

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

by Andrew Bovell

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1. About the play

Speaking in Tongues consists of three parts which are cleverly connected with each other through both their themes and their characters.

The first part deals with four people – two couples – who attempt to betray their respective partners. While two of them – Pete and Sonja – back down, Leon and Jane really do cheat on their spouses. Soon later Sonja and Jane as well as Pete and Leon meet by accident. Additionally, Jane massively questions her own feelings when she observes how trustful her neighbour Paula remains towards her husband Nick the moment he becomes the prime suspect in a woman's disappearance.

In fact, that night of adulterous encounters and partner exchanges reveals far more about the characters and their feelings towards their spouses than merely a certain instability in their marriages.

In the second part the audience gets to know Valerie, a psychologist who is the very woman who vanished in the first part on a deserted road after her car broke down. In this part, Nick's, Neil's and Sarah's stories are uncovered: Neil, who already met Leon in a strange encounter in part one, is still in love with Valerie's client Sarah, who left him years ago; Nick meets Valerie when she is desperately trying to get home hitchhiking after her car has broken down; and Valerie's client Sarah is the very woman with whom Valerie's husband, John, is cheating on his wife while she is desperately trying to call him on their landline in order to get help.

John's adulterous behaviour, however, is only discovered in part three, when Leon, who is a police officer, interviews him about Valerie's disappearance.

Andrew Bovell himself claims that "*Speaking in Tongues* is about the right and the wrong of emotional conduct. It is a story about contracts being broken between intimates while deep bonds are forged between strangers."

2. About the author

Andrew Bovell is an award-winning screenwriter and playwright with a string of awards to his credit, including the Australian Writers' Guild's annual awards for excellence for his plays *Holy Day*, *Who's Afraid of the Working Class*, *Speaking in Tongues* and *Scenes from a Separation*. His work for the screen has seen him win over 10 awards in Australia and the 2003 London Critics' Circle Film Awards for Best

Screenplay for the hit Australian film *Lantana*, and the Australian Writers' Guild Award for Best Adapted Screenplay and the Australian Film Institute Award for Best Film and Screenplay for Baz Luhrmann's film *Strictly Ballroom*, which he co-wrote. In 2002, Andrew was named Scriptwriter of the Year by the London Film Critics Circle.

3. Characters

Pete

Pete is married to Jane and does not cheat on her with Sonja although he is not entirely happy in their marriage. He leaves Sonja in order to save his partnership and returns to Jane offering her to raise a family.

Jane

Jane betrays Pete with Leon. When she is temporarily left by her husband after her betrayal, one night she observes her neighbour Nick throwing away a woman's shoe. When a woman is reported missing, she suspects Nick and calls the police. Seeing how trustful Nick's wife remains towards him shows Jane that she does not have that same trust in and love for Pete.

Leon

Leon is a police officer who betrays his wife Sonja with Jane. His infidelity causes him to have a bad conscience. When he meets Pete in a bar by accident, he becomes even more aware of the consequences of his adulterous behaviour.

He also is the police officer in charge of the case of the disappearance of a woman (in part three). While interviewing John, the woman's husband, he keeps judging John for his infidelity.

Sonja

Sonja is married to Leon. She is completely devastated when she finds out about Leon's betrayal. By accident she meets Jane in a bar. At one stage both women play with open cards.

Neil

Neil meets Leon by accident and tells him about his unrequited love for Sarah, who has left him without explanation after a trip to Europe. He is still desperately in love with her and has even tried to trace her down. At one stage Leon finds Neil's shoes at the beach, but does not see him again.

Sarah

Sarah sees Neil, who has been stalking her, and pretends not to recognize him. Later she tells her psychologist Valerie about that encounter and about a letter she has received from him as well as about her married lover. Her affair is, of course, John, Valerie's husband.

Valerie

Valerie is Sarah's psychologist. She does not like her client, since she seems to know about Sarah's affair with her husband John. One evening she is driving home on a deserted road when her car breaks down. After leaving several messages on the answering machine at home asking John for help, she gets a lift from Nick. At one stage she becomes scared and panicky and gets out of the car losing her shoe. After that incident she is reported missing.

Nick

Nick is Jane and Pete's neighbour, who himself faces some marriage problems. Thus, he was out drinking and happened to be driving along the deserted road in the middle of that night. Knowing that he unintentionally scared Valerie, he tries to get rid of the shoe she has lost in his car and throws it into a vacant block. He is observed by Jane, who reports him to the police. His wife Paula, however, believes in his innocence.

John

John is Valerie's husband, who is interviewed by Leon upon her disappearance. Only at a late stage does he admit to his affair with Sarah and the lack of love for Valerie.

4. Australian theatre

In the 1780s European settlers brought Western theatre traditions to Australia, where theatre was then shaped by local as well as international artistic movements, events and trends.

Early colonial drama consisted mainly of English-style musical theatre, comedies and pantomimes that tried, however, to depict local themes. Some institutions believed that theatre had a bad influence on the inhabitants of a penal colony, since Australia should serve as a place for punishment rather than entertainment. Moreover, theatre-goers were often badly-behaved and authorities struggled with theatre licenses and crime. Others, however, thought that theatre could be a useful form of entertainment. Both views affected the development of Australian theatre. In any case, a few people did set up theatres and present performances which ultimately proved to be very successful.

In 1789, for example, convicts performed George Farquhar's comedy *The Recruiting Officer* in Sydney in order to celebrate King George III's birthday. In the 1790s Robert Sidway established a theatre in Sydney where performances continued until at least 1800. In 1833 Barnett Levy established the Theatre Royal in Sydney, and later, in 1838, Sydney's Royal Victoria Theatre. The Pavilion, Melbourne's first theatre, opened in 1841.

Australia's golden years between 1850 and 1899, which showed a massive population growth and increase in trade due to the goldfields, also led to a growing demand for theatre entertainment. Shakespeare and opera were increasingly performed. Famous actors from America and England were flown in to the Australian stages.

During the 1880s this trend continued. Many major theatres were built, including The Princess and the Alexandra in Melbourne, Her Majesty's and the Criterion in Sydney and the Theatre Royal and Her Majesty's in Brisbane.

At the beginning of the 20th century people were looking for ways to express the unique Australian identity on stage. Australian themes were taken up, often depicting the lives of ordinary Australians. The Great Depression (1929) hit the Australian

theatre world very hard. However, semi-professional and amateur groups began springing up at that time.

Political issues and radical theatre were brought on stage, a trend that continued when World War II brought home Australian performers who had been away. Despite a certain shortage of male actors, materials and scripts for production, Australian theatre fulfilled an important role providing morale-boosting entertainment.

The Festival of Perth was established in 1953 and The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust was founded in the following year. Again Australian themes were picked up. Australian plays began to be successful even outside the country.

In 1958, the National Institute of Dramatic Art was established in Sydney. In the 1960s various theatre festivals were founded, as well as The Australian Council for the Arts, which has helped to nourish Australian theatres by providing arts funding and by establishing major state theatre companies.

In 1973, Australia's landmark Sydney Opera House opened. In 1979, Australia's first Theatre of the Deaf was established.

In the 1980s a number of experimental theatre groups emerged and in the 1990s Aboriginal topics were brought on stage. Furthermore, Australian theatre also started to put greater emphasis on Australia's proximity to East Asia by establishing the Asian Theatre Festival.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, Australian theatre-goers almost seem to take for granted the country's vast array of dynamic performance styles, venues and theatre companies which are able to delight, entertain and challenge their audiences.

5. Some "love songs" and assignments

If music be the food of love, play on!

(Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*)

-) Read the following song lyrics and interpret the songs.
-) *You Oughta Know*: The singer and her ex-lover are having a conversation. Its content is just like the song. Write down their dialogue!
-) *Seven Years*: The singer and his/her ex-partner, the betrayer, are having a conversation. Its content is just like the song. Write down their dialogue!
-) *You Oughta Know*: The man/woman who has been dumped writes a diary entry.
-) *Seven Years*: The woman/man who has been betrayed meets a friend to discuss her/his situation. Write down their dialogue!
-) What could be the exact reasons and circumstances why the relationships mentioned in the songs ended so dramatically? Try to find possible explanations in the lyrics and/or between the lines and/or also draw on your own experience. Or just speculate.

You Oughta Know – Alanis Morissette

I want you to know that I'm happy for you
I wish nothing but the best for you both
An older version of me
Is she perverted like me
Would she go down on you in a theatre
Does she speak eloquently
And would she have your baby
I'm sure she'd make a really excellent mother

Cause the love that you gave that we made wasn't able
To make it enough for you to be open wide, no
And every time you speak her name
Does she know how you told me you'd hold me
Until you died, till you died
But you're still alive

And I'm here to remind you
Of the mess you left when you went away
It's not fair to deny me
Of the cross I bear that you gave to me
You, you, you oughta know

You seem very well, things look peaceful
I'm not quite as well, I thought you should know
Did you forget about me Mr. Duplicity
I hate to bug you in the middle of dinner
It was a slap in the face how quickly I was replaced
Are you thinking of me when you fuck her

Cause the love that you gave that we made wasn't able
To make it enough for you to be open wide, no
And every time you speak her name
Does she know how you told me you'd hold me
Until you died, till you died
But you're still alive

And I'm here to remind you
Of the mess you left when you went away
It's not fair to deny me
Of the cross I bear that you gave to me
You, you, you oughta know

Cause the joke that you laid on the bed that was me
And I'm not gonna fade
As soon as you close your eyes and you know it
And every time I scratch my nails down someone else's back
I hope you feel it...well can you feel it

And I'm here to remind you
Of the mess you left when you went away
It's not fair to deny me
Of the cross I bear that you gave to me
You, you, you oughta know

Seven Years – Natalie Merchant

How did I love you?
there was no measuring
far above this dirty world
far above everything
in your tower over it
you were clean

so warm and insightful
were you in my eyes
I was sure the rightful
guardian of my life
damn you betrayer
how you lied

but for seven years
you were loved
I laid golden orchid crowns
around your feet

for seven years
I bowed down
to touch the ground
so wholly your devotee

you were
all I could see

I've got my sight now
I see everything you hid
so don't you try to right now
all the wrong you did
I might forget you
but never forgive

but for seven years
you were loved
I laid golden orchid crowns
around your feet

for seven years
I bowed down
to touch the ground
so wholly your devotee

for seven years
you were so revered
I made offerings of
anything and everything I had

you were
all I could see

6. Possible assignments

Extract 1

- Pete/Leon:** It's not much.
- Sonja:** It's what/I expected.
- Jane:** I expected – I don't know what I expected. It makes me feel/cheap.
- Sonja:** Cheap. Sordid.
- Pete/Leon:** Do you want to leave?
- Sonja/Jane:** No.
- Sonja:** I like it./Do you?
- Jane:** Do you?
- Leon:** We could go somewhere else.
- Pete:** I'm not sure.
- Jane:** We're here now.
- Pete:** I'm sorry.
- Sonja:** Why?
- Pete:** It's just that/I haven't done this sort of thing before.
- Leon:** I haven't done this sort of thing before.
- Sonja/Jane:** Nor have I.
- Leon:** I've got this pain in/my chest.
- Pete:** My chest is pounding.
- Sonja/Jane:** Are you all right?
- Pete/Leon:** Yes.
- Sonja/Jane:** Are you sure?
- Pete:** I said/I'm alright.
- Leon:** I'm all right.
- Pete:** I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap.
- Jane:** You're not having /a heart attack?
- Sonja:** A heart attack is something I couldn't cope with/right now.
- Leon:** Right now I could do with/ a drink.
- Pete:** A drink would go down well.
- Jane:** Do/ you want to go back?
- Sonja:** You want to go/back?
- Leon:** Back to the bar?
- Pete:** No.
- Jane:** Yes.
- Leon:** No.
- Pete:** We're here now.
- Jane:** Good.

Questions and assignments

-) What does extract 1 tell us about the people involved? What situation are the people in? How do they feel?
-) What effect is created by having the different people say the exact same thing at the same time? Why did the author choose this feature?
-) Did you realize quickly what situation the people are in? How did you find out?
-) Jane claims that she feels cheap. Do you believe her? Why, why not?
-) Leon and Pete say that they haven't done this before. Do you believe them? Why, why not? And why do you think they want to betray their wives now?
-) Jane/Sonja/Pete/Leon writes a diary entry after that night's conversation.
-) Continue their dialogue.

Extract 2

- Sonja:** Tell me about your wife.
- Leon:** Who?
- Jane:** Your wife.
- Pete/Leon:** Why?
- Sonja/Jane:** Is she happy?
- Pete/Leon:** With me?
- Sonja/Jane:** With life.
- Pete/Leon:** Yes.
- Leon:** Maybe./I don't know. Why do you want to know?
- Pete:** I don't know. Why do you want to know?
- Sonja/Jane:** I want to know something about the woman I'm hurting.

Questions and assignments

-) Judging from this extract, we do not know a lot about Sonja and Jane. Try, however, to characterize them.
-) Why do you think do the women want to know about the men's wives?
-) Why are they more interested in whether they are happy with their lives rather than with their husbands?
-) Do you think that knowing about the fact that they are hurting somebody has any implications for Sonja and Jane in their situation?
-) Do you like Jane and Sonja for their enquiring about the other one? Why (not)?
-) Write down Jane's/Sonja's inner monologue at that moment.

Extract 3

- Pete:** I've left my wife.
- Leon:** Ah... well, there you go, my wife's left me.
- Pete:** Permanent?
- Leon:** I don't know. I hope not.
- Pete:** Do you still love her?
- Leon:** Oh yeah. I love her. I hurt her though, very badly. And she's gone away. Maybe to punish me. Maybe to recover. I don't know and I've just got to wait. But I've never been very good at it.
- Pete:** At what?
- Leon:** Waiting... And you? Do you love your wife?
- Pete:** I can't tell you. Because I don't know. I'm finding it hard to forgive.
- Leon:** What do you have to forgive her for?
- Pete:** She...
- Leon:** What?
- Pete:** You know.
- Leon:** Had an affair?
- Pete:** Yeah. That. Well, just kind of a one-night thing. I mean, I think. I hope that's all it is.
- Leon:** Yeah, I'm sure that's all it is.
- Pete:** You?
- Leon:** Same. Except the other way around.
- Pete:** Huh?
- Leon:** I had the affair. Or the one-night thing.
- Pete:** You bastard.
- Leon:** Yeah.

Questions and assignments

-) Describe the mood in the pub. How might their conversation continue?
-) Do you think that the men become aware of the implications of their past actions?
-) Could they become friends? Why, why not?
-) On whose side are we, and why?
-) Do you think that they still love their wives? What makes you come to your conclusion?
-) Continue their dialogue.

Extract 4

Leon: Well, she started to approach his table and he was half-way between trying to wipe the food from his mouth and standing up to meet her when she walked straight past him. She didn't know who he was. She was the love of his life and she didn't recognize him. He felt so humiliated. He looked around and the woman was kissing a man at another table. Some stranger to him.

Sonja: Did she say anything to her?

Leon: No. He got out of there as quick as he could.

Sonja: What did you say to him?

Leon: What could I say? I think I said that's a very sad story, but now that he had seen her and seen that she was alive and all right, maybe he could let her go. He didn't reply though. He just, you know, looked out over the water... The next day I was jogging along the beach and I saw his shoes, his brown brogues. They were on the sand at the edge of the water.

Sonja: Where was he?

Leon: I don't know.

Sonja: He drowned himself?

Leon: Maybe. There's been no reports of a missing person and there's been no body found. But I haven't seen him again. And I've been going to the beach every morning just to look for him- But he's just vanished. And I just can't get the thought of him out of my head.

Sonja: And the shoes?... Leon, what did you do with the shoes?

Leon: Well, that's what I did that was out of character. I took them.

Questions and assignments

-) Extract 4 tells us about Leon's encounter with Neil and Neil's story. How does Neil feel at that moment in the restaurant?
-) Has he learnt his lesson? And what is the lesson?
-) Do you think that he really committed suicide?
-) Why did Leon take Neil's shoes?
-) Has Leon learnt a lesson? And if yes, which one?
-) The day Neil sees Sarah in the restaurant he writes a diary entry.
-) Years later Leon meets Neil again. They talk for some time. Write down their dialogue.
-) Have you ever liked someone so much that you tried to get in touch with him/her without getting anything back in return?
-) What would you advise Neil if you were to meet him?

Extract 5

Pete: How does she know?

Jane: She asked him. She said, 'Did you do anything to hurt that woman?' And he said 'No'. And that was enough, Pete. For Paula that was enough. There is no question. He is innocent... And I envy that, Pete. I envy her simple, unshakeable faith. Because if I was in the same position, if you were suspected for murder and the evidence was overwhelmingly against you, then I think, almost certainly, I would need more than a simple no to feel reassured. But, Pete, that should be enough. If things were right between you and me then that should be enough.

Questions and assignments

-) What is Jane trying to say?
-) How is Jane's attitude different from Paula's? Is one of the two better than the other?
-) Do you believe in Nick's innocence after what Jane says? Why, why not.
-) Paula visits Nick in prison, where he is waiting for his trial. Write down their dialogue.
-) Paula writes a letter cheering Nick up while he has to stay in prison.

Extract 6

Neil: Why did you write those letters, Sarah?

Sarah: I don't know.

Neil: When I re-read them they reminded me of something I had forgotten.

Sarah: I think I hurt this guy.

Neil: Your letters reminded me of what it felt like to be loved. And I guess, Sarah, I've held onto that.

Questions and assignments

-) In extract 6 Neil and Sarah are not in fact talking to each other but to themselves, but their thoughts circle around the other person. Why do you think did Sarah write Neil love letters from Europe without being in love?
-) Do you think Sarah regrets what she has done to Neil?
-) Have you ever hurt somebody unintentionally/intentionally when it came to such a delicate matter as love? How did you handle the situation afterwards?
-) Sarah agrees to meet Neil. Write down their dialogue.

Extract 7

Sarah: [*answering machine*] You've called Sarah Phelan. Leave a message if you want me to get back to you.

John: [*on tape*] Sarah... it's John. Have you gone away? You don't return my calls. Listen. I'm in trouble. I need you, Sarah. Something terrible has happened and I need you. Please, Sarah, please –

Questions and assignments

-) Where do you think Sarah might have been during John's call.
-) What does John want to tell her?
-) Do you think Sarah will eventually call John back? Why, why not?
-) Do you think Sarah will stay with John or does she want to get back together with Neil?
-) Two hours later, John leaves another message for Sarah. Write down his message.
-) Have you ever not returned calls, or not picked up the phone? And what was the reason for your action.

7. Vocabulary

sordid	morally degraded, foul and run-down	elend, schäbig
to pound	to beat	klopfen, schlagen, hämmern
numb	lacking sensation, insensitive	benommen, gefühllos, betäubt
betrayal	the act of being sexually unfaithful to one's partner	Untreue, Verrat
to take a stroll	to go for a leisurely walk	lustwandeln
to toss and turn	to move or stir about violently	sich hin und her drehen
to linger	to continue to exist, remain present although waning or gradually dying	fortbestehen
ulcer	a circumscribed inflammatory and often suppurating lesion on the skin or an internal mucous surface resulting in necrosis of tissue	Geschwür
to accost	to speak to someone, to approach with an offer of sexual favours	ansprechen
to press charges against sb	to blame sb officially	jem. offiziell beschuldigen
to be at stake	in danger, hazarded	auf dem Spiel stehen
fallible	likely to fail or be inaccurate	fehlbar
repercussion	a remote or indirect consequence of some action	Auswirkung, Nachwirkung
to get back on equal par	having the same quantity, having done/to do the same thing	gleichstellen
appalled	strike with disgust or revulsion	entsetzt
to broach	bring up a topic for discussion	ansprechen, thematisieren
to reconcile	come to terms with something	versöhnen, schlichten
to drown oneself	die from being submerged in water	sich ertränken
to be out of character	not typical, unusual	untypisch sein
vasectomy	surgical procedure that removes all or part of the vas deferens (usually as a means of sterilization); is sometimes reversible	Vasektomie
crèche	a public nursery where young children are cared for during the day	Kinderkrippe
brogues	thick and heavy shoes	Straßenschuhe
to shudder	to involuntary vibrate, to tremble convulsively, as from fear or excitement	schaudern, zittern
somersault	an acrobatic feat in which the feet roll over the head (either forward or backward) and return	Salto, Purzelbaum
to commute	travel back and forth regularly, as between one's place of work and home	pendeln
shortcut	a route shorter than the usual one	Abkürzung
to pry	search or inquire in a meddlesome way, make an uninvited or presumptuous inquiry	herumschnüffeln, neugierig sein
cowardice	the trait of lacking courage	Feigheit