

2008

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#### Recommended Citation

Farrell, Colleen (2008). Listen to this: The Effects of Judicious Listening in the Play, *A Mourning Recap*. *Undergraduate Review*, 4, 79-84.

Available at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad\\_rev/vol4/iss1/16](https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol4/iss1/16)

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# Listen to this: The Effects of Judicious Listening in the Play, *A Mourning Recap*

**COLLEEN FARRELL**

Colleen Farrell is a senior majoring in English. Her Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Grant was mentored by Dr. Ann Brunjes. Her main concern upon graduation is to teach English to non-speaking students. Colleen will either earn her MFA at the University of San Francisco upon graduation or will be teaching English through the Reach to Teach program in Taiwan.

It would seem that listening has evolved into being an expression of self-indulgence rather than an expression of compassion and understanding. We listen to music in our cars, at work, on the way to either the car or work. It is background noise at gatherings, theme parks, and in elevators. We have replaced the desire to listen absorbedly with listening to pass the time.

If the meaning of listening has been slightly lost or thrown off course it makes us all the more grateful when we have friends who are there, listening intently, whenever anything goes wrong in our lives. In our darkest moments, the times when life seems absurdly cruel, we become the speakers and our friends are the ones who can turn the volume up. It is during these moments when the power of listening becomes essential to understanding someone's clandestine emotions.

I took this notion and tried to write, stage, and produce a play that states the importance of friendships and listening. The play, *A Mourning Recap* illustrates the idea that without such camaraderie we will become lost and feel abandoned. Once we are lost, no amount of shutting the world out with an i-pod will help.

I have included here four scenes taken from *A Mourning Recap*, which illustrate the importance of listening. The first scene is a monologue spoken by Karista who is the protagonist of the play. She is speaking to a third party not present but who is assumed to be her therapist. By not including the therapist I hoped to enable the audience to listen more to *her* rather than to a dialogue between two individuals.

The inspiration for this monologue came from *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. Tom, the narrator, opens the play with a monologue spoken directly to the audience and addresses the dramatic elements of the play. Williams hides nothing from the audience and holds us in suspense by letting us know that there is some tragedy that will occur before the play ends. Karista similarly acts as a spoiler when the audience sees her in the present tense speaking of actions that have yet to occur. Then, going backwards, we see her in a therapy session before she has recovered from the death of her friends.

KARISTA.

You are watching my memory. This means I am controlling what you see. I hope this means you will take my word for what I present. It's easier to stay straight. Get it out. Like a band-aid. Ever notice that those who say rip it off like a band-aid probably don't have the strength to do the same? At any rate, there are moments. Collapse like a deck of cards you build up, then as you pick up the facts you begin to think, I should have seen this coming. Granted, I couldn't have seen what was coming. I just should have known that it wasn't my mother's fault. Do you love your mother? I *love* my mother. *[Karista moves downstage left she sits in the chair facing the audience]* Have I ever loved someone? Sure. *[Pause]* Besides my parents? That must mean you think I love my parents. No it was a joke. I was kidding. I do love them, more than they know. So, someone else then? *[Pause]* I really liked someone if that answers your question. Once, when I was nine I was in love with Chris McKenna. He played football every recess and I would sit watching along the side. One time the ball was thrown too far and flew past him, it landed right by my feet. I picked it up as he came walking over to me. I reached out to give him back the ball, my hands waiting to make contact with his. Touch them for a second. He took it and pinched me! Then he ran back to play again. It left a bruise and stung for the rest of the day. That means he liked me too, right? *[Pause]* No. That's it. Just Chris. *[Pause]* No one else. *[Pause]* I said that's it. Yes. I miss my friends, but I don't want to talk about that. No, I don't smoke. *[Pause]* Drinking? Not often. *[Pause]* My favorite memory? *[Pause]* Walking off. I did it at theme parks, malls, supermarkets, anywhere really. My sisters and brother would all be stuck together and I'd just wander off. I don't know what would happen but I'd find myself staring off at display, a ride, food and I'd walk in that direction. My mom used to get so scared. One time I was missing for eight hours, it was getting dark and I remember falling asleep on a bench. A security guard found me and took me to the front of the park. My mom was there. She looked different, she had been crying. She swung her arms around me and it was the first time I felt like one of her kids, like she had really missed me while I was gone. I did it too many times to count after that; I'd start walking off just to get noticed. She stopped getting scared, she started using a leash. *(Lights go to black, KARISTA exits)*

I felt that opening the play in this manner would immediately foreground the central theme of listening. We are being forced to listen to the character who most needs to be heard and in turn we are being given information that will be later explained as the play progresses.

The next excerpt parallels Karista's struggle to be heard. Kevin is one of three friends who are seen for the majority of the play. He is a gay man in a relationship with James, someone who cannot be honest about his emotions and his sexuality. In order to portray the scene between Kevin and James I thought that both sides had to be presented. The audience had to know where Kevin was coming from but I thought that this would create a bias and create sympathy resulting in the audiences' taking Erin and Sarah's side (however rightfully so). However, this would make James an easy character to abhor which is not my intention at all. If anything I wanted the audience to sympathize with every character because in doing so the audience would be listening to each character. Therefore, this scene is portrayed in three parts. Kevin is at first speaking directly to Erin and Sarah who are in the moment with him; then he is reminiscing with James present about the conversation; then we are once again brought back to the setting and conversation of the barroom.

KEVIN. Sarah, could I please have another glass of wine.

SARAH. Fine, but tell us what happened.

KEVIN. I went to see him after work and he was waiting for me on the couch. We were supposed to go see a movie. I threw down my bag, jumped right into the conversation. I said, I want to talk about us. He said

*During Kevin's dialogue James appears downstage left.*

JAMES and KEVIN. What's there to talk about?

SARAH. What did you say?

KEVIN. I said, I needed to know where we stood.

ERIN. Good for you.

JAMES. You're standing there and I'm sitting here on this couch.

Get ready or we'll be late for the movie. Do you want dinner afterward? Greg invited us out later. You're not wearing *that* are you?

SARAH: That's not what you meant.

KEVIN: [*Kevin turns to face James.*] That's not what I meant and you know it.

JAMES: What's wrong? You don't want to go out after? If you didn't bring another shirt wear one of mine.

KEVIN: I feel like I'm hiding.

ERIN: And you are!

JAMES: What are you talking about? If the shirt means that much to you it's fine.

KEVIN: You haven't told anyone about us yet have you?

JAMES: Told what? Let's talk about this in the car. The movie's going to start. Are you staying over tonight?

KEVIN: I want to.

JAMES: Is that a yes?

KEVIN: Yes.

JAMES: Good, let's leave.

KEVIN: Wait, I'm not finished yet.

JAMES: Then spit it out.

KEVIN: Do your friends know about me?

JAMES: I just told you *Greg* asked us out later. What is with you?

KEVIN: Stop it, that's not what I'm talking about. Does Greg know we're fucking.

JAMES: No, I haven't dropped that into the conversation yet.

KEVIN: Do your parents?

JAMES: Even if you were a girl, I wouldn't tell my parents we were fucking.

KEVIN: That's not the point!

JAMES: Then tell me the point so we can leave. [*Pause*] Let's go.

KEVIN: Wait. Why can't you tell people that we're together? When we go out, why can't you tell them?

JAMES: We just started dating. What's the big deal? I don't like my friends to go out with one another. Maybe it gives me friend envy.

KEVIN: It makes you uncomfortable.

JAMES: Kev, Twenty minutes.

KEVIN: I want to know where we stand. I don't want to look at your friends like I'm some friend. I'm falling in love with you.

JAMES: I'm not ready to be a fag. [*Pause*] I'm sorry Kevin. I'm really sorry. I didn't mean it the way it came out. You don't know what it's like for me. My friends aren't like yours. I can't say that everything they think they know about me is a lie. I'm not ready. I'm not. We have to go. *James exits stage left.*

SARAH: Kevin.

ERIN: I can't believe him!

KEVIN: [*Remembering where he is.*] It's fine. I'm fine. He apologized on the way to the movie, at the movie, during the movie, after the movie. I don't even remember the movie. I know he feels terrible. What can you do, you know? It's fine. He's just not ready yet.

ERIN: When will he be?

SARAH: Erin!

ERIN: No. When will he be? Kev, you've known James for six months and have been dating long enough now. You don't need another relationship where you're the only person in it. How much can you take?

KEVIN: You don't get it.

ERIN: Oh really?

KEVIN: Erin. You *don't* get it.

SARAH: Leave him alone. It's over now.

The last excerpt from the play *A Mourning Recap* was the most challenging to write. It takes place between mother and daughter. Once again, I wanted the audience to sympathize with both sides. The scene takes place closer to the present and is a few days after the tragic events described in the play. Karista's mother enters the room and tries to talk with her.

While writing the play I was stuck in very few places and when I was stuck a short walk with Putter, the obese family beagle, would get my mind working. Yet it seemed after a month with no progress that I was at a stalemate with this scene. It wasn't until I took a suggestion from my mentor, Dr. Ann Brunjes, that I found an idea to write.

Dr. Brunjes brought to my attention a playwright she thought I would find particularly interesting: David Mamet. After reading his plays, in particular *Oleanna*, I became mesmerized by his writing style. The way he structures dialogue is exactly the voice I wanted to give to Karista and her mother in the scene I had been struggling with. His dialogue weaves in and out between characters so fast that reading it does not fully explain its novelty. One must hear it and see the reactions of the characters to grasp how fast and realistic it allows the action of the play to be. However, since you are reading this and I have not the means to show you I will do my best to explain. Here is an excerpt taken from David Mamet's, *Oleanna*. The dialogue is between a professor and his student:

JOHN: I have asked you here against, against my

CAROL: I was most surprised you asked me.

JOHN: against my better *judgment*, against

CAROL: I was most surprised

JOHN: against the yes. I'm sure.

Through his use of sentences which, spoken or read individually, are nonsensical, Mamet creates a scene where neither character is listening to the other. The dialogue is individualistically driven because each character is trying to get across his and her own point of view. This is exactly the temperament I wanted both Karista and her mother to possess but at the same time not have the motivation be that of bitterness but of haste. Neither can wait to get out her idea but must say it before each forgets it. While keeping this inspiration in mind I was able to write the scene. Yet, even though I am proud of the written product it can only be done justice if you hear such talented actresses as Katia Hagerman playing the mother and Kathleen Szymczyk as Karista. Both of these women were able to capture the pace and tone of the dialogue far better than I can explain here. Nevertheless here is the excerpt between mother and daughter from, *A Mourning Recap*:

MOM: Why don't you wear your hair up?

*Karista shrugs.*

MOM: I bought you those bars that you like at the store. Did I tell you that yet? They're in the cleaning cupboard so your father doesn't know where they are. They're all yours.

KARISTA: I'm not leaving.

MOM: I know. Mr. Curran called from the London office and left a message trying to change your mind. I'm...very glad.

KARISTA: What'd he say?

MOM: I'm glad you're staying.

KARISTA: What did he

MOM: ***On the word he*** I want you to stay home.

KARISTA: Don't pity me.

MOM: ***Same time as pity*** I don't.

KARISTA: Where's dad?

MOM: Working on the car.

KARISTA: I'm not going.

MOM: You said that. Would you like a drink?

KARISTA: I'm not going.

MOM: You said that.

KARISTA: *On the word said* I mean I'm not staying.

MOM: You're not?

KARISTA: Ben's taking me out tonight.

MOM: What does that mean?

KARISTA: I can't stay for a drink.

MOM: When is he coming?

KARISTA: Soon. I have to change.

MOM: Can I talk to you?

KARISTA: *Over the phrase 'Can I'* What?

MOM: Sit down. Please, sit down.

KARISTA: Yes?

MOM: I can't know what you're feeling.

KARISTA: I have to get ready.

MOM: I'm trying to talk to you.

KARISTA: *Over the word talk* I have to get ready.

MOM: Sit. Down.

KARISTA: Mom.

MOM: Stay here, with me, and listen. Thank you. I'm so sorry, Karista.

KARISTA: *cutting the word sorry* You weren't driving.

MOM: Can't I help you?

KARISTA: I'm fine.

MOM: There's no way you can be.

KARISTA: What kind of bars?

MOM: Skor.

KARISTA: Thank you.

MOM: I haven't been there. for you. There for you. I'm sorry for that. I never spent much time with my family. But, I have

watched you become this wonderfully sweet, scared, woman and I haven't told you how...proud. How proud I am of this beautiful person you have chosen to be. I love you, Karista. I wish...I should have said so. Many times. I should have said so. Talk to me. When you want. When you're ready.

KARISTA: [*Softly*] Thank you.

MOM: I'm sorry?

KARISTA: Thank you.

Both Karista and her mother experience communication through the mutual lack of it. If someone is consistently stopping your train of thought you are more apt and willing to listen because you have been thrown off of your guard. This is the outcome of the piece and both characters are finally able to listen to the other.

Most people who read plays will admit that the meaning and intention of the piece is not fully grasped unless heard aloud; that necessity is already created for the playwright. The requirement to have the work acted out implores the need to listen. Similar to the style *cinéma-vérité*, David Mamet's terse and choppy speech creates a sense of tangible reality for the audience in a new way for drama. I have brought this into, *A Mourning Recap* in a way which illustrates not only the need to listen but also makes it easier to understand the characters and their motivations. The play relates to a generation who use games when speaking. It is rare when one answers a question with a straight answer or states exactly what he or she is thinking. There are layers in conversation which reveal depth of intent as well as ambiguity in meaning. This guessing game of intent is explored in my play, *A Mourning Recap*. Through the comedic undertone and sharp sentence structure, *A Mourning Recap* is a relatable piece which highlights a universal need to be understood and to be heard.

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