islands in the Pacific—Oahu in the Hawaiian Islands, Saipan in the Northern Marianas Islands, and Satawal in the Central Caroline Islands of Micronesia.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Song for the Navigator is set on the tiny atoll of Satawal in the Central Caroline Island of Micronesia. The navigators of the Central Caroline Islands are some of the last people on earth that know the traditional art of navigating solely by the stars, waves, and other natural phenomena.

Although there are over 2,158 islands in Micronesia, covering an ocean mass the size of the contiguous United States, very few Westerners know anything about the culture, approximately nineteen languages, or life of Micronesians. And the diversity within Micronesia is immense.

To try and capture the body language, lifestyle and spoken language of Satawal are essential ingredients that make up *Song for the Navigator*. Some elements are intangible and therefore not easily written into the play. The sense of another world, specifically the world of Satawal, is what will always maintain audience curiosity.

To produce this play, it is suggested that people from the Caroline Islands (also the people of Carolinian ancestry from Saipan) be involved. The language spoken in the play is Satawalese, a dialect of the Carolinian language. People that speak Carolinian will be able to assist with the pronunciation. Also, helpful hints for body language and clothing (such as how to tie a *thu* [th'oo], the traditional loincloth for the men) can be acquired from people who know the islands.

Two helpful books that deal with Satawal and navigation are: *A Song for Satawal*, by Kenneth Brower, 1983, London:Arrow books, Ltd., and *East is a Big Bird—Navigation and Logic on Puluwat Atoll*, by Thomas Gladwin, Cambridge, Massachusetts:Harvard University Press.

PRONUNCIATION NOTES FOR THE CAROLINIAN/SATAWALESE LANGUAGE

' This mark follows those syllables which should be stressed, as in the words: [lang'hē] or [e'la].

a

In all cases the letter |a|, unless otherwise indicated, should be pronounced as a "short a," most similar to the a in ago in English, or the a's in America, or father.

rr

The double |rr| produces a slight roll or trill of the tip of the tongue behind the top front teeth. It is similar to the rolled r found in the Spanish language, but with only a short duration.

gh

The Carolinian |g| (indicated as gh in the pronunciation) has no equivalent in English. The contact of the back of the tongue with the soft palate is not complete and the air passing through the narrow passage produces a slight friction. The sound is made with the tongue in approximately the position for |g| in English go, but without closure. The idea is to concentrate on the vowel that always follows the frictive sound.

ā . . . day, fade, aorta

ē . . . beat, sleepy, even

e . . . The letter |e|, unless indicated, is always pronounced as in: bet, bed, bear, various

ī . . . side, site, die

ō . . . bone, snow, tone

oo . . . tool, fool, rule

(continued)

ŋ . . . is a sound that is produced by allowing the back of the tongue and soft palate to make contact, similar to the sound produced in: ring, finger, ink. The idea is to concentrate on the vowel that always follows this nasal sound.

SET DESIGN: Simple suggestive. Scenes change easily from one locale to another, using set pieces to make a dorm room, airplane, or a sailing canoe. The primary location is Satawal, where the overwhelming feeling should be one of soilless solitude. A tiny island and a great big ocean.

NOTES ON THE CAROLINIAN-AMERICAN SPEECH AND ACCENT

Carolinian Micronesians speak English with a felicity and freedom that makes the language uniquely their own. There is a joyous sense of experimentation with word usage and meaning, with no hint of self-consciousness.

Naturally, as with any second language that one attempts, that language is usually spoken with the accent of the speakers first language. To aid in readability and avoid inaccurate characterization, no attempt has been made to actually notate the Carolinian-American accent. Instead, the actors and director are encouraged to seek those persons of Carolinian ancestry within their community for assistance in arriving at a more accurate Carolinian-American accent. If those persons are not available, people of Native Hawaiian, Somoan, or Tongan origin come next closest to capturing the accent of Carolinian-American speakers (different cultures, ancestry, and language from Micronesians to be sure, but these languages come closer to approximating the Carolinian-American accent than any other language combination).

What should be avoided, is substituting an inaccurate or inappropriate accent in the desire to effect an exotic quality. Certainly, the natural rhythms of the language with no applied accent would be preferable to a generalized misrepresentation of a Carolinian-American accent.

SONG FOR THE NAVIGATOR

SCENE ONE

(The stage is dark. The idea is to evoke the feeling of dream. Slowly, the actors enter making no connection with one another, but looking at a source in the distance. Throughout the chant, GABBY is on stage asleep. ILAE-MAL begins Chant #1. The chant is sung in the slow, somewhat droning Gaapeng [ga'a'peng] style. After the first two verses, the other VOICES join in. As the chant unfolds, SAMAL enters with his Hos [hō's]—a 12-inch wooden carving of two figures, back to back, with man-like head and upper body. Below the torso, there are several prongs (a stingray tail), about four to six inches, in place of legs. The Hos is an effigy for weather, navigation and magic, used only by the navigator. SAMAL begins his dance/movement, similar to the movement he will later use to fend off the storm. The dance/movement has a rhythm and energy of its own, separate from the chant. The dance/movement should incorporate traditional movements found in the "outer islands" of the Central Caroline Islands, with the dancer always in a deep plié. As the chant finishes, SAMAL should end up near GABBY so that we understand that GABBY sees all of this as if in a dream.)

CHANT #1

ILAEMAL (*sings/chants*).

Langi langil salangai.

[lang'ē lang'gill sa'lang-i]

(The flower in my ear.)

Elah bowngasal appatai loo.

[ē'la bong'asal ap'pa-ti loo]

(That is the scent of my perfume bottle.)

VOICES (*singing/chanting*).

Sleepless, the navigator leaves his house,

He cannot lie down and rest.

A good wind springs up,

The navigator wants to be on his way.

The Gods take possession of him!

He must away.

The rising of the star Saepi [sā'pē] predicts

Good weather; get aboard!

The navigator remembers distant lands,

In his heart the navigator wants to go away.

(*Exit ALL, leaving GABBY and GUTS asleep.*)

SCENE TWO

(The lights come up on the Hawaii high school boarding room of GUTS and GABBY. In the room there is a TV and "ghetto blaster" radio. We hear the sound of a ringing alarm clock. GABBY wakes, turns off the alarm clock, and starts to pack his suitcase. GUTS also wakes. He is wearing a long earring and sunglasses.)

GUTS*. Hey, Brahda! You know what time it is?

GABBY. Sure do. It's the end of school, the beginning of summer, and time for me to head for home.

GUTS. Oh, wow, today's the day we gotta move out. Bumma', yea?

GABBY. Not for me. It's been three years since I've been home.

GUTS. Wow, so you're finally going home to that island you're from in Microknees; Saimin or something.

GABBY. It's not Saimin, it's Saipan. And it's not Microknees, it's Micronesia.

GUTS *(being cool)*. Yea, yea, I know. What do you folks do down in Micronesia, anyway? Make microwave ovens, or what? *(Laughs.)*

GABBY. Very funny.

GUTS *(gets up, turns on the TV, puts on his Walkman ear-phones, and starts to play a hand-held video game all at the same time)*. Three years...Wow! I remember when you first came to this school. You was so shy, you looked like you might faint if a chick jus' talked to you.

GABBY. No lie!

* GUTS speaks the local "pidgin" of Hawaii. It has a colorful, lilting sound where the ends of questions tend to have an upward, and then finally, downward inflection.

GUTS. Fo' real. Why you think we wen' nickname you Gabby? 'Cause you never talked, that's why. At first, you neva' knew how fo' do anything, but now you're cool, Gabby; you body surf, play good video games, and dance good too. (*GUTS and GABBY together, dance a few measures of a routine they always do.*)

GABBY (*looking around*). I'm all packed, and I gotta leave. I'm gonna miss you, Guts, but I'll be back at the end of the summer; this place feels like home now.

GUTS. Yea, well you better come back, 'cause I don't want to share this room with some other turkey; it took a long time fo' break you in. (*GUTS takes off his earring and hands it to GABBY.*) Here, take this.

GABBY. Hey, thanks, but I don't have a hole in my ear.

GUTS. That's easy. You're not going to feel a thing. (*GUTS takes the earring, grabs GABBY's ear, and pierces it in one quick motion.*)

GABBY (*struggling*). Ouch! Hey, that hurts!

GUTS. I neva' felt nothing. Now that is my mos' favorite earring, so you better bring it back.

GABBY (*looking in mirror*). Thanks, Guts. It's really cool. (*They give each other the "high ten" slap.*)

GUTS. Now get the heck out of here.

GABBY (*taking his things and going*). See you, Guts, and stay cool.

GUTS. Aloha! (*GUTS exits.*)

SCENE THREE

(GABBY walks from his Honolulu dorm room right "into" the airport at Saipan. His plane is unloading as other PASSENGERS swirl around him on their way to different destinations.)

VOICE *(repeating on loudspeaker)*. "Hafa Aday, [ha'fa-dāy] (Aloha, or, "greetings.") Flight number 57 from Honolulu, Hawaii has now arrived and is deboarding at gate 5. Welcome to Saipan."

(GABBY looks, and finally sees his MOTHER at the other end of the terminal. She appears to be a modern woman, dressed in business-style clothes.)

GABBY. Mom! Mom, over here!

MOTHER *(seeing GABBY)*. Gabriel! There you are! I was afraid you missed your plane. Gabriel, wagi tomag.

[Gabriel, wag'gĕhē tō-ma'gĕh]

(Gabriel, you've grown so much.)

Wa mwal. [wa mwall]

(You're a man now.)

GABBY. Speak English, Mom; I've forgotten all that stuff.

MOTHER. You have, have you? Well, we'll change that. My God, look at you. You've grown so much! You're almost a man, Gabriel.

GABBY. I am a man, Mom. And Mom, my friends call me Gabby, now.

MOTHER. Well, you're still Gabriel to me. You look wonderful. What is that in your ear?

GABBY. Isn't it far-out? My friend Guts gave it to me.

MOTHER. Guts? What kind of a name is that?

GABBY. Mom, can we go? Where's the car? Where's Dad?

MOTHER. He was detained. He couldn't make it.

GABBY. Detained. You mean he didn't want to come, don't you?

MOTHER. Now Gabriel, don't start with that attitude—

GABBY. Mom, would you just cut it and tell me what is going on? I haven't even heard from Dad in over six months!

MOTHER. It's been difficult, Gabriel, very difficult...Your father and I have separated. I didn't even tell him you were coming home. I suppose I just wanted you all to myself.

GABBY (*upset*). Where's the car?

MOTHER. You can't stay, Gabriel. It's not a good time.

GABBY. What?

MOTHER. As you know, my father and sister are still living down on the outer-islands. I thought it would be best for you to stay with your aunt for the summer on Satawal. [sat'ta-wall]*

GABBY. Satawal? What the heck am I going to do on Satawal? I don't know nothing about that place.

MOTHER. That's exactly the reason. I've written to your aunt so she knows you're coming, and your grandfather has been asking about you—you'll love your grandfather, he's a very wise man. He can teach you many things.

GABBY. Mom, I don't want to learn anything else, I just came back from school. God, I feel like a deck of cards.

MOTHER. Gabriel, look at me. (*GABBY turns away.*) Please, look at me. Gabriel, you're my only son and I miss you so very much. But it's not a good time to stay here. I want

* This is the correct pronunciation for Satawal, used by all native speakers of the island throughout the play. Remember, all "A's," unless indicated, are to be pronounced short (ä), as in the English words ago or father.

you to go to Satawal and spend the summer with your aunt. Will you do this—for me?

GABBY. When do I leave?

MOTHER (*kisses him*). Gilisou. [gĥē'lē-sō]

(Thank you.)

Igi aefisug. [ē'gĥē af'āy-shoo'gĥ]

(I love you.)

GABBY. Cut it out, Mom. You still wearing coconut oil?

MOTHER (*moving GABBY to the plane*). Usually the only way to Satawal is by the field trip boat. But the field boat doesn't leave for another three months.

GABBY. So when do I go?

MOTHER. In about fifteen minutes.

GABBY. Mom, I just got off the plane!

MOTHER. I know, but I've made special arrangements. This plane will take you directly to Satawal. (*Pointing and arriving at "the plane."*) It's right over here.

GABBY. What kind of plane is this?

(CRASH is seated in the cockpit revving the engines. He wears an old WWII leather jacket, cowboy hat, and scarf. He is wildly twisting and turning knobs, making little adjustments.)

CRASH. This here's a seaplane. I just call it "The Duck."
Hop in, Ace—just throw your gear in the back; let's get this boat in the air.

MOTHER (*handing GABBY a shopping bag*). Here, give these things to your aunt.

GABBY. But Mom, I don't even know what my aunt looks like.

MOTHER. She'll know who you are; they don't get many visitors. Oh, and she has a son about your age; I think he speaks good English.

GABBY. Great.

CRASH. We ready to cut some grass?

MOTHER. Take care, Gabriel. Hopefully things will be better towards the end of the summer and we can spend some time together.

GABBY. Okay, Mom.

MOTHER. Ulela abo, Gabriel. [oo-lāy'la a-bō']

(Goodbye, Gabriel.)

Igi aefisug. [ē'gĥē af'āy-shoo'gĥ]

(I love you.)

GABBY (sits in co-pilot seat). Goodbye, Mom...I love you too. (MOTHER and GABBY wave to one another. Plane starts to "taxi" to its take-off position. MOTHER exits.)

SCENE FOUR

CRASH. Hi-do! Crash is the name.

GABBY. Crash? Hi. My name is Gabby.

CRASH. Well, hang on to you britches, Gabby, 'cause we're heading for the clouds! (The plane lurches forward with GABBY and CRASH synchronized to the different movements the plane will make. "The Duck" barely makes it off the ground. During the take-off, CRASH flicks switches, taps dials, and generally prays the plane into the air. CRASH can intersperse with such statements as:) "Come on, baby—you can do it." "There ya go—do it! do it!" "Come on, Duck—spread those wings and fly!" (GABBY clings to his seat in a state of shock. As the plane becomes

airborne, CRASH continues.) All right, baby! I knew you could do it! Don't worry, Gab, this bucket is as steady as they come. They don't make planes like this anymore. *(The plane lurches a bit.)*

GABBY. I bet. *(Looking down at the ocean below.)* So this thing can land on the water, huh?...that's good.

CRASH. Sure can. And where you're going, we're gonna need to land on the water.

GABBY. Why?

CRASH. You know what Micronesia means, don't you?

GABBY. Yea, sure, it means small islands, right?

CRASH. Something like that. All 'n' all there's about two thousand, one hundred 'n' fifty-eight islands in the area they call Micronesia. If you took all those tiny islands and stuck 'em together like Play-Doh, they'd only be about half the size of Rhode Island. Satawal, where you're going, is what they call an atoll—an island made from coral reef. Heck, if you take your time, you can walk around the whole place in about forty-five minutes. Satawal is so small, they don't even have room to build an airstrip. *(The plane drops into an uncontrolled nosedive. CRASH quickly, but methodically, tries to find the problem.)*

GABBY. Oh God, we're gonna die!

CRASH *(pulls back on the wheel and finally gets "The Duck" under control)*. Ya-hoo! Shoot, that wasn't nothing but a little power-nose-dive, that's all. *(GABBY is nauseous, and frantically looks for a place to be sick. CRASH notices that GABBY is ill.)* It's under the seat. *(GABBY reaches under the seat, finds a paper bag, turns, and relieves his stomach.)* Don't worry, Son, it's all straight ahead from here on out. *(Tapping one of the instruments.)* And according to our flight speed indicator, which I think is working, we got only about four hours and thirty-five minutes left till we

drop down to that tiny island of yours. Sat-a-wall here we come!

SCENE FIVE

(The plane arrives at Satawal. CRASH exits. GABBY is standing on the beach with his suitcase, "ghetto blaster," and bag of things. GABBY's aunt, ILAEMAL, and his cousin, TILIFAG, enter to greet GABBY. ILAEMAL is dressed in a lava lava. TILIFAG is dressed in a traditional loin-cloth, called a thu [th'oo]. BUGOLIMAR, a Satawalese man, also enters. He looks on with curiosity at the new visitor. In fact, BUGOLIMAR generally follows GABBY around with intense interest.)

ILAEMAL. El Garrabet? [yell garr·a·bet'ʔ]

(Are you Gabriel?)

GABBY *(reaching to shake ILAEMAL's hand)*. Yes, I'm Gabriel. Hello. *(ILAEMAL just looks at GABBY's hand, as ALL laugh at this "strange" gesture of greeting.)*

TILIFAG *(shaking GABBY's hand)*. Hello. My name is Tilifag, I am your cousin. You're welcome to Satawal.

ILAEMAL *(crying out with joy, she embraces GABBY in a vigorous bear hug and beats on his chest and arms with her fists)*. Ai sigulei bwe ubwe toto igila!

[i sē·ghoo·lāy' bwāy oob'wāy tō·tō ē'ghē'la]

(We didn't know you were coming today.)

Ngere ai gulei nge ai bwe pil mwar bwe mwaerem!

[ŋa·rrāy' i ghoo·lāy' ŋa i bwāy p'ill mwa'rr
bwāy mwerr'um]

(If we knew, we would have made you a flower lei.)

TILIFAG. My mother said she never knew you come today. We thinking you come in couple month on field trip boat.