

MINORITY REPORTS

Nina Raine and Katori Hall on the seen but not heard.

BY JOHN LAHR

“Silence is the unbearable repartee,” G. K. Chesterton once observed. In Nina Raine’s subtle and scintillating new play, “Tribes” (elegantly directed by David Cromer, at the Barrow Street Theatre), silence is the shadow that lends brilliance to the hubbub around the bohemian, intellectual upper-middle-class British family dining table where the play is set. In fact, silence is given a place at the long pine table, in the person of the twenty-something Billy (Russell Harvard), the youngest member of the family, who is deaf and who seems to bend in whichever direction the blustery household weather blows. Words fly and splatter around him like paintballs, spilling their gaudy, funny mess on everyone. “Abusive love’s all that’s on offer here,” the rivalrous firstborn son, Daniel (Will Brill), says of his parents. Daniel has a good line in aggressive affection himself. “When are you going to realize perfect pitch doesn’t mean you’ve got a personality?” he tells his sister, Ruth (Gayle Rankin), an opera singer in embryo.

In the family’s exchanges, argument substitutes for intimacy, and liveliness spackles over the emptiness of egotism. (As the story unfolds, the play’s first words—“These nuts are *all* rotten”—hover suggestively over the proceedings like a coded indictment.) Words are a kind of raiment with which each character broadcasts a sense of his own uniqueness. Even Billy’s upbringing—an expert lip-reader, Billy was never taught to sign; instead, he struggles to speak words he can’t properly hear—is a family choice, a sort of imperialism, designed to hold him to the family’s élitist standards. “We didn’t want to make you part of a minority world,” Christopher (Jeff Perry), the prolix patriarch, explains. Christopher deplores the notion of identifying personality by disability. “Billy’s not deaf,” he declares. (He refers to the deaf as “the fucking Muslims of the handicapped world.”)

Christopher is a retired academic, now

a writer of books. “I do words . . . that’s what I do,” he says. “Join in! Have an argument!” is his mantra; it’s a game that he, with his professorial talents, is bound to win. Bustling in and out of the room in his stocking feet, his eyes bulging and his pot belly poking out of his rumpled brown T-shirt, he is a dishevelled poltergeist of fulmination and cogitation. “You *cannot* call the Iron Curtain the ‘Ferrous Veil!’” he badgers his wife, the long-suffering Beth (Mare Winningham), insisting on giving her notes on the first chapter of a detective novel she’s writing. He adds, “There is nothing naffer than titivating a cliché.” As Perry plays him, Christopher is a wonderful, spluttering spinning top, at once foolish, hilarious, and monstrous. Eating Beth’s pasta with smoked roe, for instance, is judged “like being fucked in the face by a crab,” and Daniel’s ex-girlfriend is recalled as having “all the charisma of a *bus* shelter.” When his mischievous aperçus don’t get sufficient attention, Christopher dons his headphones in the midst of the din and works on his conversational Chinese, whose singsong is loudly broadcast from his laptop—a noise that Daniel tries to block by blasting “Bohemian Rhapsody” from the kitchen radio.

In all this brouhaha, only occasionally does anybody remember that Billy is at the end of the table, trying to listen and saying nothing. Raine shrewdly builds this dense canopy of sound around Billy’s silence in order to make the narrative of his oppressive solitude and his subsequent liberation from it—when Billy meets and falls for Sylvia (the compelling Susan Pourfar), a strong, no-nonsense woman who is losing her hearing and who does use sign language—more than just a problem play about the hearing-impaired. “Tribes” is as much about the tyranny of language as it is about the misery of not being able to hear it. By shifting between speaking and signing—supertitles decode the semaphore of the deaf characters and sometimes even spell

out the unspoken feelings of the all-too-vocal ones—the play demonstrates that speech can be as isolating as silence, and, conversely, that the self can be communicated without words as easily as it can be derailed by them.

As Billy, Russell Harvard, who is deaf, brings an extraordinary restrained sweetness to the role. He's handsome, alert, and sensitive, and, without any mawkishness, he manages to convey the bravery both of Billy's resilience and of his rebellion. "It was li . . . so-thi 'witched on . . . in my mind," he says, of love at first sight, to his mother, who answers, "Billy. Consonants." In a superb tragicomic set piece, Billy brings Sylvia home, and Christopher, the bullyboy, challenges her to convey with gesture what he can get across with speech: "How do you say . . . 'Her mind's . . . like a . . . plastic bag . . . flapping . . . out a car window?'" he asks, speaking slowly and clearly, so that there can be no mistaking him. Sylvia expressively jumps this hurdle. Christopher's donnish allegiance to language—"How can you feel a feeling unless you have the word for it?"—is discreetly subverted by Sylvia. "You don't have to pin the emotion down to a word," she says, signing the words for "jealous," "angry," "upset," and "insecure" in such an emotive way that Ruth exclaims, "So it's like music. Non-verbal, but it gives you feelings."

Raine's play has the same startling effect: it forces the hearing audience to understand the poignance of the struggle to transcend silence *and* the punishing limitations of speech.

During an argument with his family, Billy rips out his hearing aids, leaving the others gesturing vehemently in his direction in a dumb show of bewilderment. Through his love for Sylvia, Billy finds a new tribe—the deaf community. Now that he feels known and seen, he no lon-

ger has to sleep with a light on. When he confronts the family, he refuses to try to speak; he'll only sign, to Sylvia, who translates for them. "He's spent his life trying to understand you and now he thinks you should try to understand him," she says. The triangulation brings a new level of drama to the stage. Billy may not feel part of his family, but he has inherited its talent for invective. "We're our



Pourfar, Perry, Winningham, and Harvard, in "Tribes."

own . . . totally bonkers . . . hermetically sealed . . . community," he says. "No hawkers, no traders, and no one who doesn't know who Dvořák is." In this provocative and original play, Raine keeps the ideas and the ironies coming until the final thrilling, paradoxical image.

Raine's gift is for penetration; she makes her story mean more than the social problem it dramatizes. By contrast, Katori Hall's gift is for slick presentation, which, in the case of "Hurt Village" (di-

rected by Patricia McGregor, at the Signature), makes her sprawling story mean less than the social problem it takes on. "Hurt Village" is about the degradation of growing up in a notorious Memphis slum. In this stew of street clichés, the indigestible gristle of poverty is tenderized with juicy slang, a dollop of violence, a sprinkling of drugs, and a slug of rap. The evening is memorable mostly for the searing arias delivered by Big Mama (the electrifying Tonya Pinkins), a bone-tired matriarch who works nights at a hospital, only to discover that the little extra money she makes disqualifies her from being relocated to a better housing project. A big woman with a roiling internal engine, Pinkins inhabits a circle of fury and desperation that goes well beyond the parameters of the script; in a scene in which Big Mama addresses an offstage bureaucrat, Pinkins's characterization is so vivid and heartbreaking that it seems to be from another play:

Ma'am . . . ma'am . . . ma'am. LISTEN!!!! I don't mean to raise my voice, but ain't no other office to go to but this one. . . . Y'all say y'all don't want a niggah on welfare they get off it, they get them a lil' funky-ass job cleanin' up piss and shit and vomit and other unmentionables and you wanna drop 'em out of the system faster than a hoe droppin' panties on the Auction St. corner.

When Big Mama fell to her knees in supplication, I had to look away; the humiliation of poverty needed no further elucidation. Among the hardworking cast, Marsha Stephanie Blake's mouthy, illiterate Crank, and Joaquina Kalukango as Cookie, her precocious thirteen-year-old daughter, an aspiring rapper, bring their own appealing light to Hall's stick figures. ♦

BLOCK THAT METAPHOR!

From Yahoo! Sports.

Throwing the rulebook out the window is a slippery slope and it opens the door on a potential Pandora's box of sticky situations.