Acting Edition

The Sound Inside

by Adam Rapp

SAMUEL FRENCH

ISBN 978-0-573-70858-9

www.concordtheatricals.com
www.concordtheatricals.co.uk

FOR PRODUCTION INQUIRIES

United States and Canada
info@concordtheatricals.com
1-866-979-0447

United Kingdom and Europe
licensing@concordtheatricals.co.uk
020-7054-7298

This work is published by Samuel French, an imprint of Concord Theatricals Corp.

THE SOUND INSIDE was commissioned by Lincoln Center Theater (André Bishop, Producing Artistic Director; Adam Siegel, Managing Director; Hattie K. Jutagir, Executive Director of Development and Planning). It received its world premiere at Williamstown Theatre Festival (Mandy Greenfield, Artistic Director) in Williamstown, Massachusetts, on June 27, 2018. The performance was directed by David Cromer with set design by Alexander Woodward costume design by David Hyman, lighting design by Heather Gilbert, original music and sound design by Daniel Kluger, and projection design by Aaron Rhyne. The Stage Manager was Dane Urban. The cast was as follows:

BELLA ..... Mary-Louise Parker
CHRISTOPHER ..... Will Hochman

This production opened on Broadway at Studio 54 on October 17, 2019. The producers were Jeffrey Richards, Lincoln Center Theater, Rebecca Gold, Evamere Entertainment, Eric Falkenstein, Salman Vienn Al-Rashid, Spencer Ross, Filmnation Entertainment/Faliro House, Jane Bergère, Caiola Productions, Mark S. Golub and David S. Golub, Ken Greiner, Gemini Theatrical Investors, Scott H. Mauro, Jayne Baron Sherman, Jacob Soroken Porter, and Williamstown Theatre Festival.

The cast and creative team remained the same, except the production Stage Manager was Richard A. Hodge.

CHARACTERS

BELLA
CHRISTOPHER

I.

*(**BELLA**, a middle-aged woman, emerges from the darkness. She is dressed for a cold winter night.)*

BELLA. *(To audience.)* A middle-aged professor of undergraduate Creative Writing at a prestigious Ivy League university stands before an audience of strangers. She can't quite see them but they're out there. She can feel them – they're as certain as old trees. As constant as the northeastern sugar maples and sawtooth oaks that have been so handsomely colonizing her campus since the early 1700s. Gently creaking in the heavy autumn air.

Is this audience friendly, she wonders? Forgiving? Are they easily distracted? Prone to dismissing the complexities of difficult matters of the heart? Or will they hear this woman out?

And what about her?

Ironically, she often dissuades her students from describing a protagonist in too fine of detail. *Let the reader construct your main character* with *your author*, she advises them early in the term. Readers only need a few telling clues, after all.

"The countess possesses a shock of gray hair."

"The farmer's mouth is a shriveled axe wound."

"The veteran local librarian has the unfortunate eyes of a star-nosed mole."

The only distinguishing physical characteristics Salinger gives Holden Caulfield are his height and that little patch of gray hair at the side of his head, and yet within a few pages he's so thoroughly formed in our minds. If you do your authorial job correctly your eager reader will *create* the rest of the character.

So going against her own professorial mandate she describes this woman to said audience of strangers.

Beyond her somewhat forgiving brown eyes, your narrator could be described as unremarkable. She is neither beautiful nor homely. Terrifically alluring nor terribly repellant. In that thorny subjective bureau of classification known as the Looks Department, if she's being brutally honest with herself, she'd say she's perhaps four or five degrees beyond mediocre, also known as "sneakily attractive."

She is the equivalent of a collectible plate mounted to a wall.

Her laugh is loud and mannish, though following a good, sturdy joke it has been known to light up a room. She's been told by one colleague that her smile can be radiant. At a recent cocktail reception, she heard Plath Van Hugo, her somewhat-deaf, somewhat-pickled Departmental Chair, refer to her as a "handsome woman." *That Bella Baird is an inviolably* handsome *woman*, he declared in his suspiciously British accent. She imagined one of the Founding Fathers in a prom dress. How is one *inviolably* handsome, anyway? It sounds as if he's referring to an indestructible government building. Something made of limestone with a few dozen steps and a portico. Pigeons pacing about epileptically.

The truth is she has a good pair of legs but rarely shows them. During her semi-competitive weekly tennis match, one might even describe her as being remarkably youthful. Fleet-footed even. Despite her

fifty-three years she can still run down even the most mischievous baseline lob.

So now that we've teased out more than a few telling details about our protagonist, who is this audience of strangers?

As your painfully-reliable narrator delicately shifts from third person to first – after all, this *is* a confession of sorts – I answer, "You are."

*

Autumns in New Haven, where the temperature drops so fast it's as if God is hoarding something; as if he's keeping a piece of this world for himself, never to be returned. Yes, my God is a man. He's selfish and smokes a pipe and looks like a perverted eighteenth-century French novelist. My God is a fat man with money who can still get it up. His penis is short and stout and stiff as an old book. My God has gamey breath and gout. My God is basically Honoré de Balzac.

So it's the day before November recess, known on most other college campuses as Thanksgiving Break. Regarding the weather, which stubbornly refuses to deviate from almanac predictions, there has been early snow, nearly a foot of it, in fact. Records have been broken. The snowplows scraping along the streets of New Haven have become a familiar score to the end of this term. It seems as if the brief fall skidded across Chapel Street like a cheap motorbike. One barely remembers the leaves changing.

So this is now. Right now.

I'm standing in the center of the New Haven Green, a snow-heaped park near campus. It's very cold. There is no wind. The naked trees look palsied and arthritic. It's that part of the night when even the most mundane objects seem to possess thought. A guilt-ridden park bench. The serpentine wickedness hiding in a lost

scarf. That lamppost over there knows more about me than most of my students. Even the homeless are somewhere else during this cold, late hour.

I come to this park when I can't sleep. I talk things out. I use long, heavily-embroidered, figurative sentences; the kind of sentences I urge my students to avoid. In this park I'm a Creative Writing hypocrite. I imagine my purple prose evaporating in the cold air above me. Thousands of words disappearing into the cloudless night sky…

So let's go back in time a bit, to when my story begins.

Let's get down to brass tacks, shall we?

Some fourteen months ago, shortly after the beginning of the fall term – my tenth tenured year at Yale – sharp stomach pains drove me to the university medical center's emergency room where I sustained a rupture in my lower intestine. At home I had been sitting in my favorite chair – an overstuffed plaid recliner – re-reading James Salter's *Light Years*. It's a book I read every year, often in the fall. Published in 1975, it's one of those rare works of fiction that continues to reveal new things with each reading. Salter's meditation on marriage and infidelity and love and loneliness and death cuts deep and his sentences are breathtakingly poetic, their density of feeling shattering. The book's greatness can be dangerous, though. It can induce paralysis in even the most confident writer. Anyway, I was about forty pages into it when I got up to go to the bathroom and was suddenly doubled over in pain. It felt as if I'd been stabbed in the stomach with a hunting knife. Fortunately my cellphone was within arm's reach and I was able to dial 911. I lost consciousness shortly thereafter. I don't even remember the paramedics.

A few days later, after recovering from emergency surgery – I lost an enormous amount of blood – I underwent a series of tests, which revealed that my

stomach was riddled with a constellation of tumors. Yes, they were malignant. And yes, according to the medical center oncologist who shall remain nameless, my cancer was somewhat advanced, well into the Stage Two phase of metastasis.

Here's some general information:

My name is Bella Lee Baird. I'm fifty-three years old. I was born at Saint Francis Hospital, in Evanston, Illinois. Aside from a semi-annual bout of Midwestern bronchitis that I brought east with me some thirty years ago, I am healthy. I eat a low-fat, high-fiber diet. I've never smoked cigarettes. Over the years I've occasionally enjoyed various forms of marijuana but I don't abuse it or any other drug for that matter. Aside from a bottle of red wine now and then, I've never been much of a drinker. I do own a thirty-year-old single-malt Scotch that I'll nip from on special occasions. I do eat meat, but only a few times a month and exclusively the six-ounce filet over at Jack's Bar and Steakhouse on College Street. I've never so much as suffered a broken bone.

What's my marital status, you ask? Well, that's simple. I've never married and I have no children. Like many single, self-possessed women who've managed to find solid footing in the slippery foothills of higher education, I've been accused of being a lesbian. And a witch. And a maker of Bulgarian cheese. And a collector of cat calendars.

Both my parents are dead. My father suffered a fatal heart attack at sixty-two and I'll get to my mother in a minute. I have no brothers or sisters. I'm essentially a walking Social Security number with a coveted, tenured Ivy League professorship and a handful of moth-bitten sweaters. I live in faculty housing. I don't own property. Nor do I own a car. I actually drive a twenty-year-old three-speed bike. My trusty Schwinn Men's Traveler.

Despite those rumors, I'm not a witch or a maker of Bulgarian cheese. I have no pets. I don't collect cat calendars.

Besides those sweaters, my greatest claim to this life has been my book collection, which I've been carefully curating since my early twenties. Everyone from Theodore Dreiser to Edith Wharton to Samuel Beckett. I'm a whore for first editions. *An American Tragedy*, *Ethan Frome*, and the French version of Beckett's *Watt*, to name a few.

Scattered among these monuments are three of my own contributions to the world of letters: two slim volumes of short stories published before I was hired by Yale, and an underappreciated novel written in my late thirties that, despite some flattering reviews and a mention or two on a handful of year-end lists, is struggling to stay in print.

So back to my mother.

Lorna Baird died of stomach cancer at the age of fifty-four. She had a rare disease called neurofibromatosis, which the cancer infiltrated. Neurofibromatosis is a condition in which tumors manifest either topically, as moles or skin tabs, or internally. In her case, one of the more tenacious little bastards attached itself to one of her adrenal glands and burst apocalyptically, seeding little baby malignant tumors all throughout her abdomen. At the time there was no known protocol for treatment. They tried everything: chemotherapy; radioactive isotopes; transcendental meditation. They even fed her shark cartilage. She spent two months at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. But the tumors organized their attack and grew so quickly that her abdomen swelled to the size of a cantaloupe. And then they digested the rest of her. It was as if she'd been attacked by some force outside of her body, not within it. As if a scourge of invisible termites had been unleashed on her.

During the final week of her life I sat beside her hospice bed in the house I grew up in – a modest Tudor with a sloping roof in Oak Park, Illinois. She was unrecognizable. Lorna Baird had been reduced to some childlike, larval version of herself. Hairless and wheezing and addicted to morphine. Her hands were monstrous and skeletal. Her breath tinged with a chemical rot.

Toward the end I read to her from her favorite Anne Tyler book: *The Accidental Tourist*. She was sixty-three pounds. She went blind and didn't know her own name. She eventually dissolved into nothingness.

Like a patch of snow in a surprising, warm winter rain.

I don't have neurofibromatosis.

I just have good old-fashioned cancer.

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