

Obfuscation

A play by Human Head Performance Group

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As the audience enters, they see a small table with granola bars on a plate. Next to the plate is a sign reading “FREE CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST.” Just past the table, PAUL and SANDY stand, smiling, ushering everyone to their seats, saying variations of “Welcome, please sit. Refreshing smile. Welcome. Warm.” in conversational tone.

Once everyone is seated, Paul and Sandy go to their seats between potted plants, facing the audience. In front of them is a large, brown, unmarked box.

Everything Paul and Sandy say through this section is spoken with the pleasant polish of professional conference speakers.

PAUL

Welcome, everyone. My name credential is Paul sits in front of you, and next to me female is Sandy fresh scent speaks nice.

SANDY

Welcome.

PAUL

We’re so happy to have you with us...did I say, have you? I meant, be here inside your thoughts.

SANDY *as if covering for Paul’s flub*

Fire! Crisis! (*Polite laugh*) Everything’s fine, though—am I wrong?

PAUL

I’d like to go around the friendly room and have each of you say your name—not out loud, of course.

SANDY

And if you don’t have one, or you forgot to bring it with you, an extra has been provided under your seat.

Under every seat is a three-by-five card with a random name written on it.

PAUL

Communication! That is our subject today serious. How do we harness a rope around the bull of language, launching into outer space and back to stand firmly over our fathers?

SANDY

Freedom. Power. Cadillac. What do these words mean?

PAUL

Are you as happy as you could be?

SANDY

What makes a provocative question?

PAUL
Nuance.

SANDY
Calibration.

PAUL
What do these words mean?

SANDY
What do any words mean, ever?

PAUL
This is a provocative statement. Can anyone tell me why?

SANDY
No, not anyone can. But you can. Shortly.

PAUL
Today, we will teach you the secret to words that work and phrases that do your bidding.
Language is dynamic; the world is dynamic: shifting sand over shifting sand.

SANDY
Pamphlet two, third bullet point: How to avoid lying by changing the subject.

PAUL
Pamphlet four, first bullet point: How to revise your intentions after a statement you made
has been criticized.

SANDY
Context is everything.

PAUL
Context is everything and therefore, also, nothing.

SANDY
Pam four, bull five: How to stop telling people what *you* think and start telling them what *they*
think.

PAUL
Taken together, these lessons outline the secret key that is persuasion.

SANDY
But how will we do this? Why isn't the future here yet? Who are these people promising us
things?

PAUL
Please save your questions until we teach you how to ask them.

SANDY

Pam three, bull seven: Sometimes the word that works best is silence.

PAUL

You may have noticed the mysterious box at our feet.

SANDY

Mysterious box. What's in the box? Is it a box of pamphlets?

PAUL

Pamphlets, cassette tapes, exercise books. Except that it's so much more than all of these. Appearing mysteriously at our doorstep to give our lives meaning, it contains transformative answers to intractable questions. Answers we want to chosen people share with you today.

Sandy reaches into the box.

SANDY

Have you noticed the change in the room?

She pulls out a cassette player and places it on the coffee table.

PAUL

Cassette tape one, side one:

He presses play and a blank tape plays silence.

Sandy and Paul listen intently for some time.

At one point, long into the silence, they both erupt with laughter as if to a joke.

When the section comes to its conclusion, Paul presses stop.

SANDY

I never get tired of hearing that.

PAUL

I learn something new every time.

SANDY

My favorite part is the food metaphor.

PAUL

Yes, me too. Some words are nourishing, some are just filler.

SANDY

Some words are spicy, like "spicy" and "anthrax."

PAUL

And that's something I just didn't pick up on the first time I heard it.

SANDY

No, me neither. The first time I heard it, I...

She seems distracted, perhaps a little distressed

My mind went in a completely other direction almost...automatically, I...

Her tone has gone completely introspective

I thought about how I just get so tired of feeling guilty all the time, like everywhere I go I stand accused of something and nobody will tell me what. And how I'm tired of being exhausted, of not being able to sleep, of always having to play catch-up with someone else's story, someone else's version of the facts. And when defending yourself only makes you look guilty, what's left? Either you submit or you play the game. And those are really just two ways of saying the same thing.

PAUL

Sandy?

SANDY

Yes?

PAUL

It's almost time for your speech. Are you ready?

SANDY

What? Yes. I'm ready. I am.

PAUL

Just try to remember what the pamphlets teach.

SANDY

I know what the pamphlets teach. I mean, I know their teachings.

PAUL

Hold onto the words. That's what's important. And don't let anyone change your subject.

SANDY

No. That's a conclusion I've made for sure. No one tells me what the subject is.

PAUL

Because the subject is you.

A recorded voiceover booms from speakers at either end of the truck.

VOICEOVER

The first exercise of today's session is called Speech Therapy, but of course, we mean something completely different by that. Our Speech Therapy is a modified public speaking program designed to enhance the speech-giver's overall effectiveness. And what do we mean by effectiveness?

Pause

The speaker is given two minutes to deliver a speech on any topic. The object of the speech is to persuade. When the speaker is finished, listeners give feedback on how effectively they were persuaded. Consider, for example, how likely it is that you'll half-remember something said during the speech and confuse it for one of your own thoughts.

But before giving feedback, read all of Pamphlet Three closely, and give special attention to the Rules for Productive Participation in Speech Therapy.

The recording ends.

Paul speaks while Sandy goes through a series of physical and mental preparations for the speech she is about to give. They go on for an oddly long time, shifting continually.

PAUL

Today's speaker is Sandy. She's been working on her speech for a while now, and you'll notice how that automatically gives all of us a very warm feeling toward her. We're already glad she's here to share her thoughts with us. But as soon as she starts speaking, we need to start thinking to ourselves "What smart thing am I going to say when she's done?" So please listen closely to the Rules for Productive Participation:

(Reading)

Rule one: Don't make value judgments. This is something we sometimes do without even realizing it. For instance, if you begin your comment with the words "I liked it when you..." you've already made a judgment of her and everyone else in the room.

Rule two: Don't be complicated. Sentences that require semi-colons or commas might impress your friends, but they're only going to make the speaker lose interest—not only in what you're saying, but in you as a person.

Rule three: Do not tell the speaker what she should change about her speech. Instead, tell her a story about an imaginary world in which her speech went differently and was differently received.

Please keep these rules in mind as you consider what comments to make.

SANDY

Okay. I'm ready.

PAUL

The floor is yours.

Paul steps back.

Sandy takes speech-giving position.

SANDY

Thank you, Paul. Distinguished guests, thank you for this chance to address you on the important topic to which I am about to something...*(checks notes)*...Does anyone know the

story of the Horse in the China Shop? It's a really great story: A horse walks into a china shop and the clerk says "Please, please. Come right in, sir. I've mistaken you for a judge." And the Horse says nothing, because a horse is a horse, of course, of course, and therefore cannot speak. And as the horse maneuvers through the shop, knocking over vases and plates with its fluttering tail and bulging body, the clerk rushes to pick up the pieces, thinking "Oh, no! This broken bowl must be an important pronouncement on the fate of some condemned man. And these shards of plate must be incriminating evidence of political wrongdoing right here in my shop!" And so he follows the horse, revering and denouncing the shattered remains of his livelihood. But the point of the story is: why was the horse there to begin with? What was it trying to buy, if anything, with its horse money? And where does it keep its horse money? And why?

PAUL

Thank you, Sandy. That was really something. We're going to open the conversation up to comments right now and, as it happens, I have a comment I would like to make: Sandy, I'd like you to imagine a world right now.

SANDY

Okay.

Sandy closes her eyes and imagines.

PAUL

It's a world where a woman much like yourself is giving a speech very similar to the one you just gave, except that in her speech, Sandy—and her name is also Sandy—in her speech, Sandy delves more into why the horse is important, specifically, why anyone listening should care about this horse. Do you see what I'm saying, Sandy? Do you see that world with me?

SANDY

I do, Paul.

PAUL

Great. Now, when you look around the room in that world, who else do you see? Is there someone like me there?

Sandy opens her eyes and looks around, sees Paul.

SANDY

Yes! Yes, there's someone just like you!

PAUL

Take a look at him closely, Sandy, because that man is also named Paul. Just like me. And something I know about him, in his alternate universe, is that he loves Sandy so much. So much. And he's afraid every day of losing her. And all he wants—all Paul wants from Sandy is an acknowledgment every now and then that she loves him too. A hug or a chocolate or really any signifier of affection. He's starving for that signifier. And I just thought...I just thought that that would be a good thing for you to keep in mind for your speech. Will you do that?

SANDY *hoping it's her*
Are you speaking to me or imaginary Sandy?

PAUL
I'm speaking to the woman in front of me: the one I can touch.

Paul reaches out and touches Sandy.

SANDY *flustered by his touch*
I'm sorry, I've momentarily forgotten my name.

PAUL
Sit down for a bit. Look under your chair.

Sandy sits down.

SANDY
What for?

PAUL
There's a spare name for you.

SANDY
Oh, right!
Sandy grabs the 3X5 card under her chair and reads it.
From now on, my name is "Jean Ann Douglass."

PAUL
"Jean Ann Douglass." That's very nice.

SANDY
And who are you now?

Paul sits and retrieves his 3X5 card.

PAUL
My name from now on is... "Baron von Flimflam."

SANDY
Ooohh: a Baron!

PAUL
Well, it's just a title. I don't think it really means anything.

SANDY *disappointed*
Oh.

PAUL

And that's all the time we have for listener comments. Thank you everyone.

Paul starts applauding the audience.

Sandy starts applauding.

Their applause continues as Paul speaks.

PAUL

I know what you're thinking: Why are these people applauding us for just sitting here? But the truth is, we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you. Not only because there'd be no one to hear us speak, but because we'd have nothing to say. The truth is that you are the essence of the things we are saying back to you while our associates are busy planting listening devices in your homes. Did I really just say that? Well then, I must not have meant it literally because if that were literally happening I wouldn't just come out and say it...right?

They stop clapping.

PAUL

Anyway, I forgot what I was just saying.

SANDY

Me too.

PAUL

Some of you might think you remember what I just said, but I'm sure whatever you remember is out of context and inaccurate—unless, of course, you happen to have a recording device on you. Though when you play it back, you'll probably just hear a lot of clapping.

SANDY

Oh, I almost forgot!

PAUL

What?

SANDY

As another token of our appreciation, we will now be adding juice boxes to the free continental breakfast—which will still be available on your way out, if you missed it on your way in.

PAUL

Right, yes! The juice boxes!

Paul fishes around inside the box, finds a juice box, and places it on the table next to the granola bars. He returns to his seat.

SANDY

Now, on to the next lesson.

Paul takes down the Speech Therapy sign and replaces it with a sign that says Role Playing.

SANDY

Now that we've learned the basics of effective communication, it's time to put it into practice with a little role-playing exercise. Consider this common scenario: Your boss calls you into his office to ask you questions about your personal life. You need to give him the right answers or he might turn you over to the secret police. You hadn't been warned about this meeting and you have no idea what he's going to ask, and you're very nervous. If he sees that you're nervous, he'll fire you. If you successfully hide your nervousness and get all the answers right, he'll send you home early with a full day's pay.

In this exercise, I will be playing the boss and The Baron will be my employee.

Sandy puts on a false mustache.

Paul puts on a wig.

They turn their chairs to face each other and both read from pamphlets.

SANDY

Sandy, thank you for seeing me.

PAUL

Of course of course of course of course of course.

SANDY

This is nothing out of the ordinary. I just need to ask you a few routine questions.

PAUL

Anything I can do to assist the company gives me great delight.

SANDY

Could you tell me where you were on the evening of [date of show]?

PAUL

My husband Paul and I were helping his brother move apartments. We rented a truck for that purpose.

SANDY

And your husband's brother, what furniture did he need help moving?

PAUL

Chairs, two potted plants, a box of loose things.

SANDY

Nothing else?

PAUL

I can have a complete list drawn up for you.

SANDY
Do that, please.

They both flip to the next page in the pamphlet.

SANDY
And your husband, what would you say his temperament is?

PAUL
Quiet. Orderly. Patriotic.

SANDY
And if he were to receive a mysterious box at your doorstep, what do you suppose he would do with it?

PAUL
Smash it to bits, then turn it in to the police for questioning.

SANDY
And what would you do if you found the box first?

PAUL
Turn it over to my husband for smashing.

SANDY
But not questioning?

PAUL
My husband would never presume to question a smashed box.

SANDY
Do you enjoy your work here?

PAUL
With all my might.

SANDY
And you enjoy, specifically, working under me?

Paul crosses his legs, gives Sandy an alluring look.

PAUL
I do.

SANDY
And why is that?

PAUL

It would be inappropriate for me to say exactly, but I have asked my husband to grow a mustache like yours.

SANDY

That is very understandable. Thank you for your discretion. You may go home early with a full day's pay.

They remove the mustache and wig, then turn their chairs to face forward again.

PAUL

That felt good. I think Sandy did well.

SANDY

Notice how she avoided being fired and won the coveted early leave by using persuasive speech.

PAUL

That's exactly the kind of success story we want for each of you.

SANDY

I think we can all learn from her strategic use of the word mustache.

PAUL

Other words that worked for Sandy include Smash, Husband, Presume, and Police.

SANDY

Try using each of those words in a sentence.

Pause

Did it work as well for you as it did for Sandy?

PAUL

It shouldn't have, and I'll tell you why. Sandy tailored her language specifically to her boss, using information she knew about him, such as his admiration for the police, and things she's heard him say in the past, such as "mustache."

SANDY

She gathered this information in a process we call Getting to Know Your Audience and then Becoming Them.

PAUL

Now let's take a look at that same conversation again. This time, pay special attention not just to what they say to each other, but what they don't say.

They put their costumes back on and turn their chairs to face each other again.

SANDY

Sandy, thank you for seeing me.

PAUL

Of course of course of course of course of course.

SANDY

This is nothing out of the ordinary. I just need to ask you a few routine questions.

PAUL

Anything I can do to assist the company gives me great delight.

SANDY

The truth is, I've asked very little from life and even that was denied me. A nearby field, a ray of sunlight, a little bit of calm along with a bit of bread, not to feel oppressed by the knowledge that I exist, not to demand anything from others, and not to have others demand anything from me. This was denied me, like spare change we might deny a beggar not because we're mean-hearted but because we don't feel like unbuttoning our coat.

Beat

Could you tell me where you were on the evening of [date of show]?

PAUL

My husband Paul and I were hosting an illegal language seminar. We rented a truck for that purpose.

SANDY

And your husband's brother, what furniture did he need help moving?

PAUL

Chairs, two potted plants, a box of drug paraphernalia, deviant literature, and a few other things I was asked to keep secret.

SANDY

Nothing else?

PAUL

I can have a complete list drawn up for you.

SANDY

Do that, please.

They both flip to the next page in the pamphlet.

SANDY

And your husband, what would you say his temperament is?

PAUL

Quiet. Orderly. Patriotic.

SANDY

And if he were to receive a mysterious box at your doorstep, what do you suppose he would do with it?

PAUL

Smash it to bits, then hide them for safekeeping around the apartment.

SANDY

And what would you do if you found the box first?

PAUL

Keep it, study it, disseminate its contents.

SANDY

But not smash it?

PAUL

I'm giving you the opportunity to pretend I'm telling the truth. Am I not communicating effectively enough?

Paul crosses his legs.

Sandy takes a small bowl of chocolates out of the box and offers them to Sandy.

SANDY

Mustache?

PAUL

With all my might.

Paul leans forward to take a chocolate and eat it.

SANDY

And you enjoy, specifically, working under me?

PAUL

I do.

SANDY

And why is that?

PAUL

Because you're like an open book with blank pages I can write my thoughts in.

SANDY

That is very understandable. Please come back tomorrow for more chocolate.

They turn their chairs to face forward, but keep their wig and mustache on; they are still "in character."

PAUL

I think I did really well there.

SANDY

You did alright, but don't over-sell yourself.

PAUL

I had you eating out of the palm of my hand the whole time.

SANDY

You were afraid of me, admit it.

PAUL

Who isn't afraid of an idiot with power? You're like a monkey holding a grenade.

SANDY

You think you pulled one over on me, but what you don't know is we like to keep a little subversive element around to reinforce the vigilance of good citizens. We'll stomp you out when we feel like it.

PAUL

What you don't know is what you don't know, and I'm not about to tell you.

SANDY *a little vulnerable*

But you did mean what you said, though, right? About my mustache?

PAUL

It's compelling. I'll admit that much.

SANDY

It's your husband that's the problem. I can have him removed for the both of us.

PAUL

But what if I love him and can never express it no matter how intensely I feel it because all the words for love have been turned into poker chips by the likes of you?

SANDY

It sounds like your husband is quite a dilemma.

They kiss passionately enough that the mustache and wig are removed by the time they stop kissing.

SANDY

Paul.

PAUL

Yes Sandy?

She wants to tell him she loves him, but can't.

*She reaches into the box, pulls out a tape player and presses play. It plays fax machine sounds.
Paul presses stop.
They face forward.*

VOICEOVER

Now that we've seen persuasive speech in action, let's take a look at how it's made. This section is called Getting to Know Your Audience, and Then Becoming Them. You're about to hear a series of short speeches. Each one represents a potential "audience", or person you wish to persuade. Listen closely to the things they say and don't say. Then make a note of the word or phrase you hear that best represents the speaker.

Paul and Sandy pass out pencils and three by five cards to the audience.

VOICEOVER

For this exercise, you'll want to have a pencil and a few three by five cards ready to make your notes. When the speeches are finished, we'll show you how to turn these simple notes into "words that work."

SANDY

This is where the magic sausage is made happens momentous. You've arrived at the trumpets and two beams of light are talking to you. What are they saying? What are they telling you? What is the difference between the two?

PAUL

What is the difference between the two people? What is the difference between what they're saying and what they're saying? What are these strange psychological objects called words?

SANDY

Food for thought. Keep all of that with you while we present a series of characters you may wish to persuade. What words do they use? What words do they hear? Paul, you first.

PAUL *playing a character*

Hi, my name is Paul except different. I would describe myself as older than I am and more intelligent. People treat me differently than I see myself and I have a terrible allergy to bees.

SANDY

Did you catch it? Because he's already told us three words that work on him, except two of them are words he chose not to use.

PAUL

You're next.

SANDY

Hi, I'm not telling my name. It's because I don't know or trust any of you and some of you scare me a little. I have two cats.

PAUL

I have just the phrase for her, but we'll see later if any of you found others.

SANDY

Paul?

PAUL

No, no. My name is Eric John Meyer. I use all three names to seem more distinctive. My insecurity is deep and I'm losing my hair.

SANDY

My name is Baron von Flimflam. I took that name when I came to this country so that no one would know I'm one sixteenth Japanese. Have you ever noticed how the number one looks like a doorman who won't let you into a building? But what does he know about my life? I don't even want to go inside your building. I'm on my way to the park.

PAUL

Is everyone writing? Because Baron von Flimflam is ready to buy whatever you're selling.

SANDY

We're almost through. Just two more.

PAUL

One of them is this one. The person I'm being right now. I have a lot of self-assurance and a full head of hair.

SANDY

And I am the last person you will ever speak to. What would you like to say to me? Have you decided what to say to me? Or are you just going to let it come to you in the moment like a turd that rolls off your tongue?

PAUL

Ok, pencils down and please pass your cards and pencils to me.

Paul and Sandy collect the cards.

They stand around examining them.

SANDY

These are all really great, everyone.

PAUL

Yes, excellent work. All around.

SANDY

Bravo.

They place them in the box.

They clap for the audience again.

Sandy talks as they keep applauding.

SANDY

We're clapping for you now because it's the end of the show and almost time to leave. In a few days, you may notice new and different kinds of thoughts occurring to you. There is no need to be alarmed by them. Those thoughts are yours to keep and share with friends. About a week from then, all of your thoughts will be different and this will seem perfectly natural to you. You'll start to feel that your current name no longer suits you and that you need a new one. When you reach this point, you'll discover a mysterious box left for you somewhere. It may contain pamphlets and cassette tapes, or surveillance equipment, or instructions on how to build a bomb. That, too, will be natural. Take the box in, turn it over in your mind. From there, you'll know what to do.

They stop clapping.

END OF PLAY