The Sound of a Voice
By David Henry Hwang

Characters: Woman – In a remote corner of a forest lives a Japanese woman in a small hut. With no neighbors nearer than two days’ journey, she is lonely. Many of the distant villagers think she is a witch and believes she turns her visitors into flowers that she keeps in a vase.
Man – Wearing a sword, the man seems to be a soldier but has no mission, no assignment.

Situation: Chinese American playwright David Henry Hwang has modeled a short play on Japanese ghost stories. As in those traditional tales, his play lets the audience decide whether the characters are humans or spirits. In this scene, the man happens upon the woman’s hut. He is puzzled by her solitary life, but he stays on as her guest.

[Evening. Woman warms tea for man. Man rubs himself, trying to get warm.]

Man: You are very kind to take me in.
Woman: This is a remote corner of the world. Guest are rare.
Man: The tea - you pour it well.
Woman: No.
Man: The sound it makes – in the cup – very soothing.
Woman: That is the tea’s skill, not mine. *She hands him the cup* May I get you something else? Rice, perhaps?
Man: No.
Woman: And some vegetables?
Man: No, thank you.
Woman: Fish? *Pause* It is at least two days walk to the nearest village. I saw no horse. You must be very hungry. You would do a great honor to dine with me. Guests are rare.
Man: Thank you.

(Woman gets up, leaves. Man gets up, walks to the kitchen door, listens. The room is sparsely furnished, except for one shelf on which stands a vase of brightly colored flowers. The flowers stand out in a sharp contrast to the starkness of the room. He crosses to the vase of flowers. He touches them. Quickly, he takes one of the flowers, hides it in his clothes. The woman re-enters. She carries a tray with food.)

Woman: Please. Eat. It will give me great pleasure.
Man: This – this is magnificent.
Woman: Eat.

Man: Thank you. *(He motions for the woman to join him)*

Woman: No, thank you.

Man: This is wonderful. The best I’ve tasted.

Woman: You are reckless in your flattery, sir. But anything you say, I will enjoy hearing. It’s not even the words. It’s the sound of a voice, the way it moves through the air.

Man: How long has it been since you last had a visitor?

*(Pause)*

Woman: I don’t know.

Man: Oh?

Woman: I lose track. Perhaps five months ago, perhaps ten years, perhaps yesterday. I don’t consider time when there’s no voice in the air. It’s pointless. Time begins with the entrance of a visitor, and exits with his exit.

Man: And in between? You don’t keep track of the days? You can’t help but notice –

Woman: Of course I notice.

Man: Oh.

Woman: I notice, but I don’t keep track. *(Pause)* May I bring out more?

Man: More? No. No. This was wonderful.

Woman: I have more.

Man: Really – the best I’ve had.

Woman: You must be tired. Did you sleep in the forest last night?

Man: Yes.

Woman: Or did you not sleep at all?

Man: I slept.

Woman: Where?

Man: By a waterfall. The sound of the water put me to sleep. It rumbled like the sounds of a city. You see, I can’t sleep in too much silence. It scares me. It makes me feel that I have no control over what is about to happen.
Woman: I feel the same way.

Man: But you live here – alone?

Woman: Yes.

Man: It’s so quiet here. How can you sleep?

Woman: Tonight, I’ll sleep. I’ll lie down in the next room, and hear your breathing through the wall, and fall asleep shamelessly. There will be no silence.

Man: You’re very kind to let me stay here.

Woman: This is yours. *(She unrolls a mat)*

Man: Did you make it yourself?

Woman: There is a place to wash outside.

Man: Thank you.

Woman: Good night.

Man: Good night. *(He starts to leave)*

Woman: May I know your name?

Man: No. I mean, I would rather not say. If I gave you a name it would only be made up. Why should I deceive you? You are too kind for that.

Woman: Then what should I call you? Perhaps – “Man Who Fears Silence”?

Man: How about, “Man Who Fears Women”?

Woman: That name is much too common.

Man: And you?

Woman: Hanako.

Man: That’s your name?

Woman: It’s what you may call me.

Man: Good night, Hanako. You are very kind.

Woman: You are very smart. Good night.

*Scene*