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Pieces curated by ASF Artistic Director Rick Dildine and actress Adrian Kiser. Additional support provided by Cameron Williams.

# SPEAK THE SPEECH!

## ABOUT

Words matter. Language and stories have been used to empower, empathize, and embolden communities. Students exposed to theatre are often more confident and creative and develop a life-long appreciation of language.

Inspired by William Shakespeare's directive to "speak the speech" and by American playwrights today, we invite your students to bring these famous speeches to life and feel the power of language in their own voices.

## USING THIS GUIDE

Below you will find monologue excerpts from 14 plays. All of the playwrights featured in Speak the Speech are notable figures of American theatre, with the exception of Shakespeare.

The curators of the project have ensured that the pieces are appropriate for students. There is no cursing, and each selection is accompanied by a brief description of the scene and character. There is also information on how to purchase the full script for teaching purposes and further classroom study.

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## A RAISIN IN THE SUN

By Lorraine Hansberry

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

Around the 1950s in the Southside of Chicago, three generations of Youngers find themselves packed into a tiny apartment in the ghetto. With the passing of the family's patriarch comes a substantial insurance check. In this speech, Beneatha Younger, daughter of the deceased, laments about her dream of being a doctor after receiving terrible news about the money.

### BENEATHA:

Me? ...Me? ...Me, I'm nothing ...Me. When I was very small... we used to take our sleds out in the winter time and the only hills we had were some ice covered stone steps down the street. And we used to fill them with snow and make them smooth and slide down them all day... and it was very dangerous, you know... far too steep... and sure enough one day a kid named Rufus came down too fast and hit the sidewalk... and his face just split open right there in front of us... And I remember standing there looking at his bloody open face thinking that was the end of Rufus. But the ambulance came and they took him to the hospital and they fixed the broken bones and they sewed it all up... and the next time I saw Rufus he just had a little line down the middle of his face... I never got over that...

That that was what one person could do for another; fix him up—sew up the problem, make him alright again. That was the most marvelous thing in the world... I wanted to do that. I always thought it was the one concrete thing in the world that a human being could do. Fix up the sick, you know—and make them whole again. This was truly being God.

[Purchase the full script here.](#)

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## CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

By Tennessee Williams

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

As proprietors of the largest estate in the Delta, the Pollitt family epitomizes high-class Southern society. However, on the night of Big Daddy Pollitt's sixty-fifth birthday, the family finds themselves facing a breakdown. This American classic is a tale of legacy, deception, and unrequited love. In this speech, Maggie confronts her husband, Brick Pollitt, about his indifference toward her and his feelings for his late friend.

### MAGGIE:

What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof?—I wish I knew... Just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can...

Later tonight I'm going to tell you I love you an' maybe by that time you'll be drunk enough to believe me... Big Daddy is dying of cancer...

What were you thinking of when I caught you looking at me like that? Were you thinking of Skipper?

*(Silence from Brick)*

Laws of silence don't work...When something is festering in your memory or your imagination, laws of silence don't work, it's like shutting a door and locking it on a house on fire in hope of forgetting that the house is burning. But not facing a fire doesn't put it out. Silence about a thing just magnifies it. It grows and festers in silence, becomes malignant.

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## DEATH OF A SALESMAN

By Arthur Miller

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

For the Loman family, the road to success is paved with grave disappointment. Willy Loman has worked a dead-end job for over thirty years and the exhaustion has taken its toll. This play is a tragic illustration of the “American Dream.” In this speech, Willy’s wife, Linda, defends her husband’s life’s work to their son Biff.

### LINDA:

I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person. You called him crazy, no, a lot of people think he's lost his balance. But you don't have to be very smart to know what his trouble is. The man is exhausted. A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man. He works for a company thirty six years this March, opens up unheard-of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary away. Are they any worse than his sons? When he brought them business, when he was young, they were glad to see him. But now his old friends, the old buyers that loved him so and always found some order to hand him in a pinch, they're all dead, retired. He used to be able to make six, seven calls a day in Boston. Now he takes his valises out of the car and puts them back and takes them out again and he's exhausted. Instead of walking he talks now. He drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there no one knows him anymore, no one welcomes him. And what goes through a man's mind, driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent? Why shouldn't he talk to himself? Why? When he has to go to Charley and borrow fifty dollars a week and pretend to me that it's his pay? How long can that go on? How long? You see what I'm sitting here and waiting for? And you tell me he has no character? The man who never worked a day but for your benefit? When does he get the medal for that?

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## GEE'S BEND

By Elyzabeth Gregory Wilder

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

The ladies of Gee's Bend, Alabama, have passed on the tradition of the Freedom Quilting Bee for generations, a source of expression and preservation of history. Wilder's play honors these women whose work is recognized around the world as staples of modern art. In this speech, Sadie prays to God about her newfound independence from her husband's authority.

### SADIE:

They cut off that ferry, make it real hard for some folks. But it ain't so bad. People leave us alone. Gee's Bend a peaceful place. We starting the Freedom Quilting Bee. Gonna be sewing for Bloomingdale's Department Store up in New York. The Lord give us our quilts and the quilts give us our freedom. Used to be the womens didn't have too much say so, the mens has the say so, so we had to wait on the mens. And now we trying to stretch out and leave the mens. Because they won't put up. And we just have to try and ask the Lord to help us. We making our own money now. Don't need to be answering the mens.

For the first time. My life feel like it my own again, Lord. Like I live for me.

[Purchase the full script here.](#)

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## GLEAM

Adapted By Bonnie Lee Moss Rattner  
From Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

This piece brings Zora Neale Hurston's famously tragic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to life on stage. The story follows Janie Crawford, a strong-willed Black woman who goes on trial for what some would call the unthinkable. Back in Eatonville, she confides in a friend, Phoebe, about her love affairs. In this speech, Phoebe addresses the audience in what would become the retelling of Janie's story.

### PHOEBE:

It is so easy to be hopeful in the day time when you can see the things you wish on. But it was night, it stayed night. Night was striding across nothingness with the whole round world in his hands. The monster Lake Okeechobee was awake now and was rolling in his bed. Rolling and complaining like a peevish world on a grumble. They sat in company with others in other shanties, their eyes staring against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure they puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes, their eyes were watching God.

[Purchase the book here.](#)

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## HENRY V

By William Shakespeare

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

After his father's untimely death, a rogue young prince is duly crowned King Henry the Fifth. This new role comes with immense responsibility during a time of great tension and unrest – the 15th-century battle for England and France's unification. In this speech, the chorus invites us to imagine the time as it really was... Creating for the audience a suspension of disbelief.

### CHORUS:

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend  
 The brightest heaven of invention,  
 A kingdom for a stage, princes to act  
 And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!  
 Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,  
 Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,  
 Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire  
 Crouch for employment. But pardon, and gentles all,  
 The flat unraised spirits that have dared  
 On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
 So great an object: can this cockpit hold  
 The vasty fields of France? or may we cram  
 Within this wooden O the very casques  
 That did affright the air at Agincourt?  
 O, pardon! since a crooked figure may  
 Attest in little place a million;  
 And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,  
 On your imaginary forces work.  
 Suppose within the girdle of these walls  
 Are now confined two mighty monarchies,  
 Whose high upreared and abutting fronts  
 The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:  
 Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;  
 Into a thousand parts divide on man,  
 And make imaginary puissance;  
 Think when we talk of horses, that you see them  
 Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;  
 For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,  
 Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,  
 Turning the accomplishment of many years  
 Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,  
 Admit me Chorus to this history;  
 Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,  
 Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.

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## I AND YOU

By Lauren Gunderson

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

This poignant and shocking piece follows Caroline, a headstrong seventeen-year-old with a failing liver, and Anthony, a popular “nice guy,” who have been paired by their English teacher to work on a project. As they cram for a Walt Whitman presentation about interconnectivity, we find out how fundamentally connected total strangers can be. In this speech, Anthony shares his passion for music in an effort to get Caroline to open up.

### ANTHONY:

Ok. So we have a lot of options. We could go Bill Evans, we could go Miles Davis. Do you like Coltrane? I love Coltrane. Coltrane is the king—ok, this is great. I haven’t met anyone at school who gets it like I do.

Jazz is the heartbeat. Of the universe. True jazz is the actual way the world—I mean, it’s the chaos—the order out of chaos. The music form of—I dunno—like—giddy. Perfect. Math.

Saxophone is an instrument that is flexible and sonorous and textured and it carries the human range and it’s made for jazz and jazz is the essence of our creativity—as a species—it’s a perfect—syncopated and improvised perfection in this life. I JUST LIKE JAZZ. It is not about girls. I do not get girls. They get all weird, and then they get mad, and then I’m supposed to know what they want and I really don’t, so I try to avoid the whole thing because they seem to be a lot of stupid work for no real purpose.

*(Anthony plays song on record player)*

It’s called “A Love Supreme.” It’s the best thing Coltrane ever did. It’s his version of...prayer, I think. There’s four parts all recorded in one day, in one sitting, and the parts have these great names, this one is “Acknowledgement,” and “Pursuance” is the third one, which is cool because they all make up this journey, like he’s wandering, like he’s trying to find something, you know?

I think, like...peace. What do you hear? In the music, what do you hear? Or see—what do you see when you close your eyes—close your eyes.

[Purchase the full script here.](#)

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## JITNEY

By August Wilson

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

In the 1970s, when White cabbies refused to oblige passengers in Black neighborhoods, there was the Jitney service – an unofficial taxicab company owned and operated by hardworking African American men. Wilson’s play reveals the tale of a lost son and his not-so-forgiving father. In this speech, Booster eulogizes his father in the Jitney station he now owns.

### BOOSTER:

I never knew him too much, you know. I never got to know him like you all did. I can’t say nothing wrong by him. He took care of me when I was young. He ain’t run the streets and fuss and fight with my mama. The only thing I ever knew him to do was work hard. It didn’t matter to me too much at the time cause I couldn’t see it like I see it now. He had his ways. I guess everybody do. The only thing I feel sorry about... is he ain’t got out of life what he put in. He deserved better than what life gave him. I can’t help thinking that. But you right... I’m proud of my old man. I’m proud of him.

*(The phone rings.)*

And I’m proud to be Becker’s boy.

*(He stops and catches himself.)*

I didn’t come here to preach no sermon.

*(He starts toward the door. He stops and turns around. The phone continues to ring. He crosses to it and picks up the receiver.)*

*(into phone)* Car service.

**[Purchase the full script here.](#)**

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## MANAHATTA

By Mary Kathryn Nagle

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

The epicenter of the U.S. economy was once the Native American island of Manahatta. This piece follows Jane Snake, a mathematician turned Wall Street executive. In this speech, just as Jane and her sister, Deborah, hear the news of losing the family home to foreclosure, their mother, Bobbie, reminds them of their heritage and the strength of their Lenape ancestors.

### BOBBIE:

We're Lenape. We're never homeless.

This was all water, you know. Whole earth was water. But then there was a turtle, and this turtle came up outta the water and raised its back up high. And the water ran off. And there, where the earth was dry, there grew a tree. Right in the middle of the turtle's back. The root of this tree sent out a sprout, and there grew a man, the first man. This man was alone, and woulda been alone forever, but the tree bent over backward 'til its top touched the earth, and out came another sprout. From that sprout grew a woman. We all come from this man and woman. We're all related.

*(Bobbie takes off the wampum necklace around her neck.)*

This is wampum. Someone in your family carried this necklace all the way from the helape chen kwaelas to here, where we are now, in Oklahoma. So they can try. But they'll never really take our home.

Every time they make us leave, like the turtle, we carry our home with us.

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## OUR TOWN

By Thornton Wilder

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

This American classic is one of Wilder's most frequently performed plays. Grover's Corners, a fictional town in early 1900s America, is a seemingly inconsequential place. The play is a cautionary tale for all people in all towns, communities – places. In this speech, Emily has asked to leave her grave to relive her twelfth birthday.

### EMILY:

I can't bear it. They're so young and beautiful. Why did they ever have to get old? Mama, I'm here. I'm grown up. I love you all, everything. I can't look at everything hard enough.

*(pause, talking to her mother who does not hear her. She speaks with mounting urgency)*

Oh, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. Wally's dead, too. Mama, his appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it—don't you remember? But, just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another.

*(pause, looking desperate because she has received no answer. She speaks in a loud voice, forcing herself to not look at her mother)*

I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another.

*(she breaks down sobbing, she looks around)*

I didn't realize. All that was going on in life and we never noticed. Take me back—up the hill—to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Goodbye, Goodbye, world. Goodbye, Grover's Corners... Mama and Papa. Goodbye to clocks ticking... And Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths... And sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.

*(she asks abruptly through her tears)*

Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? —every, every minute? *(she sighs)* I'm ready to go back. I should have listened to you. That's all human beings are! Just blind people.

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## PICTURE OF A TREE

By Christina Quintana (CQ)

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

This piece was presented in partnership with ASF's [22 Homes Project](#)—a collaboration between Southern playwrights and actors across the country. The monologue is by Peter—a Vietnamese-American guy in his late twenties. It's springtime – May 2020. This is Peter's first socially distanced hang out in his New York City neighborhood park since the shelter-in-place order ended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### PETER:

You know how folks can change their Zoom backgrounds? A while back, I sat in virtual space, all Brady Bunch style—like we do now—in a conference of close to 60 people. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a guy shifted his background to an image of one of those massive live oaks in the middle of City Park draped in Spanish moss, with its arms outstretched toward the sky, and I'm not sure why, but it got me kind of choked up. Just a tree. Not even a tree. A picture of a tree. In a small square at the corner of my laptop screen. 'Cause that's where I'm from.

Where I'm from Bánh mì is a Vietnamese po'boy, and the trees are just like that, and I always said I'd go back for good, but I never have. When is "for good," anyway? What does that even mean? When they ship my remains into an above-ground-plot the good-old New Orleans way? The Times said they might dig temporary trenches with ten caskets in a line in New York's remote parks to bury virus victims. Remember that?

I live across from the park here. It's clearly not remote. Smack-dab in the middle of apartment buildings on all four sides. The hospital is five blocks away and the sirens wail on the regular. But did you notice the magnolia trees are in full bloom right now? Their pink and white waxy flowers exploding pockets of life.

And me. I'm like a cat, full of longing at my windowsill, staring into the magnolia trees. Once a week, I wake up before the rest of the neighborhood. I step outside – mask on – and I just take 'em in. They're just as beautiful here as they are back home. Sometimes I imagine that's the first thing Bà and Ông Nội saw when they arrived in Versailles that Spring of 1980. Or maybe they just saw a row of palmettos, or a plain, flat suburban street. When was the first time they saw a live oak tree? I remember mine. That field trip to NOMA—New Orleans Museum of Art—when Kassie Broussard and I snuck away while everyone else wandered the Sculpture Garden during lunch... we had a good time. I think I told her I loved her that day – right in front of one of those epic beauties. I bet there are a thousand couples who have made out behind that tree, and a thousand more to come. It's so nice to be outside, but—they don't have live oaks here. Nowhere else. Not that I know of—not like that.

[Watch a performance of the monologue here.](#)

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## PIPELINE

By Dominique Morisseau

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

Nya Joseph, a teacher in the inner city, contends with desperate rage as her son Omari faces expulsion from his private boarding school due to an altercation with one of his teachers. This piece exposes the cracks in our educational system and those who fall prey to slipping through them. In this speech, Nya delivers a stirring sermon that reveals the truth about race in education and the pipeline from the classroom to prison.

### NYA:

I almost lost it. I almost broke down and stayed somewhere in the between. Nervous breakdown is what most folks call it. Doctors call it panic disorder. I call it my moment of revelation.

All my son's life, I thought there was space for him. A little opportunity and education he'd be complete. But, members of the board, I'm here to tell you that I miscalculated. Omari's actions aren't his bag alone. They're mine. All of ours. We didn't carve out enough space. He doesn't belong anywhere. There is no block. No school. No land he can travel without being under suspicion and doubt. No emotion he can carry without being silenced or disciplined. He needed more space to be. I want my son to belong. I want my son to have another chance. Be born again with a slate clean of the baggage.

Our baggage. MY baggage.

Sometimes I look into his face and I get stuck staring. As if I can see what he will become and the longer I look, the longer his life will be. I want him to find space for his anger. Where it isn't quelled, but put to good use. Where he isn't a product of bias or low expectation. I want him to know love.

To feel love from all places. He is a man. Young. Still growing. Not fully anything.

He's not an animal. You're not an animal. No more than the rest of us are. And if so, we built the jungle. I disappoint you. So if you please, let me take him from here. Let me find him a different school. Reset and try again. But please don't... don't press charges. Don't lock away what hopes he can become. This rage is not sin. It is his inheritance.

And I am here before you to say that I take the blame. It is me. Send me away. Punish me. But my son???... Not my son. Not my son.

**[Purchase the full script here.](#)**

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## TOO HEAVY FOR YOUR POCKET

By Jiréh Breon Holder

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

This piece explores the crossroads between personal responsibility and sacrifices for a greater cause. The lives of the Carters and Brandons are changed considerably when Bowzie Brandon gives up his acceptance to Fisk University to join the Civil Rights Movement's legendary Freedom Rides. In this speech, Sally-Mae Carter reassures Bowzie as both couples prepare for the future after his return.

### SALLIE-MAE CARTER:

Dear Bowzie,  
Thank you for writing me.  
I know it's ill-timed that I'm writing you just as you're getting out.  
There are things you should know.  
Before you get back.  
I went to church the other night. Wednesday night bible study.  
They let Mother Cassandra Becton lead because she said she had a Word on her heart  
and the Lord had told her that it was for somebody in the building.  
Her Word brought tears to my eyes,  
but I do believe that Word is for you.  
She say when each of her boys came of age, she take 'em to Old Hickory Lake.  
Then say, "Pick a rock."  
And none of them know why, but she just tell 'em, "Pick a rock, boy."  
And they did.  
And she say, "That's your rock.  
You put it in your pocket and take it with you everywhere you go.  
Don't never let it loose.  
Never.  
And whenever you mad you stepped in a puddle  
or whenever something don't go your way,  
you grab that stone and thank God.  
Think of one thing to be grateful for.  
Because no matter if the whole world turn it's back on you  
and don't nothing go your way,  
there's always something to be grateful for."  
Bowzie, sometime it don't look like there's much at all to be grateful for, I know.  
I know,  
I know,  
I truly know.  
Sometime that rock get so heavy in your pocket  
'cause you can't figure out what to be grateful for.  
Sometime it get so heavy.  
It's so heavy.  
*(She raises to one knee.)*  
It's so heavy.  
*(She stands with great effort.)*  
But pick it up.  
*(She looks to her house.)*  
*(She looks to Bowzie's letters.)*  
Pick it up anyhow.  
Hold it 'til you figure it out.

**[Purchase the full script here.](#)**

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## WEDDING BAND

By Alice Childress

### SUMMARY OF SCENE

This tragedy is similar to that of the “Montagues and the Capulets” and those famously ill-fated lovers. Julia and Herman find themselves in a decade-long war of ignorance and time in Childress’s play about omnipresent racism in the 20th Century. In this speech, Julia confronts her neighbor about her desire to have what everyone deserves—peace and happiness.

### JULIA:

I—I’ve been keeping’ company with someone for a long time and... we’re not married. Ten years today, ten full, faithful years. You know it’s against the law for black and white to get married, so Gawd nor the tea leaves can help us. My friend is white and that’s why I try to stay to myself. Oh, the things I can tell you ’bout bein’ lonesome and shut-out. Always movin’, one place to another, lookin’ for some peace of mind. I moved out in the country...Pretty but quiet as the graveyard; so lonesome. One year I was in such a lovely colored neighborhood but they couldn’t be bothered with me, you know? I’ve lived near sportin’ people...they were very kindly but I’m not a sporty type person. Then I found this place hid way in the backyard so quiet, didn’t see another soul...And that’s why I thought y’all wanted to tear my house down this mornin’... ’cause you might-a heard ’bout me and Herman...and some people are...well, they judge, they can’t help judgin’ you. Mattie, the way you and your husband feel that’s the way it is with me’ n’ Herman. He loves me...We love each other, that’s all, we just love each other. And someday, as soon as we’re able, we have to leave here and go where it’s right... Where it’s legal for everybody to marry. That’s what we both want...to be man and wife—like you and your husband.

[Purchase the full script here.](#)