

THE LANGUAGE ARCHIVE

By Julia Cho

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A STUDY GUIDE

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THE AUTHOR. Born in 1976 in Los Angeles, Julia Cho grew up in Arizona. She took degrees in English literature at Amherst College and the University of California at Berkeley. She then turned her attention to the theater, studying playwriting at New York University and The Julliard School.

In an interview with *theatertimes.org* in 2007, she described herself as,

. . . about the least likely playwright possible. I did not grow up in a family of artists. I did not grow up watching theater. But when I saw my first play, I found the experience absolutely searing. I guess I was born with something in me that responds to theater—to this day, nothing pierces me more than a great play. But I often think how easily I could've gone without ever knowing that theater moves me so much. Sometimes, being a playwright seems like such an accident. It was simply a matter of the right ticket being put into my hand at the right time.

In the same interview she also described her ability “to spend hours completely absorbed in my own thoughts,” a personal feature that enables her “to cobble together made-up worlds, word by word. I also have a really strong imagination. In fact, the people and places I imagine can sometimes feel more real to me than real people and places. “

This enthrallment with the capacity of words to create worlds points towards the ideas Cho would explore a year later in *The Language Archive*, a play that dramatizes the power of language to beget its own reality.

In describing the genesis of *The Language Archive* in an interview with Second Generation theater company, Cho explained that,

This one came out of some reading I was doing on dying languages. Apparently, it’s not just species that are going extinct with breathtaking rapidity; languages are dying as well. It seems to me that words don’t just express our thoughts; they create our thoughts as well. Languages have different world views embedded in them and to lose a language means losing a whole way of looking at the world. All of this thinking about languages led me to reflect on my own life: I don’t speak the language my parents speak (Korean). I feel that loss acutely; it’s a source of shame and guilt. And somehow out of all this came a play.

If world-views in fact cannot be understood outside of the languages that embody them, then Cho’s failure to learn Korean means that, at some fundamental level, she has never been able to communicate fully with her own parents, to say to them what they most deeply want to hear, or to grasp what they most urgently want to tell her. In *The Language Archive*, the linguist, George, finds himself in exactly this situation with his wife, not because he and she speak different languages, but because they merely imagine they speak a common tongue while in fact they are only talking past each other.

In an interview with the New York Times on September 23, 2006, Cho noted that in many of her early plays she “was trying to articulate . . . what it is to be Asian-American. . . . But I think I might be getting to the end of that exploration.” *The Language Archive*, written two years later, bears no discernible ethnic imprint. Its characters might be members of any race or descendants of any cultural background. Their shared identity lies in the paradox faced by all humans who, as Churchill said of England and America, are divided by a common language.

The Language Archive was first produced by The South Coast Repertory Theater in 2009. Since then it has been staged at theaters from California to New York. Among Julia Cho’s earlier works are *The Architecture of Loss* (2004), *Durango* (2006), and *The Piano Teacher* (2007).

THE SETTING: Aristotle defines plot as “the arrangement of the incidents” that make up a play. Because the “incidents” of *The Language Archive* move frequently and fluidly from location to location, the plot calls for a physical setting that is minimalist and somewhat abstract. In fact, the playwright provides no stage directions to describe the settings of any of the multiple scenes in the two acts of the drama. Therefore, the director and designer are free to create the play’s physical environment, their choices limited only by the need to move the action instantly from one imaginary place to another. These locations include the home of the linguist, George, and his wife, Mary; George’s laboratory; a train station; a hospital room; and a bakery. One or two evocative furniture pieces or props will have to do the work of making these wide-ranging scenes present to the eye and imagination of the audience.

The setting is abstract in another sense as well: the playwright specifies no particular historical moment or geographical location for the action. However, because we are in a world with computers, laboratories for the study of linguistics, I Hops, and rapidly dying languages, we infer that the plot unfolds in the United States at more or less the present time. And because there are college campuses, labs, and hospitals, we assume that we are in a city or a town large enough to support such institutions. But the only geographic names mentioned are clearly intended to be generic: Upper Midlands and Lower Midlands. There are two characters who are said to have traveled to George’s lab by plane from a rural location that sounds like it might be in the far West: they come from “the wilderness . . . between the gorge and the river.” So—given the air travel involved—it seems likely that the setting is some distance from their home, possibly somewhere east of the Mississippi.

These abstract and generic qualities in the setting of the play are thematically significant. As we noted above, at the time she was working on this script the playwright saw herself “getting to the end” of her focus on the Asian-American experience. In this play there is no ethnic, regional, or cultural specificity. To the extent that ethnicity figures in the action at all, it appears in the persons of two characters who are identified as “Ellowans,” members of a fictitious American Indian group whose disappearing language George wishes to preserve in his archive. But these made-up “Ellowans” are themselves representative of a generic category: speakers of vanishing languages, with characteristics drawn from a wide spectrum of Native American cultural experiences. Just as Esperanto (which figures prominently in the play) is a synthesis of the languages of Europe with no deep history of its own, so “Ellowans” are a synthesis of ethnic types, not representatives of a concrete, historic culture. Again, we are drawn back to the play’s obsession with what is universal in human experience rather than what is culturally unique: namely, the contradiction between our aspiration to express everything possible about our inner and outer worlds through language, and our inevitable failure to achieve this goal.

THE PLOT. The play begins in the home of George the linguist and his wife, Mary. George is worried about Mary because she has been crying a lot. She also seems to be leaving cryptic notes in various spots where George is sure to find them: in one of his books or at the bottom of his tea cup.

Initially reluctant to discuss these matters with her husband, Mary finally does confront him with the source of her sadness and her odd behavior: in all their years together, she has never seen George cry. Not when they view tragic events on the nightly news; not when her dog, Cookie, died; not even when his grandmother “passed away and everyone else was bawling. . . .” She deplores his failure to evince the “human reaction, the normal reaction” to such experiences: mourning. According to Mary, George mourns ideas, not people; dead languages, not dead grandparents. As a result, she finds it impossible to continue their marriage and informs him that she is leaving him.

In an aside to the audience, George confides to us that if she goes “it’ll *destroy* me. . . . I’ll be a city in ruins.” But when his wife asks him whether he has anything to say in response to this stunning news, George can only manage to stammer, “Don’t . . . Go. . . .?” Whereupon Mary sighs and goes.

George then turns to the audience and tells us that he is a linguist who speaks eight languages in addition to English. But, he notes, “Even with all my languages, there still aren’t the right words.”

Scene two takes us to George’s linguistics laboratory—the “language archive” of the play’s title— a place where he makes recordings of people speaking languages that are nearing extinction. We see his assistant, Emma, setting up the instruments for the day’s work: recording the conversation of the last people alive who speak Ellowan.

As George welcomes the visitors, the scene switches to Mary, who is at home packing to leave, and soliloquizing about her husband and her tears: “What he does not know— because he has not cried probably since he was seven . . . is that there are many reasons for weeping.” She proceeds to list several of them, including, “I can’t believe how beautiful it is, so I weep. . . . I can’t believe how true it is, so I weep. . . . I am marked for suffering, so I weep.” At the end of her catalog of causes for crying, “*Her face is radiant. . . . [T]here is something like joy shining in her eyes.*” On this paradoxical note of joy through tearfulness, she snaps her suitcase closed and leaves the house.

Back at the lab, the recording session with the two Ellowans, Resten and Alta—husband and wife—is not going well. Rather than conversing in their precious, vanishing language, they fall to bickering about what happened on the plane during their flight from home. She resents the fact that he grabbed the window seat, forcing her to sit in the middle, while he chides her for taking up the whole armrest.

The bitterness escalates until George intervenes to remind them that they are supposed to be speaking Ellowan, not English. They respond that Ellowan is a language for expressing beautiful thoughts and feelings, not for saying hateful things to one another. That function belongs to English, which for them is the language of anger, spoken only by “hard people. . . .With guns. . . . And very bad manner.” Having explained the linguistic situation, they return to their quarrel. Their insults and counter insults grow ever more incendiary and vicious, until, totally outraged, each casts a hex on the other, a curse that prevents them from exchanging words, thus defeating the whole purpose of their visit to the language archive.

A dejected George reaches into his pocket for a cloth to wipe his glasses with, and out with it comes yet another cryptic note from Mary. As he reads it, the action moves forward, remaining in the lab but resuming later in the day. The feud between Resten and Alta continues, with George acting as go-between for the couple who will not speak to each other. The quarrel now focuses on Resten’s contempt for his wife’s cooking. In an attempt to discredit her husband, Alta persuades George to sample some of the food she has brought from home. Just as he is about to dig in, Mary walks through the door, with an important question for George: “there’s something I wanted to ask you . . . about the way we left things . . . are you sure you have nothing to say to me?” As George *“opens his mouth to speak Mary waits, hopeful.”* She is giving him a chance to redeem himself, to atone for his earlier silence in response to her plea for some healing words. And again he fails. He conjures up memories of their first date, but that’s not enough. “Just tell me what you want,” he pleads, “and I’ll say it.” To which Mary sadly responds, “Oh, George, that’s not how it works,” and leaves him again. At this second abandonment, George *“falls back onto the floor. He lies down on the ground,”* an emotionally defeated man.

The next scene takes us to an office where George’s assistant, Emma, is taking lessons in Esperanto, one of her boss’s favorite languages. It has become clear in earlier scenes that Emma is powerfully attracted to George, and that she has not acted on her feelings because of his marital status. Now that his wife has left him, however, new possibilities on this front present themselves. Because George loves Esperanto, she has thrown herself into the study of that artificial language. But she is doing poorly at it because, as her instructor explains to her, one studies a foreign tongue because she is in love with something intimately connected with

it, and Emma has yet to open the door that would reveal what sort of love has led her to the language she is trying to learn. A love of Italian cooking might lead a person to learn Italian; a love of American movies might prompt someone else to tackle English. Emma must admit to herself what sort of love has brought her to Esperanto.

From the language lesson, we return to the lab, where George is still lying on the floor, now having visions of Mary. Alta and Resten return, resuming their quarrel, and George upbraids them for their childish behavior, which is wrecking his attempt to record their dying native language. They respond that he must be feeling grumpy because his wife left him. And they inform him that she didn't go because he couldn't find the right words to keep her with him. "You think everything is about language. But the world ends first, my friend. World die and then language follow."

A short period of time elapses, and we see Alta and Resten in the lab by themselves. They begin conversing in Elowan, patching over the differences that have prompted their feud. Alta attempts to consummate their reconciliation by offering Resten the food he previously rejected as inedible. But even now, he can't bring himself to taste it, instead beginning "*to retch and grimace in pain,*" at which point the lights on stage abruptly go out.

The scene moves to a railway platform, where Mary is apparently waiting for a train. She takes off her wedding ring and seems to consider throwing it on the tracks, but doesn't. An Old Man appears and begins talking to her. He asks about her marriage, and she initially refuses to talk about it. However, in the face of his persistence, she reveals her situation and admits that she doesn't actually know why she has left her husband. He then reveals that he has come to the platform to commit suicide by jumping in front of a train. Mary talks him out of this desperate act, and they decide to leave the platform and have lunch together, she having not discarded her wedding ring and he not having killed himself. As they leave the station, Mary asks the Old Man about the contents of a box he is carrying. "Well, my dear," he replies, "that is a long story." Immediately following their departure for lunch, George arrives in search of Mary, leaning over the edge of the platform, looking "*one way down the track and then the other.*"

The next scene takes us back to George's house where he "is haunted by regret." He rummages through books and sofa cushions, lifts the rug, moves knick-knacks around, searching for another message that Mary might have left behind. He finds a bottle of Scotch and begins drinking. Then he looks in his slippers and discovers what he's been looking for: Mary's last note, which he pointedly does not read. Instead he tucks it into his breast pocket and "*puts his hand there. He holds it there for some time.*"

The action now moves to a hospital where Resten is being treated for the illness that overcame him at the end of his previous scene. Alta speaks Ellowan to him, pleading with him not to leave her. Emma arrives to inform Alta that Resten is seriously ill and might not recover. She then queries Alta about differences between Ellowan and English, and Alta explains that, “Whole thing have no equivalent.” Emma asks how to say “I love you” in Ellowan, and Alta tells her: “Mir ne glessala,” which literally means, “Don’t leave me.” She advises Emma to say the Ellowan words to George, obviously having intuited the young woman’s love for the linguist. As the scene ends, Resten regains consciousness and asks his wife to kiss him.

We now return to George’s house, where we discover him lying asleep on the floor, with the bottle of scotch standing next to him. Emma enters, and begins to talk to the sleeping linguist, in effect confessing her love. She reaches out to touch him, but just at that moment he wakes up. Seeing Emma in his home, he is confused, but she informs him that Alta and Resten have begun talking to each other in Ellowan. Immediately he readies himself to rush to the hospital to observe them in action.

When he gets there, Resten is in a talkative mood, and as a way of consoling George over the loss of his wife he tells him an Ellowan parable about courtship and marriage in which the woman resists her wooer by shifting into the shapes of many different animals, in the end accepting his advances by becoming a gentle lamb. “She only became all those terrible things because she was scared. That is marriage, my friend. Same as myth. Except, each is both hunter and changer.” Thus enlightened, George is still inconsolably grief-stricken at his wife’s leaving. When Emma enters, *“What happens next stuns her. Very, very slowly and very, very gently, he embraces her. . . . It is the embrace of perfect happiness and perfect sadness.”* And with this conjunction of opposites, the first act ends.

The second act begins back in the lab, where George is hunting through his large collection of recordings of dying or extinct languages, selecting various tapes for some purpose not divulged during the scene. During this action, George conducts “A short lesson in Esperanto,” in which he conjugates the phrase “I am being loved”—“Me estas amata”—in the present tense, and then in several versions of the past tense, ending with, “I was about to be loved.” The various tenses seem to refer both to his relationship with Mary and, now, to Emma.

The scene then switches back to the office of the Esperanto Instructor, where Emma is confessing her love for George. Her teacher—in a mixture of Esperanto and English—urges Emma to declare this love openly and emphatically so as to open a door within herself:

That is why you must tell him. Not for him . . . for yourself. This is your greatest fear and you must face it! Yes, it might break you to do so, but if you don't, how else will you ever be free.

Filled with determination, Emma strides out of the office, prepared to declare her feelings to George—in Esperanto, his favorite language. But as she is heading off to find him, she is sidetracked by the smell of baking bread. The aroma leads her to The Blue Tulip Bakeshop, where she finds Mary in charge. Rather than leaving town, she is running the bake shop, handed over to her by the Old Man she met at the train platform, its former proprietor. The little box she queried him about, we learn, contained the precious “starter” material, needed to raise the dough to produce a loaf of bread. Mary is now deliriously happy, transformed both spiritually and physically, her new passion for baking having made her, in Emma's words, “The most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life.” Emma buys a loaf, and heads back to the lab.

There she primes herself to declare her love—in Esperanto. But first she notices the many tapes George was pulling from his shelves in the earlier scene, and realizes that he has created a sound collage drawn from the holdings of the archive. She plays the recording George has put together, and realizes it is a collection of voices saying “I love you” in the many languages preserved on the tapes. George enters, and she asks him if this collection is intended for Mary. As George tearfully explains how his wife still haunts his life, Emma realizes that this is not the moment for her declaration in Esperanto. Instead, she tells George about Mary and the bakery. Immediately he prepares to visit her, taking the sound collage with him. Emma sits in front of the recorder repeating her Esperanto phrase over and over—to herself. At the bake shop, he tells Mary that,

There is a certain language . . . our language . . . and. If you don't come back, I can't speak it anymore. Do you understand? We are the only two speakers of that language. And if you don't come back, the language will die. And no one on earth will ever speak it again.

But his appeal meets with incomprehension. “I'm sorry,” Mary responds, “But I don't understand what you're trying to say. I have never understood what you were trying to say.” Now truly defeated in his attempt to get his wife back, George hands Mary the sound collage, and in return she gives him a loaf of bread.

Outside the shop, George ponders the fact that he never learned to speak or understand his grandmother's language: “to me it made her strange. I didn't like her strangeness. . . I

separated myself from it and from her the very first chance I could. I've spent my whole life trying to make up for that. I guess I always will." He then eats a piece of Mary's bread, and his sadness *"is made even more profound by the fact that she makes such good bread."*

The scene shifts to the railway platform, where Emma is now waiting for a train, suitcase in hand. She informs us that she is going on a long trip, though where to, she doesn't know: "Wherever as long as it isn't here." Clearly she feels the need to escape from her failure with George and from the unmade declaration of love. Like Mary, she too meets an Old Man, who turns out, miraculously, to be L.L. Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto—dead since 1917. An ophthalmologist as well as a linguist, he examines Emma's eyes, and informs her that she is going blind due to "unrequited love." He advises her to fall out of love, and leaves the train, at which point Emma awakes from her dream, and finds George on the same car.

She tells him that she is planning to take a long trip, and then to find another job. George begs her not to leave the archive. She asks him if he ever visited the bakery, and he tells her that he didn't, and that he doesn't think he "ever, ever will." When Emma hears this it is *"momentous."* George has declared that he is finished trying to reconcile with Mary, and with that realization, Emma decides to disregard Dr. Zamenhof's advice, and to persevere in her unrequited love.

She cancels her plans to travel, and returns to the lab. A letter arrives from the Ellowans, informing George and Emma that Resten is dying, but announcing that even in their old age they have found it possible to change—for the better. This time on the plane, Resten offered the window seat to Alta, which she declined. The letter closes by saying that their time has become "to small for everything we need to say to each other. It is one long conversation, and it goes on and on and on."

Time begins to fast-forward on stage. Zamenhof pays Emma another visit, and explains that he persevered in the teaching of Esperanto, despite the persecution of his family, because he believed his universal language held out the hope for world peace and reconciliation, and "Without hope, there is no world. Not one worth living in at any rate."

George discovers that Emma speaks Esperanto and is delighted. Alta appears to inform us that Resten has died; and we learn that Mary has listened to George's sound collage and wept on hearing it. George tells us that he never did read that last message from Mary that was tucked into his slipper—never, that is, until he was a very old man, when he opened it up and found it was blank. Emma confesses that George never did fall in love with her, but that on his death bed he thanked for the embrace of perfect happiness and perfect sadness that ended the first

act. As the play ends, they reenact that embrace, with Mary, Alta, and Resten looking on and commenting as a kind of chorus:

MARY: And it is maybe the only time in all of history that two people, despite the fact they are feeling entirely opposite things, actually feel the exact *same* thing at the exact same moment in time.

ALTA: And it is the one and only time in each of their brief lives

RESTEN: that they feel utterly and completely,

MARY: perfectly understood.

And with that irony—the occurrence in the language archive of perfect understanding without words— the action concludes.

THE CHARACTERS: Throughout the play, **GEORGE** wants to get his wife back and patch up his marriage. But he doesn't know how. He makes three attempts to win Mary back by saying the right thing, and each time he fails. His character is therefore deeply paradoxical. A speaker of eight languages in addition to his native English, and a collector and student of endangered languages from around the world, he is nonetheless at a loss for words at the moments when he most needs their help.

His character is emotionally paradoxical as well. While he was living with Mary, he kept his feelings to himself—at least, that's the impression left by Mary's complaint that in all the years of their marriage he has never cried, not at the horrors reported on the evening news, not at the death of her beloved pet, not even at his own grandmother's passing. To which George responds, saying, "I just don't find death, a single human—or canine—death, a tragedy, I'm sorry. Because we all die." Not that he never mourns: "I do mourn. I mourn a lot." But, retorts Mary, "You mourn ideas, not people." He mourns languages. So, as far as Mary is concerned, George is emotionally deficient, a cold fish, and therefore intolerable to live with.

The paradox lies in the fact that, when Mary leaves, George is overcome by powerful waves of emotion: sadness, grief, longing, heartbreak. He even begins emitting tears, much in the manner of Mary herself at the beginning of the play. But it's too late. All the feeling let loose in him by the loss of his wife fails to repair the damage done by the absence of feeling he showed when she was with him.

Then there is his blindness to Emma's love for him, an attachment she expresses with virtually every glance and gesture she makes towards him throughout the play. True, she never comes out and declares her love in so many words, but if we in the audience can read her body

language, it certainly should be legible to a trained linguist. And yet he doesn't get it—another paradox. The fact that he goes on living and working in her adoring presence for the rest of his life without catching on, and, apparently, without taking up with any other woman, suggests that he never does get over Mary after all. Having failed in his attempts to get her back, he simply stops in his tracks emotionally, or at least as far as the emotion of personal love is concerned.

MARY'S behavior at the beginning of the play—at least as described by George—is distinctly strange. According to her husband she cries at, “long-distance phone commercials, nature specials where animals of prey get killed, sometimes over nothing at all.” Which makes her the polar opposite of her tearless husband. She denies that her tears are the product of emotional illness: “I am not depressed,” she declares. “Depression to me is numbness, the absence of emotion.” George calls her condition depression, but that's only because he “is very reductive.” She, on the other hand, is a kind of connoisseur of tears, as she proceeds to list some of the many causes that make them flow: beauty, truth, mortality, the inevitability of suffering. In a sense, she enjoys her sadness, practicing the delectation of melancholy.

The emotional differences between her and her husband have driven Mary to the edge of desperation. And yet she hesitates to take the plunge. For example, on her way to catch a train that will take her to another life, she stops by her husband's lab for one last encounter. She hasn't come to say good-bye, but to give him another chance to heal the wounds of their marriage, to say the words that will make things right again. Given her dissatisfaction with her husband, why is she keeping the door open to her life with him?

We can see the reasons for her self-contradictory behavior in her encounter with the Old Man at the train station. She has removed her wedding ring, and has clearly been weighing the idea of tossing it on the tracks as a terminating gesture towards her marriage. But she hesitates, repeating the indecisiveness that led her to re-visit George's lab. The Old Man begins to question her about her marriage, and she rebuffs him, quite waspishly, calling him “rude” for his curiosity. But, evoking the privileges of age, the Old Man persists, drawing from her the admission that she doesn't know where she is going, and that she “doesn't really know” why she left her marriage. Her defensiveness about being questioned, her ambivalence about her ring, her return to the lab, all grow out of this fundamental fact: she doesn't understand the motives for her own behavior. Like any dramatic character, she has an intention: to leave her husband and start a new life. But what she lacks is a clear reason for pursuing it.

More deeply, this seems to stem from the way she imagines her emotional life: “sometimes you can feel so sad, it begins to feel like happiness. And you can be so happy that it starts to feel

like grief. You can feel so alive, it starts to feel like death. . . . [Most]people live their whole lives without touching any of these places at all. But I do.”

So, like George, her life is also marked by paradox, with emotions turning into their opposites, like one element morphing into another under the magical pressure of alchemy. And she is proud of this liability, seeing herself as an explorer of the soul: “It’s like you’re in a room. And you think it’s the very last room. But there’s another, even further. There’s a door. Can you see it? Can you open it?” Her metaphor can only lead us to assume that she has pushed through the door leading out of her marriage just to see what’s on the other side, to discover a new emotion to savor.

The last door we see her pushing through leads her to the Blue Tulip Bake Shop, where she finds her true vocation. Why does baking satisfy this emotionally restless woman? Fashioning our daily bread is an ancient and primal sort of occupation. All its doors would seem to have been opened long since. And possibly this is why it entralls her. She can stop seeking, and settle into her final, richly aromatic room:

I bake bread all through the night. And when the bread is all gone, I close the shop and then I go home and sleep. Sometimes I dream I’m baking bread and that is how it goes, from a waking happiness to a sleeping happiness and back - like water being poured back and forth between two cups.

So no more emotional see-sawing, with joy turning into grief or life becoming death. Instead she has found perpetual happiness through living by bread alone—the most basic of foods, always fundamentally itself, but capable of infinite variations. Her paradox has been resolved, and the thesis/antithesis of Mary’s psyche has been synthesized in the staff of life.

EMMA, like George, is another character who has a clear purpose that is never achieved: she wants George to fall in love with her, and he doesn’t. She dotes on him in all of their scenes together. She studies Esperanto in order to communicate with him more fully. She makes a recording of herself declaring her love for him in two languages. But none of it works. When it becomes clear to her late in the play that George still loves Mary, she decides to break out of her hopeless situation by leaving town, boarding a train, and heading off to . . . anywhere else. But that doesn’t work either. Instead, she meets George on the train, and returns with him to the lab, where she falls more deeply and hopelessly in love with him than ever.

The tape declaring her love has been sitting in the recording machine in the archive while Emma was making her abortive dash for elsewhere aboard the train. It was there while George

was making his futile visit to Mary at the bread shop. And it's still there when Emma and George return to the lab to begin the rest of their lives working together, endlessly playing out their earlier embrace of happiness and sadness. George fiddles with the recorder, and the tape suddenly begins to play: "Mi amas vin, George"—"I love you, George." But before the message can sink in, Emma quickly hits the stop button. When George asks what was on the tape, her reply reveals the contradictions of her life: "Nothing. Just gibberish." Of course, it's not gibberish: it's the most important thing she could ever have said to him. But since she never allows him to hear the words, they remain just meaningless signals on a spool of tape. And meaninglessness is the essence of gibberish. In a sense, this is the condition of her heart: it's like that tape—full of unexpressed love.

ALTA AND RESTEN: Approaching the end of life, Alta and Resten stand in sharp contrast to the other characters in the play because essentially they have what they want: each other. Not that they don't pursue other objectives in the course of the play; if they didn't they would be inert, dramatically speaking.

So they make their entrance conducting a feud about who usurped the window seat during their flight, and Alta bemoans the fact that she didn't marry Gary Siga, and Resten makes invidious comparisons between Alta's cooking and that of her rival, Ahvia. But all their insults and curses, we learn, are merely ritual expressions of anger. In fact, they are still deeply attached to one another and all the fuss and fury about Gary Siga and Alta's cooking are just the passing storm-clouds that appear and disappear in any life-long marriage.

The sad paradox in their world is that the language of their marriage, Elowan—the language through which they have shared their love—is on the verge of extinction. When Alta and Resten die, so will that language, and with it the possibility of there being another long, loving life quite like theirs. As the play ends, Resten has in fact died, leaving Alta alone with her language. So she becomes a bit like Emma: full of love with no one to tell it to.

THEMES: As noted above, the play's central irony is that George, the linguist, the overseer of the language archive, the speaker of multiple tongues, can't find the right words to serve his purposes at the most crucial moments of his life. And when he makes his final, most urgent plea to Mary to return to him so that they can preserve the unique language of their marriage, her response is crushing: "I don't understand what you're trying to say. I have never understood what you were trying to say."

That single word, "never," is a devastating touch. It retroactively empties out the contents of their whole life together, turning their marriage into a total sham. Their relationship has been

the opposite of Alta's and Resten's, who have always deeply understood each other. Despite the imprecations and the hexings, they can hear what's really being said between the lines: Don't leave me.

So the play gives us two contrasting marriages. The one between George and Mary is not just broken; it was never whole to begin with. The one between Alta and Resten, though full of sound and fury, is solid as a rock. George and Mary talk past each other; Alta and Resten yell at each other in English, and save the good stuff, the ongoing exchange of affection, for Ellowan, the dying language.

The play also draws a contrast between the kinds of lives led by Alta and Resten on the one hand, and George, Mary, and Emma on the other. Alta and Resten are emissaries from what is essentially a pre-modern culture, the Ellowans being members of an imaginary Native American tribe. George, Mary, and Emma are members of a highly mobile, educated, urban, modern middle-class.

Alta and Resten are fundamentally satisfied with their lives. They are not running from unhappiness, or groping toward some undefined fulfillment, or pursuing impossible dreams of perfect love, or searching hopelessly for the right words to say and failing to find them.

George, Mary, and Emma are all involved in some variety of one or more of these activities. They are searching for the right lives to lead and trying to become the right selves to lead them. By contrast, Alta and Resten have been given pathways to follow and identities to embrace by the traditional culture that has shaped them. In this sense, it has taken a village to make them who they are. George, Mary, and Emma have no village; instead they inhabit the kinetic, ever-changing modern world which provides no established answers to the questions they are constantly asking themselves.

But, as Resten explains to George, languages die because the worlds that they belong to die first. Which means that Resten's world, for all its virtues, is moribund. The language archive is the repository of dead worlds as well as dead words. The world inhabited by George, Mary, and Emma is alive, but a living language adequate to its demands eludes them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. George feels guilty about not learning his grandmother's language. Are there relatives in your family whose language you have never learned?
2. How important are words in determining what we think and feel? Have you met people whose brand of English made them seem strange to you?
3. Why do you suppose L.L. Zamenhof wanted to create a new language called Esperanto?
4. Would the world be a more peaceful place if everybody spoke the same language? Can you think of places where everyone speaks the same language but where there is still lots of violence?
5. Why does Mary find baking bread to be so satisfying? What are some ideas and emotions you associate with bread?
6. Have you ever been at a loss for words to express your feelings or ideas at a really important moment?
7. What are your reactions when you encounter a person who doesn't speak your language? Curiosity? Puzzlement? Indifference?
8. Why does Emma decide to stay on working with George even though she knows he will never return her love?
9. Why do Alta and Resten bicker so vehemently when it's clear that they really love each other?
10. The image of an embrace between perfect happiness and perfect sadness occurs twice in the play. Why?