

# UNSPOKEN

A play about a man and his stammer

by Neil Rathmell

in collaboration with speech and language therapist Dr Trudy Stewart

*Unspoken* was first performed by Leeds Arts Centre at The Carriageworks, Leeds, 5-8 July 2017, with the following cast:

Alex - Oliver Sapier

Voice 1 - Pam Wilson

Voice 2 - Maureen Willis

Voice 3 - Djo Fisher

Voice 4 - Rich Francis

Voice 5 - Mark Sowden

Voice 6 - Victoria Bailey

Director - Trudy Stewart

Stammering coach - Jordan Halkier

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## **CHARACTERS**

Alex

Voice 1: Mother, Sophia, Parveen, Customer 1

Voice 2: Grandmother, Jennifer, Course Leader, School Librarian, Caller 1

Voice 3: Garage Mechanic, James, Class Teacher, Customer 2, Careers Teacher, Bus Driver, Caller 2

Voice 4: Waiter, Father, Bully, English Teacher, Bank Clerk, Caller 3

Voice 5: Wrestler, Supply Teacher, Caller 4

Voice 6: Helen, Infant Teacher, Mary, Shop Assistant, Katy

## **NOTES**

Alex is always the principal focus of the audience's attention, standing downstage centre in front of an (imagined) mirror.

Voices are, as the name suggests, heard, not seen. They are shadowy figures, confined mainly to the darkness upstage, behind Alex. The actors should perform as they would in a radio play. They are voices in Alex's head, which is how the audience should hear them too. The only exceptions to this rule are in the scenes involving the first named character for each Voice in the list above. In these scenes, Voices interact directly with Alex and sometimes with each other. The costumes worn by Voices represent these characters as they are the only ones seen clearly by the audience.

Downstage centre, facing away from the audience, a side table and an upright chair, about a metre apart. On the table a hairdryer, an electric shaver, aftershave, a comb, hair gel, deodorant, cologne, a watch, a neatly folded white shirt and a small box containing an engagement ring. On the chair Alex's vest, socks, tie and suit. Under the chair a pair of shoes. A mirror between the chair and the table is left to the audience's imagination.

Light is concentrated downstage centre, where Alex stands facing the audience and where from time to time Voices interact directly with him. The upstage area, where Voices congregate, is dimly lit.

Enter ALEX, wearing only underpants. He stands upstage drying his hair on a towel. VOICES enter in ones and twos. They stand watching him. He does not see them. When he has finished drying his hair, he drops the towel and walks downstage to the chair. VOICES follow him. ALEX picks up the socks and sits on the chair to put them on. VOICES watch.

HELEN

(Turning to other VOICES.)

What's he doing?

(Other VOICES turn to look at her.)

GRANDMOTHER

What's it look like? He's getting ready to go out.

HELEN

Why?

WAITER

*You* should know. He's going to ask you to marry him.

HELEN

Me?

GRANDMOTHER

He's got the engagement ring and everything.

GARAGE MECHANIC

It was supposed to be a surprise.

HELEN

You've spoilt it now!

WAITER

But first he's going to tell you about his stammer.

HELEN

He hasn't got a stammer.

VOICES 1-5

Oh yes, he has.

HELEN

He hasn't. I should know. I've been sleeping with him for nearly a year.

MOTHER

(Under her breath.)

Little tart!

HELEN

What did you say?

MOTHER

You heard.

HELEN

Who are you anyway?

MOTHER

I'm his mother. It's all my fault. It's always our fault. You'll learn.

HELEN

I don't know what you're talking about. *I've* never heard him stammer.

(ALEX has finished putting his socks on. He leans forward with his arms resting on his knees.

VOICES turn to watch him again.)

What's he doing now?

WAITER

Listening.

HELEN

Who to?

WAITER

Us.

HELEN

Can he hear us?

WAITER

Oh yes! He can hear us!

(Murmurs of agreement and knowing smiles from the others.)

He wishes he couldn't, but he can.

GARAGE MECHANIC

He hears us all the time.

GRANDMOTHER

He can't get rid of us. I've been gone five years and look at me. Still here!

GARAGE MECHANIC

They all have it.

HELEN

Who? What?

GARAGE MECHANIC

People like him. They all have it. I call it The Burden of Memory. I've seen a lot of it. I see it every day. They remember everything, you see. Can't ever forget. Makes you glad to be normal.

(ALEX stands up and turns to face the audience, looking at himself in the mirror.)

HELEN

What's he doing now?

WAITER

Still listening. He's always listening. He can't help it.

GRANDMOTHER

He needs a woman. Someone to love him. A nice young woman who can make him feel good about himself.

WRESTLER

That would be nice.

GRANDMOTHER

(To HELEN.)

That's who *you* are.

MOTHER

(Under her breath.)

More's the pity!

HELEN

Is it?

GRANDMOTHER

That's why he wants you to know.

HELEN

What do you mean, wants me to know?

MOTHER

She hasn't got a clue!

GRANDMOTHER

About his stammer.

MOTHER

All mouth and no knickers!

(HELEN is about to react when ALEX switches on the hairdryer and, directing it at his hair, blows the VOICES back upstage onto the furniture and packing cases. WRESTLER makes his way back downstage, as if battling against a gale. He puts ALEX in a wrestling hold, forces him to let go of the hairdryer, switches it off and puts it down.)

WRESTLER

You don't get rid of us that easily!

(Lets ALEX go and steps back, but keeps an eye on him.)

ALEX

(Looking at himself in the mirror.)

What's the matter with you? You're sweating. You're going to need another shower.

(Takes vest from chair and puts it on.)

Calm down.

(Takes the box off the table, opens it, closes it, puts it down.)

Don't think about it. Just get ready.

MOTHER

(As if calling from downstairs.)

Alex! Are you up yet? Alex! You're going to be late.

ALEX

(To himself, as if rehearsing a line.)

I don't feel very well.

MOTHER

Alex? Are you still in bed? What's the matter?

ALEX

(Calling to her but looking at himself in the mirror, as he continues to do in the dialogue that follows.)

I feel poorly.

MOTHER

(Comes downstage, looking out front as if ALEX is in front of her.)

Where don't you feel well?

ALEX

In my tummy.

MOTHER

Alex, I've got to go to work. I can't leave you here on your own.

ALEX

I'll be all right.

MOTHER

You'll have to go to school. You don't look poorly.

ALEX

My tummy really hurts. It does. Don't make me go to school. I feel as if I might be going to be sick. Ring gran, ask her to come and look after me. I really feel as if I'm going to be sick.

MOTHER

Let me rub your tummy for you.

ALEX

No! You'll make it worse! Mum, I need something to be sick in!

MOTHER

Oh, Alex, what am I going to do with you? All right, I'll ring her. But you can't go on like this.

(Walks back upstage.)

ALEX

(Picks up electric shaver.)

I'll just tell her. Straight out. Helen, I've got something to tell you. I'll just tell her. It'll be all right.

(School bell rings. ALEX freezes.)

WRESTLER

(Speaks like a little boy.)

Why do you talk funny?

ALEX

I don't.

WRESTLER

You do.

ALEX

I don't.

WRESTLER

You do.

ALEX

I don't.

WRESTLER

You do.

ALEX

I don't.

WRESTLER

Miss?

INFANT TEACHER

Yes, Paul?

WRESTLER

Why does Alex talk funny?

INFANT TEACHER

I don't think Alex talks funny, Paul. He's just got a little bit of a stammer, that's all.

(ALEX switches shaver on, starts to shave.)

JAMES

What's it like? Stammering? I've never met anyone who stammers before.