



SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS

by

Bess Wohl

directed by

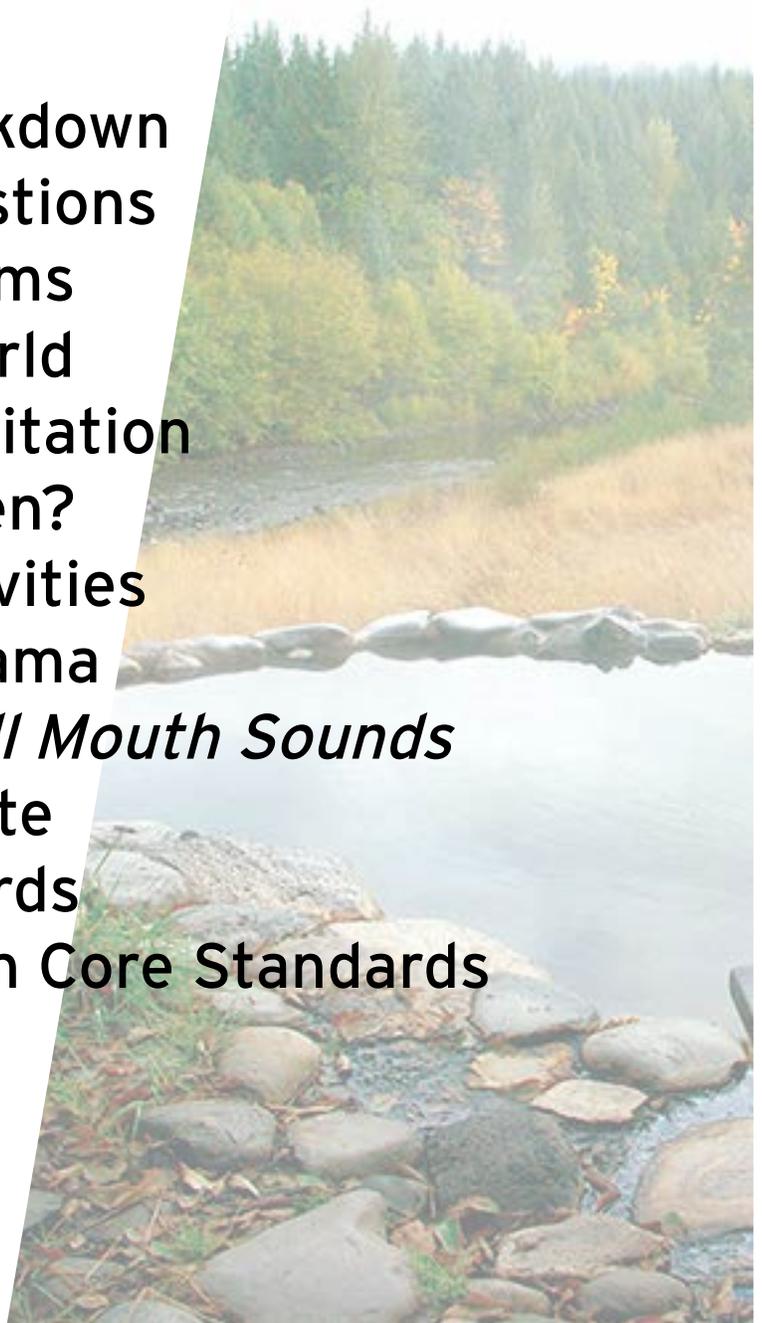
Shawn Lee

DEEP DIVE

**ARTISTS
REP 18/19**
WE DO THEATRE

STUDY GUIDE TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 3.....About Artists Rep
- 4.....A Letter to Educators
- 5.....Who's Who?
- 6.....The Playwright
- 7.....Play Synopsis
- 8.....Character Breakdown
- 9.....Discussion Questions
- 9.....Glossary of Terms
- 10.....Get into the World
- 11.....Benefits of Meditation
- 12.....Is Silence Golden?
- 14.....Classroom Activities
- 15.....Elements of Drama
- 15.....Themes in *Small Mouth Sounds*
- 16.....Theatre Etiquette
- 16.....Theatre Standards
- 17.....Oregon Common Core Standards
- 18.....Notes



ABOUT

ARTISTS REP



Artists Repertory Theatre's mission is to produce intimate, provocative theatre and provide a home for artists and audiences to take creative risks. Artists Rep is Portland's premiere mid-size regional theatre company and is led by Artistic Director Dámaso Rodríguez and Managing Director J.S. May. Founded in 1982, Artists Rep is the longest-running professional theatre company in Portland, became 72nd member of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) in 2016, and is an Associate Member of the National New Play Network (NNPN).

Artists Rep has become a significant presence in American regional theatre with a legacy of world, national, and regional premieres of provocative new work with the highest standards of stagecraft. The organization is committed to local artists and features a company of Resident Artists, professionals of varied theatre disciplines, who are a driving force behind Artists Rep's creative output and identity.

A LETTER TO EDUCATORS

We are excited to have you and your students to Artists Repertory Theatre to experience *Small Mouth Sounds* by Bess Wohl!

This study guide was created to enhance your students' theatre experience. There is material for your students to utilize before and after the performance. Our goal is to increase theatre exposure and understanding, as well as to encourage meaningful conversation and provoke thoughtful discussion about the play you attend. Within this guide, there is information about the play's themes, setting, characters, pertinent articles, basic theatre etiquette and more! We hope this information will enhance your class's theatre experience!

Artists Rep provides many opportunities for young people to get involved! Students can shadow professional theatre artists in a variety of disciplines, observe tech rehearsals, and become a member of our Student Ambassador Program! Please feel free to contact us or give your students our contact information.

Enjoy the show!

Karen Rathje
Education Director
Artists Repertory Theatre
krathje@artistsrep.org

WHO'S WHO?



1. Alan Cline (Board Op.) 2. Megan Moll (Production Assistant) 3. Michael Mendelson (Actor, Jan) 4. Darius Pierce (Actor, Ned) 5. John San Nicolas (Actor, Rodney) 6. Kelly Godell (Actor, Alicia) 7. Susannah Mars (Actor, Joan) 8. Luan Schooler (Dramaturg) 9. Miranda Russ (Stage Manager) 10. Robert Amico (Props Master) 11. Eric Viale (Acting Apprentice) 12. Shawn Lee (Director) 13. Mary McDonald-Lewis (Actor, Teacher) 14. Ayanna Berkshire (Actor, Judy) 15. Megan Wilkerson (Scenic Designer) 16. Jennifer Lin (Lighting Designer) 17. Amanda K. Cole (Intimacy Consultant)

Not Pictured: Gregory Pulver (Costume Designer), Rodolfo Ortega (Sound Designer)

THE PLAYWRIGHT



Bess Wohl, playwright

Bess Wohl began her career as an actress, earning an MFA from Yale, and has since become a writer for the stage, motion pictures, and television. She is currently at work on a family drama about the meat business for HBO. She is also working on an original musical about the adult entertainment business which is a recent commission from the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles. Her first play, *Cats Talk Back*, had its world premiere at the Yale Cabaret while she was a student at Yale. It was subsequently performed at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, and finally at the NYC International Fringe Festival where it won the award for Best Overall Production. Her play, *Touch(ed)*, had its world premiere at the Pioneer Theatre Company earlier this year. *Barcelona* was recently workshopped at Ojai Playwrights Conference. Her plays have been produced or developed at The Vineyard Theatre, The Pittsburgh Public Theater, The Northlight Theatre, TheatreWorks New Works Festival, and The Geffen Playhouse. Her work has also been supported by the MacDowell Colony, where she was recently a fellow. In 2011, her play *In*, premiered at the Pioneer Theatre Company. The screenplay adaptation of her play *In* was included on Hollywood's Black List of best feature scripts. She has also developed for network television, and recently wrote an original pilot for Twentieth Century Fox Television/FBC. As an actress, Bess has appeared onstage in New York, regionally and at Williamstown Theater Festival (five summers) and in numerous films and TV shows, where she has given birth, solved crimes, committed crimes, been wrongly accused, and come back from the dead. She is a graduate of Harvard, magna cum laude, where she was awarded the Rona Jaffe Writing Prize, and the Tennessee Williams Scholarship. At the Yale School of Drama, she was a recipient of the Rebecca West Scholarship. Wohl won the 2015 Drama Desk Sam Norkin Off-Broadway Award that recognizes excellence and significant contributions to the theater for establishing herself as an important voice in New York theatre, and having a breakthrough year with the eclectic *American Hero*, *Pretty Filthy*, and *Small Mouth Sounds*. She is originally from Brooklyn, New York, and divides her time between New York and Los Angeles.

www.besswohl.com | www.smallmouthsounds.com

PLAY SYNOPSIS

TIME: Present day

PLACE: A silent retreat, not too far from New York City

Tired of not living their 'best life,' six broken individuals gather at a wellness center in the middle of the woods for a week-long silent retreat. They are barred from speaking, of course, but they also cannot smoke or drink and their use of technology is limited to the parking lot. The strangers must use nonverbal communication to interact, resulting in a lot of misunderstood flailing. Each is there for a different reason - to gain peace, understanding, closeness, and, most of all, enlightenment.

The play opens in the great hall of the retreat. The group includes: Jan, a Finnish pastor in his fifties; Rodney, a popular yoga instructor; Ned, a man who has had horrible luck; Joan & Judy, a sex therapist and magazine editor, respectively, dealing with the recent and horrible news that Judy has terminal ovarian cancer; and Alicia, a former child star, full of shame and regret. Their teacher, a well-known spirituality guru unseen by the audience, lays down the rules for the week to come, as the students try to fix their lives and themselves.

Several times a day, they meet and meditate or practice yoga. Each write down their intention for the week on a small slip of paper. The rest of the time, they are left to their own devices - eating, hiking, swimming, and skinny dipping. As each person attempts to find a solution to their suffering, mistakes and misunderstandings occur. Judy finds Joan's intention for the week and is deeply upset. Alicia tries to get some emotional comfort from Ned, but ends up having an (offstage) sexual encounter with Rodney, whom she does not know is married. Even the teacher, who is supposed to be the closest to enlightenment, struggles with morality and purpose throughout this particular retreat.

Although all are determined to do better, the audience is reminded that there is not always a linear path to self-improvement. Absurdly funny and profoundly poignant, *Small Mouth Sounds* encourages us all to put down the phone and just be in the moment.

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

TEACHER

The teacher runs the silent retreat and has run many before it. They are somewhat famous in the yoga and meditation communities for hosting podcasts and writing books. This particular retreat is happening during a very difficult time in the teacher's life.

JOAN

Joan is a therapist and sex educator who relies on spirituality to help her deep anger at the world. She is heartbroken because her partner, Judy, was recently diagnosed with terminal cancer.

JUDY

Judy is a successful businesswoman who is often seen as harsh and controlling. Her soft spot is her partner, Joan. Judy has recently been diagnosed with terminal ovarian cancer.

ALICIA

Alicia is a former child actress and beauty pageant queen. Now she does commercials. Her existence is rattled after an intense break-up with a man named Fred. She wants to be over Fred, but isn't.

NED

Ned's life has not been going well. After a severe brain injury and years of recovery, his wife left him for his younger brother. His parents died. His dog died. His AA sponsor committed suicide. He is struggling.

RODNEY

Rodney is a married yoga instructor and vegan product designer. He has a short attention span and is not faithful to his wife, as marriage makes him feel trapped.

JAN

Jan is from Finland. He found religion late in life after his six year old son died of a prolonged illness. He is now a pastor, which gives him a sense of purpose but has not healed his wounds. He has trouble sleeping.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the Teacher is represented by a disembodied voice, rather than a character on stage?
2. Each character has a personal trial/tribulation that is relatively unknown to the audience. What assumptions did you make about each character?
3. Why would the playwright give the audience so little verbal information about the characters?
4. How does silence affect the character's interactions?
5. Do actions speak louder than words? Why or why not? Give some examples from the play.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Silent Retreat: An activity in which people, typically strangers, come together in an isolated location, where talking is forbidden in order to better themselves and reach enlightenment

Enlightenment: In Buddhism, a state of complete understanding of both one's self and of the world

Yoga: A spiritual and aesthetic discipline, including breath control, simple meditation, and specific body poses

Meditation: Intentional time set aside to think deeply or focus

Namaste: A gesture in which one puts their hands together and bows, often used to thank a yoga instructor; literally translates to: "I bow to you"

Mantra: A word, phrase, or sound that is chanted and focused on during meditation (ex. 'OM')

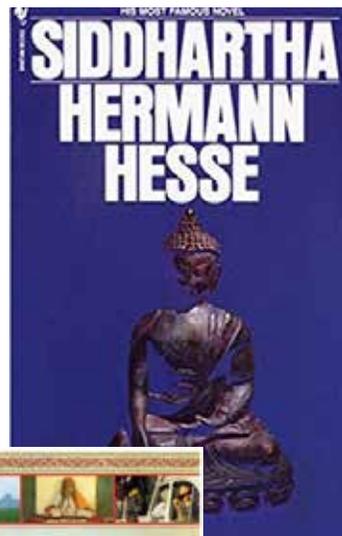
GET INTO THE

WORLD OF THE PLAY

This collection of books, movies, and music are inspired by the world of *Small Mouth Sounds*.

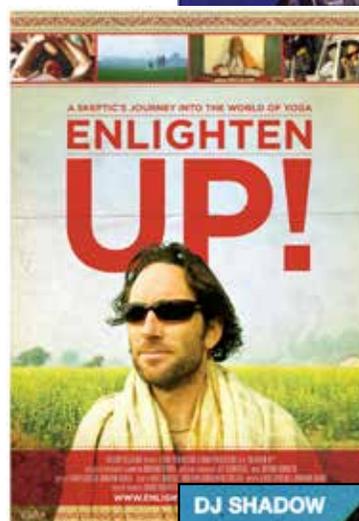
BOOKS

- *Buddha's Bad Boys* by Alan Chin
- *Sit, Walk, Don't Talk: How I Survived a Silent Meditation Retreat* by Jennifer Howd
- *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse



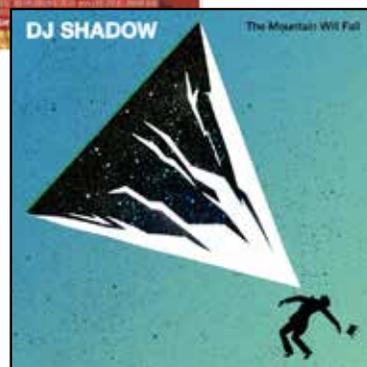
MOVIES

- Couples Retreat (2009)
- The Big Lebowski (1998)
- Enlighten Up! (2008)



MUSIC

- No Phone, Cake (Pressure Chief, 2004)
- Lebanese Blonde, Theivery Corporation (The Mirror Conspiracy, 2000)
- Nobody Speak, DJ Shadow feat. Run the Jewels (The Mountain Will Fall, 2016)



10 BENEFITS OF MEDITATION

1. Reduces Stress

Meditation trains one's body to be calm, lowering both heart rate and blood pressure and reducing the body's stress hormone, cortisol.

2. Controls Anxiety

Practicing meditation helps one manage their body's physical reactions in anxious situations

3. Promotes Emotional Health

The meditation community places value on emotional health

4. Enhances Self-Awareness

Meditation promotes self-reflection - looking inside oneself and making adjustments

5. Lengthens Attention Span

Meditation is described as weight lifting for your brain! The more you meditate, the better your attention span becomes.

6. Generates Kindness

One form of meditation, loving-kindness meditation, focuses on extending to love to all, without discrimination

7. Fights Addiction

Mindfulness meditation helps some with addiction, for example, to drugs or food, by increasing their understanding of why they crave their vice and reframing their perspective on their addiction.

8. Improves Sleep

Training oneself in meditation helps reduce the stress and anxiety that often causes insomnia. In addition, the sheer act of repeating a mantra can be as effective as counting sheep.

9. Controls Pain

Mindfulness meditation has been proven to decrease chronic pain by soothing the brain patterns associated with pain, altering the structure of the brain itself.

10. Reduces Age-Related Memory Loss

Meditation can increase blood flow in the brain, which can improve memory.

IS SILENCE GOLDEN?

BY LUAN SCHOOLER

A 2014 study done at the University of Virginia found that 67% of men and 25% of women preferred receiving an electrical shock to being left alone with their thoughts. In the study, participants were left alone for fifteen minutes in a sparsely furnished room without phones, pens, or distractions of any sort. There was, however, a button that participants could push that would give them an unpleasant electrical shock. Each had experienced the shock beforehand, and all said they would pay money to avoid being shocked again. Yet when left alone for 15 minutes, many were more averse to their thoughts than to pain.

Throughout history, people have pursued silence in search of life's meaning. Whether wandering in the desert or sitting on a mountaintop, religious and philosophical seekers have used silence as a tool for unlocking Mystery. Today, however, surrounded by noise and conditioned to an ever-quickening flood of stimulation, have we become so dependent on distraction that we can no longer simply sit with our thoughts?

Possibly. When was the last time that you sat and thought for even ten minutes, without reaching for your phone, making a list, or leaping up to do something? It's not easy to be quiet, yet the idea of silence continues to beckon. While few of us are willing to go it alone in the desert or a mountain cave, many of us long for a quiet space to examine our lives, to gain some clarity, to find some peace.

Over the last decade, there have been new social activities developed that center on silence. In some cities there are regular silent reading parties, where participants meet up in a bar to read quietly for an hour or two and then chat among the group. In London, Shhh Dating offers silent singles nights, telling patrons, "we find you can make more of a connection with others without words (to begin with). That's why we've created a unique dating format with flirting games, eye gazing, and no talking." Silent Disco Parties offer all the dancers wireless headphones so they can hear the music, but for observers the party is sound free (except perhaps for the shifting of dancers' feet).



Silent retreats have been around for many years. Many have a religious or spiritual grounding, but others are decidedly secular and focus on health, pleasure and individual

growth. Most include yoga, meditation classes, and opportunities to spend time in nature. Accommodations and meals range from modest to elegant, priced accordingly. All promise a relaxing, restorative, profound experience.

"Prolonged silence lets practitioners recharge from the stresses of daily life, but the practice of silence and its intention goes beyond relaxation. Outward silence shines a light on the parts of your inner life you don't usually experience, teaching you to acknowledge and process even your most uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. This practice of observing your inner landscape can teach greater stress tolerance and emotional balance that lasts long after the retreat is over."

-Why You Should Go on a Silent Retreat

www.doyouyoga.com

Since 2013, silent tourism is the hot new luxury trend, offering getaways centered on 'digital detox' and personal growth. Exquisitely designed spas offer enticing hot rock massages, sitting/walking/eating meditation, yoga classes, and more, all designed to help you find 'an easeful relationship with life'. In an interview with Condé Nast Traveler, Alex Glasscock, the CEO and founder of The Ranch - a kind of luxury boot camp in Malibu - said, "A calm and silent mind is the new luxury and people are actively seeking this opportunity." With rates ranging from \$3,900 for a four day visit to \$30,000 for a four week "Total Transformation" silence truly is golden at The Ranch.

Our relationship with silence is clearly complicated. On the one hand, we'd rather have an electrical shock, but on the other, we consider it a luxury item. What does this say about the way that we've constructed our lives and social frameworks? What are we afraid to find in silence? Should quiet be a luxury? Perhaps we should all take a few minutes (but less than fifteen, please!) to quietly ponder.



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

SILENT COMMUNICATION

1. Give each student several small slips of paper and have them write out:
 - a. An Action Verb (ex. swimming, running, eating, etc.),
 - b. An Animal (ex. dog, bear, chicken, etc.), AND
 - c. An Occupation (ex. teacher, firefighter)
2. Collect all the slips and place them in a large bowl
3. Have students draw a slip and “act it out” without speaking while other students guess!

INTENTIONS

Ask each student to write out an intention at the beginning of the week. This can be, like the Teacher in Small Mouth Sounds states, a mantra, hope, desire, or wish. It should only be about one sentence. Each day, remind your students to write about their intention in a journal. Some questions to pose:

- Did they remember their intention throughout their day?
- Has their intention changed their behavior in any way?
- Have they done anything to help their intention come true?
- Do they regret their intention or want to make any changes?

At the end of the week, have the students discuss the concept of writing down their intentions.

- Did writing down your intention help you achieve it? Why or why not?
- Would you ever write down your intentions again?

ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

PLOT

The sequence of events in a play revealed through the action and/or dialogue

THEME

The central topic the play investigates

OBJECTIVE

The goal a character has within a play

CONFLICT

The clash between opposing forces, ideas, or interests that creates tension

STAGING

Patterns of movement in a play, including: entrances, exits, and movement on the stage

TECHNICAL ELEMENTS

Elements such as sets, costumes, lights, music, props, and makeup used to create a unified and meaningful design for a theatrical production.

THEMES IN SMALL MOUTH SOUNDS

Power of Silence: Sometimes the most important things are said without words.

Suffering: Suffering is not always visible or obvious.

Survival: Heartbreak, loneliness, injury, and illness. We find ways to keep moving forward despite what happens in our lives.

WHAT ARE THE RULES OF THEATRE ETIQUETTE

We are so excited you are here! The audience is one of the most important parts of any performance. Experiencing the play is a group activity shared not only with the actors, but also with the people sitting around you. Your attention and participation help the actors perform better and allow the rest of the audience to enjoy the show. Here are a few simple tips to help make your theatre experience enjoyable for everyone.

BE PROMPT

Arrive in plenty of time to settle, find your seats, and get situated. Please visit the restrooms before the show begins.

BE RESPECTFUL

Your behavior and responses affect the quality of the performance and the enjoyment of the production for the entire audience. The performers can see and hear you, just as the audience can see and hear you.

TURN OFF CELL PHONES

You may think texting is private, but the light and motion can be seen by actors and audience members and are distracting to those around you. Please do not check your phones, text or take photos during the performance.

HAVE FUN AND PARTICIPATE

Rather than remaining totally silent, please note the difference between appropriate and inappropriate responses.

OREGON COMMON CORE STANDARDS

THEATRE STANDARDS - HIGH SCHOOL

Responding: Perceive and analyze artistic work

Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices. (TH.7.RE1.HS1)

Responding : Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work

Analyze and compare artistic choices developed from personal experiences in multiple drama/theatre works. (TH.8.RE2.HS1)

Identify and compare cultural perspectives and contexts that may influence the evaluation of a drama/theatre work. (TH.8.RE2.HS1)

Justify personal aesthetics, preferences, and beliefs through participation and observation of drama/theatre work. (TH.8.RE2.HS1)

Responding: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work

Examine a drama/theatre work using supporting evidence and criteria, while considering art forms, history, culture, and other disciplines. (TH.9.RE3.HS1)

Consider the aesthetics of the production elements in a drama/theatre work. (TH.9.RE3.HS1)

Formulate a deeper understanding and appreciation of drama/theatre work by considering its specific purpose or intended audience. (TH.9.RE3.HS1)

Connecting: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art

Investigate how cultural perspectives, community ideas and personal beliefs impact a drama/theatre work, using theatre research methods. (TH.11.CO2.HS1)

UP NEXT

EVERYBODY

by

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

directed by

Jessica Wallenfels & Dámaso Rodríguez

DEATH WAITS FOR NO MAN
EVEN IF HE WINS THE LOTTERY

