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# Night Sky

by Susan Yankowitz

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



**SAMUEL  
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NEW YORK HOLLYWOOD LONDON TORONTO

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In addition the following credit must be given in all programs and publicity information distributed in association with this piece:

Originally produced in New York City by the Women's Project  
And Productions, Inc.  
Julia Miles, Artistic Director

*NIGHT SKY* was produced by the Women's Project & Productions under the directorship of Julia Miles at the Judith Anderson Theatre, New York City, from May 14-June 9, 1991. It was directed by Joseph Chaikin with the following cast:

**DANIEL** ..... Edward Baran  
**BILL** ..... Tom Cayler  
**ANNA** ..... Joan MacIntosh  
**SPEECH THERAPIST AND OTHERS** ..... Aleta Mitchell  
**APHASIC PATIENT AND OTHERS** ..... Paul Zimet  
**JENNIFER** ..... Lizabeth Zindel

Set Design by George Xenos  
Lighting Design by Beverly Emmons  
Costume Design by Mary Brecht  
Sound Design by Mark Bennett  
Stage Management by Ruth Kreshka  
Casting by Susan Haskins

In the spring of 2009, a revised version of the play was produced Off-Broadway by Stan Raiff / Power Productions in association with The National Aphasia Association. It was directed by Daniella Topol with the following cast:

**ANNA** ..... Jordan Baker  
**JENNIFER** ..... Lauren Ashley Carter  
**APHASIC PATIENT AND OTHERS** ..... Dan Domingues  
**BILL** ..... Tuck Milligan  
**SPEECH THERAPIST AND OTHERS** ..... Maria-Christina Oliveras  
**DANIEL** ..... Jim Stanek

Set Design by Cameron Anderson  
Costume Design by Katherine Roth  
Lighting by Peter West  
Sound Design by Daniel Baker and Aaron Meicht/  
Broken Chord Collective  
Stage Management by Carlos Maisonet  
Casting by Geoff Josselson

## CHARACTERS

**ANNA** – an astronomer, in her 40s; strong, intelligent and intense; moves from extreme self-confidence to extreme vulnerability in course of play. The role requires vocal and physical stylization plus the ability to convey a wide range of emotions.

**DANIEL** – ANNA's live-in lover, younger than she by 5 years; opera singer, baritone (\*see note below); warm, outgoing, playful, loving, and sensual.

**JENNIFER** – ANNA's daughter, 16; bright, sarcastic, self-dramatizing and tender-hearted – a very contemporary teen-ager.

**BILL** – ANNA's astronomer colleague, 45-60; socially clumsy but imaginative and charismatic in the classroom.

**SPEECH THERAPIST** – and other female roles; 30's-50's: Articulate, patient, empathic and skilled in active listening. Versatility and a flair for creating a variety of convincing characters are essential to the role.

**APHASIC PATIENT** – and other male roles (including young man at dance); 25-35. The role requires improvisatory skills, vocal calisthenics and ease with non-naturalistic performance styles.

\* Because **DANIEL** is an opera singer, it is ideal to cast an actor with a fine voice so that his career seems credible. However, it is even more important to have an excellent actor in the role so if a choice is necessary, please consider the acting requirements over the vocal ones: tapes can, if necessary, be used as support, enhancement or substitutes. And except for the "*Papageno*" aria in Scene 9, all other music sung by **DANIEL** can be selected by the actor and director.

## **THE SET**

Encompassing both naturalistic and abstract elements, the set for *NIGHT SKY* needs to be imaginatively reconceived for each theatrical space. The play takes place – sometimes simultaneously – in various rooms of a middle-class apartment, on the street, in a classroom, a hospital, a school gymnasium, and conference hall. These should be suggested and defined by lights and well-chosen objects rather than by any attempt at verisimilitude. Fluidity of movement from scene to scene is far more important than furniture. Platforms and levels can be used to enhance flexibility, and very specific lighting is essential.

Video can be used creatively, too, especially to render the ‘magical mystery tour’ of the night sky.

## **THE COSTUMES**

Because several actors play many roles, and because most characters move quickly from one scene to another, costumes also need to be adaptable. Each performer should have a basic outfit to which accessories – somewhat stylized, in keeping with the tone of the play – can be added as needed. All design elements in the play should feel contemporary.

## **NOTE ON PERIOD AND PLACE**

This play should always take place in the present, which means that any dates or slang will need to be updated for production. When performed outside of America, it is better to adapt the references and idioms to the language of that country. The themes of the play are universal and will have more immediacy when linguistically connected to the time, place, performers and audience.

## **PERFORMANCE TIME**

*NIGHT SKY* runs a bit more than 1 and ½ hours, plus one intermission.

## INTRODUCTION

As a writer, I am very often drawn to the drama of people in extreme situations, people pushed by fate or accident or character to the edge of some abyss, personal or political. When Joseph Chaikin asked me to write a play about his own extreme condition – aphasia, or speechlessness – it coincided with a nightmare of my own and one which I know I share with many others: the terror of being locked in the self, unable to communicate. Joe anticipated that this theme would seduce me – and it did.

After the stroke that devastated his ability to speak, Joe could utter only a few disjointed words. He was unable to read or write. His memory for names, places, and numbers was impaired; abstract thought, which had always been his primary form of intellectual and creative inquiry, eluded him. During a long and arduous recovery, he began to assemble a vocabulary and finally, a new means of expression without conventional syntax, often lacking connective words like conjunctions and prepositions but nonetheless comprehensible, even poetic and profound, an idiosyncratic language which *could* communicate – but only if one listened in a manner equally new. What I came to understand was that the mind of the aphasic remains intact but the route from brain to mouth, no longer direct, is like a minefield.

Because Joe asked that the central character be an astronomer, I began doing research on both aphasia and astronomy, and discovered the extraordinary metaphor upon which the play is built, the almost perfect symmetry between the black holes in the universe and the dark matter of the brain, both of them filled with light (comprehension and thought) which is trapped inside, paradoxically invisible and present at the same time.

Embracing both the stars and the domestic, *NIGHT SKY* is about language, about inner and outer space, about a medical condition, a family's ordeal, and the resiliency of the human spirit as it meets unexpected challenges: in Anna's new language, like

*“...Alice Wonderland,  
fall down black hole,  
not dying but ex-plore new world.”*

It was inspired by Joe, and written for him, with infinite love and respect.

– Susan Yankowitz, 2010



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The playwright wishes to express her gratitude for the invaluable support and collaboration of the many organizations and individuals who helped in the development of this piece. A grant from TCG provided the means for a stimulating workshop in A.C.T.'s Plays-in-Process series. A Playwrights' Center McKnight fellowship enabled a fruitful collaboration with The Illusion Theatre in Minneapolis, under the sensitive direction of Martha Boesing. New Dramatists supplied much-needed space for early explorations and a reading. Dr. Martha Sarno at The Rusk Institute assisted with medical information. William Alschuler was a bountiful resource in the area of astronomy. Julia Miles and The Women's Project were the first to produce the work in New York; fifteen years later, Ellayne Ganzfried of NAA brought the script to Stan Raiff, which resulted in a new Off-Broadway production.

Of the others, too numerous to mention, whose talents and insights contributed to the work's creation, I would like especially to thank Joyce Aaron, Noreen Barnes, Len Berkman, Lillian Butler, Shami Chaikin, Bill Coco, Ed Gueble and San Francisco State University, Tori Haring-Smith, Irene Kling, and above all Herbert Leibowitz, who has seen almost every production and lent his editorial wisdom and life-saving love to every revision.

“Perhaps someone with expert knowledge of the human brain will understand my illness, discover what a brain injury does to a man’s mind, memory and body...I know there is a great deal of talk now about the cosmos and outer space, and that our earth is just a minute particle of this infinite universe. But actually, people rarely think about this; the most they can imagine are flights to the nearest planets revolving around the sun. As for the flight of a bullet, or a shell or bomb fragment, that rips open a man’s skull, splitting and burning the tissues of his brain, crippling his memory, sight, hearing, awareness – these days people don’t find anything extraordinary in that...”

– L. Zazestys, wounded in the head during  
the battle of Smolensk, 1943



## Scene One

*(Everywhere, encompassing and unifying the audience and performance area, is the vivid, star-filled night sky.)*

*(ANNA too stands within it, on a podium, completing a lecture to her class.)*

ANNA. ...but what we see represents only ten percent – possibly only one percent – of what exists. Most of the universe is hidden, invisible to us still, a mysterious absence. We know very little. Even the most basic insights elude us. How many stars are there, and how do we know there aren't more? Why do the planets rotate and is it possible they could stop? If black holes are truly black and truly holes, how can we be sure they're there? And within all that dark matter, somewhere, does life exist?

*(pause)*

These are the questions we'll be considering in the next few weeks. The word "consider," by the way – did you know that it comes from Latin and means literally "with the stars?" All languages are filled with these references. When you miss your class because you have the flu – "influenza" – that derives from the Italian for "astral influence." And if your friend calls you a "schlimazel" for spilling wine on your white suit? That's Yiddish for someone born under an unlucky star. Then there's "disaster!" a word we hear all too often these days, attached to hurricanes, floods, and even our economy – and what does "dis-aster" actually mean? Bad star!

*(steps down from the podium)*

Class dismissed!

*(The stars go out; the stage goes black.)*

*(Lights up in ANNA's living room.)*

*(DANIEL, ANNA's partner, is playing solitaire on his PDA. JENNIFER, her daughter, is drawing in a sketch pad.)*

ANNA. *(entering)* Home from the wars.

JENNIFER. Yeah, we know. The star wars. Hi, Mom.

ANNA. *(putting away her coat, briefcase, etc.)* Hi, sweetheart. Sweethearts. Sorry I'm late.

JENNIFER. No problema.

ANNA. Mucho problema. Problemas. I didn't pick up the cleaning. I didn't go to the bakery. I didn't buy printer paper – or toilet paper.

DANIEL. No toilet paper?! Oh shit!

ANNA. *(starting to set up her laptop)* I'd need six hands and ten brains to handle everything that came at me today. And finally, finally, I'm all packed up and ready to leave my office when I hear a knock at the door. It's a student in my lecture class – tears cascading down her cheeks. The calamity? She thought she'd registered for astrology!

JENNIFER. So she's dropping?

ANNA. *(opening her laptop)* Oh no. We bonded. Turns out we're both Aquarians. Of course I don't really know what that means but it can't be good. I had an email from the Astronomy Journal saying I have to get my revisions in by tomorrow morning. I thought I had another week, but...I don't. So – sorry – there's nothing in the fridge and I'll have to work all night, which means that you two –

JENNIFER. Hey, Mom, chill. We ordered pizza.

ANNA. Great! I'm starving.

JENNIFER. Well...I mean...like, we didn't know when you were coming home and we sort of...scarfed it down.

ANNA. You didn't.

DANIEL. Sorry, hon.

**ANNA.** Listen. I'm going to be late twice a week this semester. It would really help if you guys cooked dinner on those nights.

**JENNIFER.** I can't. No way, mom. Not with calculus and French and volleyball and model U.N. plus maybe a social life. Daniel, you do it.

**DANIEL.** Me? Uh-uh. No talent in the kitchen. You know that.

*(pause)*

Not much talent anywhere, I guess.

**ANNA.** Ohhhh. City Opera! What happened?

**DANIEL.** I sang my audition piece, they asked if I had something else, so I gave them the Puccini...

**ANNA.** They wanted to hear more. That sounds good. Very good.

**DANIEL.** I thought so, too. But when I finished, one of them said that my voice was a little thin in the low notes.

**ANNA.** Thin? No! Do you think it was?

**DANIEL.** ...I don't know. Maybe...

*(concentrates again on his PDA and keeps playing whenever he can withdraw)*

**JENNIFER.** Mom, tomorrow...after volleyball...I'm going with Francesca to get a tattoo.

**ANNA.** No. No, you're not getting a tattoo.

**JENNIFER.** Just a tiny one, right over my ankle bone, sort of like an ankle bracelet, but with really sick colors, you know.

**ANNA.** Sick is right. The dyes can get into your bloodstream. No.

**JENNIFER.** Omigod, Mom, that's so middle ages! Nobody gets infected these days! We know the good places to go. And my design is like unbelievable! You'll love it. Look.

*(shows what she's been drawing: a band of stars)*

**JENNIFER.** (*cont.*) See? Orion's belt. But around my ankle. Sort of in honor of you. How cool is that??

**ANNA.** Way cool, crazy cool, whatever you kids say – but if you want to honor me, try getting on honor roll this year. ...Don't you have homework?

**JENNIFER.** Tons.

**ANNA.** Then hop to it.

(**JENNIFER** *mockingly hops off.* To **DANIEL**.)

I don't get it. You've sung those arias all over the country. To rave reviews.

**DANIEL.** Yeah. They're wild for me in St. Louis, Sarasota, DC – but this is New York, babe. You know what the competition is like here. So. ...I was nervous. Very nervous.

**ANNA.** Well, that'll do it.

**DANIEL.** Do what?

**ANNA.** Mess you up. When you go into an audition or give a lecture, you have to be on top of everything, radiate confidence.

**DANIEL.** Like you.

**ANNA.** Hey. I'm not trying to put you down.

**DANIEL.** You don't have to. I'm already down. You're kicking me.

**ANNA.** You want to stay down? You can't. You're giving that recital in a few weeks. And scouts come to these things, don't they? From Germany, Italy – maybe even the Met...?

**DANIEL.** Yeah, sometimes. So?

**ANNA.** So – go for it! Rehearse, work the low notes if they're weak –

**DANIEL.** I will, I will. (*concentrates more intently on the PDA*)  
First. Thing. Tomorrow.

**ANNA.** Tomorrow? What's wrong with tonight?

**DANIEL.** I'm on a roll now, babe. Can't you see? I'm winning.

ANNA. (*looking at game*) At solitaire?!

(*grabs it out of his hands*)

How can you waste yourself on that crap?

DANIEL. Leave me to my small triumphs, please!

(*They tussle over the PDA and end up in each other's arms: sex becomes subtext, then text.*)

(*In her room, JENNIFER practices French conjugations, continuing under the scene.*)

JENNIFER. *Je parlerai. Tu parleras. Il/elle/on parlera.*

*Nous parlerons. Vous parlerez. Ils/elles parleront.*

*Je mangerai. Tu mangeras. Il/elle/on mangera.*

*Nous mangerons. Vous mangerez. Ils/elles mangeront.*

*Je comprendrai. ETC.*

ANNA. I just want to help...

DANIEL. Well, I have a few ideas on how you might do that.

(*begins to caress her*)

ANNA. This is your solution to everything.

DANIEL. It seems to work for you, too.

ANNA. (*a little seduced, a little seductive*) I have my little weaknesses, what can I say?

DANIEL. Don't say anything. Let your body do the talking.

(*Touches her more intimately. She responds, then hesitates.*)

ANNA. We can't... Jenny...

DANIEL. Jenny's studying French. What could be more conducive?

ANNA. ...I have so much to do, though. Hours and hours of revisions. And you, you really should be rehearsing...

DANIEL. But oo-la-la, I'm so much better at...French.

(*They kiss; she finally pulls away.*)

ANNA. I can't, I wish I could, but I can't. ...Rain date?

DANIEL. Good idea. Fantastic idea! We're supposed to have a downpour tonight.



ANNA. Tonight???

DANIEL. Around midnight. There will be no escape from Don Giovanni then!

ANNA. Did I ever tell you that you have the most adorable smile?

DANIEL. (*vampirish*) And did I ever tell *you* that you have the most delectable...throat?

(*hands her a gift box*)

I bought it after the audition. Instead of shooting myself.

ANNA. I'm speechless.

DANIEL. Well, that's a new one!

ANNA. (*takes out a string of large colorful beads*) Oh, Daniel – they're fabulous. I'll wear them to your concert.

(*He helps her put them on.*)

DANIEL. (*still the vampire*) You'll wear them tonight! The beads – and nothing else.

ANNA. What a rich fantasy life you have.

DANIEL. You don't know the half of it. So – we have a date?

ANNA. Yes, yes. *If I* get this work finished.

DANIEL. You will. And when the chimes peal at midnight and the rain pours down, I will pour myself into...*you*.

(*a last embrace; as he leaves the room*)

What are you going to do about dinner?

ANNA. Ohhh... Toss me an apple.

(*He does, then goes to his studio, begins to vocalize and rehearse his aria. ANNA bites into the apple and starts working on her laptop. JENNIFER continues her conjugations. It's noisy and chaotic. A knock on the door:*)

Who's there?

BILL. Bill.

(*She opens the door.*)

You weren't expecting me? It's Thursday, isn't it? Thursday at eight?

ANNA. Oh no. I mean yes, I guess it is. Sorry.

BILL. I perceive a cloud of dark, dark, very dark matter around your head. How bad were they?

ANNA. The worst yet. I gave a quiz on Tuesday, just to find out what they knew. Two of them thought that *Galileo* was hit on the head by an apple and ‘*invented*’ gravity. I asked which was more important to human life, the sun or the moon. One guy said it was obviously the moon, because the moon shines at night when we can’t see without its help, while the poor superfluous sun casts light during the day when who the hell needs it??!

BILL. And I’m teaching the next two classes...!

ANNA. You’ll have to pull out all your tricks.

BILL. I’ve got one all ready. A riddle. “How does the solar system hold up its pants?”

JENNIFER. (*already half-way into the room*) With Orion’s belt!

(BILL is mightily chagrined.)

Hi, Bill. *Maman! Au secours! Francais. Examen. Demain. Demain est la futur. Examen dans la tense futur. Je suis perdu.*

ANNA. Pardon?

JENNIFER. The future, Mom, hello?! Like, I don’t know it.

ANNA. Well, who does?

BILL. What’s up, Jen?

JENNIFER. Placement test tomorrow. In French. It’s huge! If I don’t pass, I don’t get into AP and if I don’t get into AP my record looks like sh – crapola, and I’ll end up in some boondock college and naturally I’ll start drinking and taking drugs because I’ll have zero self-esteem and then–

BILL. Hey. Don’t look at me. I studied Russian.

JENNIFER. Mom! You gotta help me. This could be an epic fail. Like, I’m totally stressed out.

ANNA. Stress is a part of life. Just drill yourself. Grammar is not brain surgery.

**BILL.** Anna, can we go over your lesson plan for next month?

**ANNA.** Not now, I can't, I'm really sorry – I *have* to meet this deadline, but I do have a hard copy you can see.... And we'll talk on the weekend, okay?

*(rummages through her briefcase till she finds it; gives it to him; while:)*

**JENNIFER.** I will be. *Je serai.* You will be. *Tu seras.* He will be, she will be, one will be: *Il/elle/on...sera?* Is that it? *Sera?* No, that's Italian. Or maybe Spanish? "*Che sera, sera,* whatever will be will be." Do you know that song, Ma?

*(ANNA nods.)*

So do you think it *is sera?* The same in Spanish and Italian and French? Could be, couldn't it?

**ANNA.** Maybe. ...'*Elle sera malade.*' She will be sick. Yes, '*sera.*' I think that's right.

**JENNIFER.** But you're not a hundred per cent?

**ANNA.** I haven't studied French in ages. See if Daniel can help you.

**JENNIFER.** He doesn't know French.

**ANNA.** Yes, he does. He sings whole operas in French.

**JENNIFER.** The words, yeah, but he doesn't know what they mean.

**ANNA.** That's ridiculous. He couldn't sing anything if he didn't understand the meaning.

**JENNIFER.** He's got a translation that gives him the gist but word for word, trust me, he doesn't have a clue.

**BILL.** *(looking at the lesson plan)* Anna... Redshifts? The electromagnetic spectrum? You think these kids are up to it?

**ANNA.** They have to be.

*(to JENNIFER)*

Why don't you just use your textbook?

**JENNIFER.** I left it in my locker.

*(noting ANNA's incredulous expression)*

Yeah, I know, like I'm brain-dead.

ANNA. Then go on line and get what you need.

*(calls out)*

...Daniel, can you tone it down a little, please?

JENNIFER. You don't care if I fail, do you?

ANNA. Haven't you heard of the Copernican Revolution, young lady? For your information, the earth does not revolve around you.

JENNIFER. Right, mom. It revolves around *you!*

*(storms out, upset)*

ANNA. Honestly, Bill, I'm over my head.

JENNIFER. *(yelling over her shoulder)* Out of your head!

BILL. *(shouting back)* Over your head! Over *most* heads – including mine.

*(JENNIFER's door slams.)*

ANNA. Do I hear self-deprecation? From you?

BILL. *I* wasn't invited to give a paper at the conference. *I'm* not representing the United States of America. Everyone at school reeks of envy.

ANNA. Not you, though.

BILL. Me? No. Well, maybe a little. Well, maybe a lot.

ANNA. You? The star of the department? The only teacher who's always over-enrolled?

BILL. That's true...

*(picks up two apples)*

So let's see. I'm popular in the classroom. You'll be world famous.

*(juggles the apples)*

The classroom, the world... Classroom, world... Oh, all right. I'll trade places with you. Just say the word.

**ANNA.** (*laughing*) The word is ‘goodbye.’ If I don’t get back to these damn revisions, I’ll be in deep deep bleep bleep. I’ll see you in the observatory on Saturday. Oh, and don’t forget about Daniel’s concert. We have to fill the hall. Check out the email reminder I sent and forward it to your own list, will you?

**BILL.** Sure. He sounds great.

**ANNA.** He is. But too loud. ...See you.

(*BILL exits, ANNA settles back to work. DANIEL sings more powerfully. She tries but can’t blot out the sound. Calls out again:* )

Daniel! It’s terrific! Just turn down the volume!

(*no response; tries to work but can’t as his voice becomes even stronger*)

Please!!! I can’t concentrate!

(*He keeps singing. Finally she goes to his door and yells:*)

Daniel, I can’t hear myself think!!!

**DANIEL.** (*entering*) Were you calling me?

**ANNA.** Your voice – it drowns out everything!

**DANIEL.** What do you expect me to do? Mouth the words?

**ANNA.** You have no idea how distracting it is.

**DANIEL.** First you complain that I don’t rehearse. Then you complain that I do.

**ANNA.** I’ll never get this work done with all that noise!

**DANIEL.** (*stung*) Noise?! Are you referring to my music? my voice?

**ANNA.** You said you’d sound-proof that room.

**DANIEL.** I will. But get off my back. It’s not my fault you missed your deadline.

**ANNA.** You know the first weeks of class are always a nightmare! You could have helped me out. I gave you the manuscript weeks ago. All you needed to do was circle the typos and make notes if something didn’t make sense.

**DANIEL.** I tried. I did. But *nothing* made sense. How many times do I have to explain that those scientific words

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