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Dramatic Publishing

HUSH: AN INTERVIEW WITH AMERICA

by
JAMES STILL



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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(HUSH: AN INTERVIEW WITH AMERICA)

Cover design by Susan Carle

ISBN 0-87129-781-7

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Acknowledgments—

With generous financial support from The Lila Wallace—Reader’s Digest Fund—New Works for Young Audiences Program, *Hush: An Interview With America* was developed over a three year period. Over 35 actors participated in the development of this play—too many to name—and I am grateful to each one of you for your genuine contributions.

Hundreds of audience members (young and older) participated by attending several readings and workshops along the way and providing honest and passionate responses to a play that for many—was unlike any play they had ever seen.

Finally, this play benefited deeply from a creative team that I am forever indebted to: Carol North, David Saar, Judy Matetzschk, and Michael Keck. On behalf of the play: thank you.

For DEBORAH—
who showed me visions in Kansas a long time ago
and for MOSES, my godson—
who may turn out to be her greatest vision

“There are some people that if they
don't know, you can't tell 'em.”

—*Louis Armstrong*

“yes is a pleasant country:”

—*e.e. cummings, XXXVIII from “1 x 1”*

“At night, or whenever conscious thought relaxes its vigilance, our experiences come back to us and we seem to live through them again. However, the unconscious mind does not usually reproduce our experiences as they actually happened. They will often be admitted into the conscious part of the mind in the guise of ‘dream images’—in this form they seem less vivid and we can live with our memories more easily. This digesting of experience by the unconscious mind is surprisingly alike in all of us, although the process works better with some individuals than with others. Hence, we are always interested in imaginary things, provided they are presented to us in such a way that they seem real. What happens in a fairy tale, for example, would be absurd in the matter-of-fact language of a news report, but when it is told to us as it should be told, we are enchanted.”

—*H.W. Janson, “History of Art”*

HUSH: AN INTERVIEW WITH AMERICA was co-commissioned and premiered by Metro Theater Company, St. Louis, Mo., and Childsplay, Tempe, Ariz. It was presented by Childsplay on November 1, 1994 at the Tempe Performing Arts Center. Direction was by David Saar, music and sound design by Michael Keck, dramaturgy by Judy Matetzschk, scenic design by Jeff Thomson, costume design by Susan Johnson-Hood, lighting design by Marc Riske, videography by Brett Long, props by Jere Luisi, scenic artist was Kraig Blythe, and stage management by Juliet Weston. The cast was:

Maggie Parks Alejandra Garcia
 Frank Parks Jere Luisi
 Jana Roberts Katie McFadzen
 The Lion Jon Gentry
 Eve, The Lamb, FBI Agent, T-Shirt Debra K. Stevens

In a revised script, *HUSH: AN INTERVIEW WITH AMERICA* was presented by Metro Theater Company in January, 1995. Direction was by Carol North, music by Michael Keck, dramaturgy by Judy Matetzschk, set design by Nicholas Kryah, and costume design by Clyde Ruffin. The cast was:

Maggie Parks Cynthia Barrett
 Frank Parks Nicholas Kryah
 Jana Roberts Jenny Bennett
 The Lion Eddie Webb
 Eve, The Lamb, FBI, T-Shirt, Phone Laura McConnell

The final version of *HUSH: AN INTERVIEW WITH AMERICA* was presented by Metro Theater Company at the Grandel Square Theatre in St. Louis on October 28, 1995. Direction was by Carol North, music by Michael Keck, dramaturgy by Judy Matetzschk, set design by Nicholas Kryah, costume design by Clyde Ruffin, lighting design by John Wylie, and additional wigs by Ruth Hanson. Scenic artist was Melinda Thorson Wickman, vocal coach was Sheila Dugan, and the stage manager was Jeremy Swanson. The cast was:

Maggie Parks	Denise Roemerman
Frank Parks	Nicholas Kryah
Jana Roberts	Jenny Bennett
The Lion	Eddie Webb
Eye, The Lamb, FBI, T-Shirt, Phone	Irene White

HUSH: AN INTERVIEW WITH AMERICA

A Full-Length Play

For 11 characters, gender flexible, doubling possible.

(The play has been done with as few as 5
and as many as 15 actors)

CHARACTERS

MAGGIE PARKS an almost 12-year old girl
FRANK PARKS Maggie's dad
JANA ROBERTS a television news reporter
THE LION a lion from the Los Angeles zoo
EVE a spirit
THE LAMB a lamb in Illinois
FBI an FBI agent
T-SHIRT a 12-year old girl
PHONE a persistent, ringing telephone
VOICES OF AMERICA people from towns across the
United States

also...

NEWSCASTERS, STATUES, PILGRIMS, SEEKERS,
TV SOUND MAN

TIME: The present.

PLACE: Hush, Kansas.
And throughout the United States.

A NOTE ON PRODUCTION

I have had the great pleasure of seeing this play in many productions and enjoyed all of the distinct interpretations. Some specifics: the “Voices of America” have been performed live and as recorded voices. I prefer it live. I simply love the theatricality of seeing actors create and portray several characters at the drop of a hat. It’s also funnier and has more energy. In a play that deals with the media and its powerful technological invasion into our homes, there’s something wonderfully subversive about telling that story with actors as opposed to video and recordings. The same goes for the character of the Telephone. Also, please note that there are two sections that were written to be updated for every production. The first is on Page 15 when Jana Roberts is reporting the nightly news. It should be changed for every performance and should be real national news. The second is on Page 46 where Frank lists off all of the talk-show hosts and affiliates he’s talked to... One thing that seems predictable about America: talk-show hosts come and go. Please adjust the text on Page 45 accordingly.

While the play is divided up into scenes with titles, it has a kind of flow that should feel continuous. No set changes. If anything, there is an abruptness in the rhythm which is not unlike channel surfing.

J.S.

HUSH: AN INTERVIEW WITH AMERICA

THE BEGINNING

SCENE: Sounds of a wind chime. In darkness we hear the joyful laughter of a young girl. It is a sound that comes from somewhere deep inside. The laughter builds and then fades to quiet.

AT RISE: Lights come up slowly on an evening sunset. Late May. A backyard in Hush, Kansas. An apple tree. A young GIRL. She spies, plays hide and seek, searches with intense curiosity. When she senses something nearby, she interacts fearlessly and begins to laugh again. The interaction evolves into free-spirited movement between her and an unseen presence. Through her, we see what she sees. For us, it's like witnessing a private moment, watching someone who doesn't know they're being watched. Her laughter builds to genuine release and continues as: Suddenly we hear loud noises from another part of the world. The sounds of an angry riot. Screaming. Shattering glass. A LION enters, looks at the audience in fear. The LION nervously crosses the stage looking in all directions. His movements resemble a dance—fear, apprehension, the hunted. The GIRL stops, startled, as if she too can hear the sounds of the riots. Without looking at the LION, she holds her hands out, a simple gesture suggesting safety. The LION sees her—the dancing light in the sky—and roars from deep inside. It is not an angry roar, but one filled with loneliness. Then he disap-

pears. Alone again, the GIRL seems disturbed, shaking herself out of a dream. A voice from offstage interrupts.

FRANK (*calling out*). Maggie! Time for dinner! (*MAGGIE does a jig and exits inside the house.*)

* * * *

DINNER IN AMERICA: PUBLIC/PRIVATE

PUBLIC VOICE OF AMERICA #1. ...Rocky Face, Georgia is reporting 92 degrees...in the shade!

PRIVATE VOICE OF AMERICA #1. What's for dinner?

FRANK (*coming into the house*). Anybody home?

PUBLIC VOICE #2. ...This late-breaking story from Gualala, California:

FRANK (*to himself*). Maybe we should just go for pizza.

PUBLIC VOICE #3. ...A bank robbery in the neighboring town of Sleepy Eye, Minnesota...

PRIVATE VOICE #2. Don't you want to eat first?

FRANK (*calling outside*). Maggie?

PUBLIC VOICE #4. ...the residents of Texico, New Mexico are preparing for their first visit from the—

PRIVATE VOICE #3. Why can't we have one meal where no one leaves the table crying?

VOICES OF AMERICA. AND—in the little town of Hush, Kansas...

VOICES OF AMERICA. ...little town of Hush, Kansas...

VOICES OF AMERICA. ...Hush, Kansas:

(MAGGIE rushes into the kitchen, out of breath. FRANK ceremoniously presents MAGGIE with a plate of food from the microwave. MAGGIE rushes by.)

MAGGIE. Fruit Loops, please! (*FRANK gives in, gives MAGGIE a giant box of Fruit Loops which she devours by the fistful. They are easy with each other, the conversation is simple, chaotic, family.*)

FRANK. What would people think if they knew all you ate was Fruit Loops?

MAGGIE. You worry too much about what people think, Dad.

FRANK (*defensive*). I do not. (*MAGGIE gleefully eats more Fruit Loops and starts to exit back outside.*) You know, man cannot survive on Fruit Loops alone.

MAGGIE (*laughs*). I'm not a man, Dad. I'm a woman.

FRANK (*automatic*). Girl.

MAGGIE. Woman.

FRANK. Girl.

MAGGIE. Woman.

FRANK. Girl.

MAGGIE (*roaring, like a lioness*). Woman.

FRANK (*flustered, rattled*). Right. I know. I was—whatever.

MAGGIE. Do you know the story about the girl who got lost in the woods?

FRANK (*launching into his own version of the story*).
Once upon a time there was a girl—

MAGGIE. Come on, Dad. This is my story. This girl was lost in the woods and the only thing she had to eat was a box of Fruit Loops. She survived for a whole week by eating one little Loop at a time. And when the cereal was gone she ate the box. Except she saved the box TOP and when she was rescued she mailed it in and got a free pen with invisible ink. (*She tears off a piece of the cereal box and offers it to FRANK.*) Want some? (*FRANK laughs, refuses her offer.*) Suit yourself. (*Eating a piece of the box, exaggerating.*)
Yummmmmmm.

FRANK (*thrown, not sure what to say*). Where do these stories come from?

(*MAGGIE's attention drifts out the window where EVE appears dancing joyfully in the night with a giant full moon as her partner. EVE is dressed in a full skirt with jeans underneath and boots, a potato chip bag on her head.*)

(*The LION appears, out of breath, running, stands nearby, as if holding his breath, listening to MAGGIE's story.*)

(*EVE tosses the moon up into the sky, and it sticks—as if dramatically/theatrically rising against the starry summer night. The moon throws light into the house, across MAGGIE's face which makes her laugh as if she's been tickled.*)

(*EVE dances into darkness and disappears.*)

(*The LION cowers in a corner, hiding from danger in the safety of darkness.*)

MAGGIE.

So: this girl wrote down her greatest most private thoughts with this invisible ink—secrets that filled an entire book. And hundreds of years later when somebody found it, they thought it was nothing but a bunch of blank paper.

(*FRANK stares at MAGGIE.*)

MAGGIE.

Sometimes I'm dancing or making up a poem or even just dreaming—and I think—here I am, full of all this stuff, like all my secrets are written in invisible ink—

FRANK.

Invisible ink?

MAGGIE.

—and who would ever know just by looking at me?

FRANK.

Are you okay, Maggie?

MAGGIE.

I'm fine, Daddy. Really.

(FRANK isn't sure how to respond to MAGGIE's insights. He picks up the remote control and switches on the television news. Behind a large frame suggesting a TV screen, JANA ROBERTS delivers the day's news.)

JANA ROBERTS *(assuming a slick, professional pose)*.
"Good evening, I'm Jana Roberts with *What's News Around The World*. Tonight's top story... *Welfare Reform. The Clinton Administration continues to—"

(MAGGIE gets up to leave the room as if to find EVE and the LION. FRANK turns off the TV.)

FRANK. Whoa, whoa, whoa! Where's the fire?

MAGGIE. I'm going outside!

FRANK. Every night this week you've run a race to get outside.

MAGGIE *(weary)*. Dad, it's almost summer...

FRANK. Maybe we should talk more.

MAGGIE. About what?

FRANK. I don't know. Things, stuff, whatever...

MAGGIE. Things, stuff, whatever?

FRANK. Ask me a question.

MAGGIE. How was work?

FRANK. The same. *(Thinks.)* It's always the same. *(Pause.)*
How was school?

MAGGIE *(mimicking FRANK)*. The same. It's always the same. *(Strains to engage FRANK.)* In science class we're learning about snow.

* See "A Note on Production," at front of script.

FRANK (*relieved*). Great! Let's talk about the weather.

Now, snowflakes have six sides and each one is totally unique.

MAGGIE (*suddenly very passionate, putting her own spin on "snowflake," making up a poem/song, engaging FRANK who joins in with goofy glee*).

**THE SKIES OPEN UP LIKE A BIG, BIG MOUTH
 LIKE WORDS TO A SONG, SEE THE SNOWFLAKES
 POP OUT
 FLOATING/FLOATING/FLOATING LITTLE HEROES
 IN THE SKY
 LANDING NEXT TO SNOWFLAKES IN A CROWD
 SNOWFLAKES PILING HIGH
 NOW BECOMING ROUND
 NOT ANOTHER SOUND
 IF A SNOWFLAKE DOESN'T DANCE
 IT BECOMES A PIECE OF LOST,
 DULL,
 ICE.**

(*FRANK collapses dramatically in a heap on the floor. Seizing her opening, MAGGIE quickly jumps up and heads for the door.*)

Your turn to do the dishes!

FRANK. Maggie—

MAGGIE. I'll be out back, Daddy! (*She runs to the backyard. Running free toward the tree swing:*)

**SWING, KING!
 SING-PING-SPRING-THING
 WING! WING! WING!**

VOICE OF AMERICA. Yeah, I'm from Friendship, Tennessee—and I read somewhere that Americans would pay about \$15 to see live dinosaurs. I would!

MAGGIE (*calling out*). You want to dance with me?

(EVE appears and accepts MAGGIE's invitation. They dance a playful, dramatic tango together accompanied by MAGGIE's spontaneous poetry.)

MAGGIE.

A LITTLE DANCING
AFTER DINNER
HELPS YOU DIGEST
WHAT YOU DIDN'T.
DO YOU DARE ME LIKE THE DARKNESS IN THE
DAWNING OF THE DEEP?
TO DING THE DIPPING DILLY LIKE THE
DRUMMER IN MY DREAMS?

(A NEWSCASTER appears out of nowhere and addresses an invisible camera. MAGGIE stops dancing as if to listen.)

NEWSCASTER. "...Back in the 1870s, Wyatt Earp was called in to Wichita, Kansas because the cattle town was averaging one homicide a year...That was the Wild West, folks!"

(MAGGIE returns to her dance with EVE. Suddenly another NEWSCASTER appears and seems to address another camera.)

NEWSCASTER #2. "...Last year in Wichita there were twice as many murders as in Belfast, Northern Ireland..."

(MAGGIE is affected by the information but tries to return to her innocent dance with EVE. Suddenly a third NEWSCASTER appears.)

NEWSCASTER #3. "...A recent study shows that one of every three American teenagers believes he or she will be shot to death before reaching old age..." (*The NEWS-CASTERS disappear. EVE invites MAGGIE to resume their dance. MAGGIE can't. EVE disappears. MAGGIE looks up into the tree.*)

MAGGIE (*whispering*). Hello? Hello? (*She shines a flashlight into the tree.*) Can you see me? (*She waves the flashlight around impatiently and leans back against the tree.*)

* * * *

THREE LIONS SITTING AROUND TALKING

(*Three LIONS sit facing the audience. Two of them are statues and stare straight ahead, stiff and regal. The other one is the LION we've seen earlier—obviously real though he is pretending to be a statue; his eyes move impatiently from side to side.*)

LION (*tense*). This has been the longest day of my life. (*The other two lions do not move. They are real STATUES.*) How do you do it? (*The STATUES do not respond; the LION grows more agitated.*) How do you just SIT here—all day? The rain, the people, the birds... (*Looking up at the sky.*)

STATUE #1. We don't feel a thing.

STATUE #2. We're statues, remember?

LION (*frustrated*). Well I'm NOT a statue, remember? And I don't like pretending to be something that I'm not. I'd rather go back to the zoo—(*Looking around anxiously.*) I didn't mean that. Oh, man, what am I gonna do? If I

hang around you guys much longer my brain is gonna turn into rock.

STATUE #1. Worse things could happen.

LION. Don't you ever dream about going home?

STATUE #2. Home?

LION. Home: Africa!

STATUE #1 (*explaining to STATUE #2*). He means the rock quarry.

STATUE #2. We don't dream.

STATUE #1. We're statues, remember?

LION. You guys are gonna drive me nuts! I gotta get outta here.

STATUE #1. Where will you go?

LION (*despairing*). I've been to every state but Hawaii and I'd go there if I could swim that far. I'm so sick of wandering around with no idea where I'm going, no reason to stop, no one to trust. (*Paranoid.*) Men. With guns. (*Looking around.*) Aren't there any decent human beings left in this country? (*Looking in the distance.*) I'm so tired of running. I don't know where to go anymore... so I just keep running. (*Knocks on the head of one of the STATUES as he sneaks into the darkness.*) Think of me. (*The STATUES look straight ahead, staring, blank.*)

STATUE #2. Will you miss him?

STATUE #1. No. Will you?

STATUE #2. No. He talked too much. (*The STATUES stare blankly straight ahead.*)