

# silence

Hoa Pham



Currency Press,  
Sydney



## **CHARACTERS**

BA, grandmother

MA, mother, her daughter

DAO, granddaughter, about 18

HUNGRY GHOSTS

HUNGRY GHOSTS are spirits of the dead that have not gone to nirvana because no-one is praying for them, or they have died in violent ways and their issues are not yet resolved.

In production, the HUNGRY GHOSTS can be represented by puppetry.

In the notation of the play, the plural HUNGRY GHOSTS speak as a voice-over audio. The singular HUNGRY GHOST is a manifestation on stage.

## **SETTING**

A couch and a kitchen table with chairs. An altar for the deceased with a picture of a man (the father of the family).

The prayers for the hungry ghosts recited in Scene One and Scene Five are from the Plum Village Chanting and Recitation book compiled by Thich Nhat Hanh and the monks and nuns of Plum Village.

SCENE ONE

BA is moving freely in front of the stage. Her hair is down and she is dressed in white.

*Ghost music plays.*

BA stares into the audience.

BA: You see what you see. I see what I see. Alone in this room I speak with the living and the dead.

*A bell sounds.*

*Audible whispering from HUNGRY GHOSTS.*

HUNGRY GHOSTS: [*in a mixture of Vietnamese and English, repeated*] *Cho ăn đi. Cúng đi. Làm qui đỏi đi.* [Feed us. Honour us. Become one of us.]

BA: Why did you abandon me, son? To your wife's care?

HUNGRY GHOSTS: You know, you know.

BA: What turned you bad? [*She scratches her rashes. She holds her head in her hands. Whispering*] I'm so ashamed. Of you. I'm so ashamed.

HUNGRY GHOSTS: Sacrifice. All you have sacrificed. You bear the family's shame. Join us. Come and join us.

BA: It would be so easy now to give up and go to sleep. Then no-one would need to look after me anymore.

*Silence.*

*A bell sounds.*

*DAO and MA's voices are heard praying.*

MA:

As if a fire is raging on all four sides,  
A hungry ghost ceaselessly suffers from heat  
Hungry ghost now to be born in a Pure Land  
Hear this gatha transmitted by the Buddha

*Bell.*

Hungry ghosts have acted unskillfully

DAO:

With craving, hatred and ignorance  
 Manifested in actions of body, speech and mind.  
 All hungry ghosts repent of this

*Bell.*

O hungry ghosts

DAO & MA: [*together*]

We make offerings of food  
 Multiplied in the ten directions  
 So that you can all receive them  
 By the merit of this offering  
 May we and all hungry ghosts  
 Be successful in the realisation of the path.

*Bell.*

*BA looks after them longingly then returns to the couch.*

*Blackout.*

*Lights up, a bright day, cheerful.*

*Suddenly, DAO is there, carrying a backpack and conical hat.*

BA: *Con đã về rồi!* [You've come home!]

DAO: *Chào Bà Nội. Bà có khỏe không?* [Greetings, grandmother. Are you in good health?]

BA: *Bà khỏe—Chỉ trừ mấy cái phong này. Ngứa quá.* [Except for these wretched rashes. They itch all the time.]

*She rolls up her cardigan sleeves and scratches.*

DAO: I have some presents for you.

BA: *Tụi Cộng sản có làm khó cho con không?* [The communists didn't give you a hard time?]

DAO: [*surprised*] Communists? No.

BA: *Bà con mình thì sao? Họ ghét người Việt Kiều như chúng mình lắm.* [What about our relatives? They hate us Viet Kieu.]

DAO: Not all Vietnamese hate the Viet Kieu. They like overseas Vietnamese. They bring money... And Auntie Chi was very grateful for what Mum gave her.

*BA pats a chair next to her and DAO sits down.*

BA: *Dì Chi ra sao? Dì có còn mở tiệm bán hàng không?* [So how is Auntie Chi? Does she still have her store?]

DAO *digs out a present from her backpack.*

DAO: From Auntie Chi.

BA: *Ba không cần quà của Dì đâu.* [I don't need presents from them.]  
[*She opens the present. It's a pair of dainty slippers.*] *Làm sao mà bà đi giày này? Với chân bà như thế này?* [How am I supposed to wear these? With my feet?]

DAO: They'll fit you.

BA: These are for ladies of leisure like your Auntie Chi. I've had to work hard standing on my feet. Is she well?

DAO: Yes. There's five of them living in the shop now. They have two mopeds and a DVD player so I guess they're doing well.

BA: Did you find a boyfriend over there?

DAO *laughs.*

DAO: No way. I got followed around by a couple of creeps but that's all.

BA: They were just being friendly. That's how your grandfather courted me, you know.

DAO: It's called stalking now, Ba.

BA: You have his eyes.

*She takes her hand.*

Your skin is so beautiful and smooth. *Dep qua.* [*She notices the conical hat next to the backpack.*] I used to wear one of those. What did you bring old peasant garb back for?

DAO *shrugs.*

When I was your age I was cycling fifty kilometres a day to sell goods.

DAO: Auntie Chi told me what you used to do.

*BA starts scratching.*

BA: My rashes are really bothering me. Did you get some of Auntie Chi's ointment for me?

DAO *sits back down next to BA and hands her the ointment.*

DAO: Smells of gum trees. Auntie Chi says it's the best stuff...

BA: Tiger balm oil.

DAO: Where's Mum?

BA: You've forgotten, haven't you?

DAO: Forgotten what?

BA: Your father's second death anniversary is tomorrow morning.

*MA comes in overladen with groceries. DAO goes and helps her.*

*MA carefully puts oranges and apples on a plate offering to the shrine.*

*She barely glances at the photo on the shrine, for her this is just one more duty.*

MA: I'm glad you're home.

DAO: I'm glad too. No-one cooks like you, Mum.

*They embrace.*

MA: Why didn't you tell me when you were arriving home? I would have picked you up from the airport...

DAO: Stacey came and picked me up, Mum.

MA: You never let me do anything for you. Always Stacey... You should ask family first.

*Silence.*

So how was Vietnam?

*MA starts setting out the table for three.*

*Then BA fetches an extra plate leaving one empty plate at the head of the table. This would be the father's place if he was alive.*

DAO: [*sarcastically*] Is someone else coming for dinner?

BA: It's for your father's spirit.

*DAO swears under her breath.*

MA: So how was Vietnam?

DAO: The countryside was beautiful. Hanoi and Saigon were so crowded, the traffic was incredible...

MA: Did anyone bother you while you were there?

*DAO looks at BA.*

DAO: No. It was pretty safe. Kids were running around at nine at night.

BA: My rashes are really itchy. The cat keeps meowing, too.

DAO: Cat? What cat?

*MA and BA ignore her.*

DAO gets MA a present from her backpack.

MA opens it. It's an áo dài (traditional Vietnamese dress).

MA: That's beautiful. But where would I wear it?

DAO: Next time you go singing, Ma.

MA scoffs.

MA: I haven't sung for a long time. I've been too busy working.

DAO: You should go back to Vietnam for a holiday.

MA: Then who would look after Ba Noi? I have too many things to do here.

MA serves dinner.

The family sits down and begins to eat.

DAO: You cooked *buon bo*! You're the best, Mum!

MA: How was the food in Vietnam?

DAO: It was so fresh and cheap! Amazing! But the chicken was really bony, though.

MA: I remember looking after chickens when we lived in the South after fleeing from the North. We had to look after them and the ducks while my mother was at work in the city. It was the best time of my childhood.

BA: I heard that your neighbours were supposed to give you money so you could buy food. Instead you ate grass. Do you remember that? You can't trust anybody.

DAO: You ate grass?

MA: We tried it one day. We were really hungry. But these are all stories from the past. We are really lucky now.

MA eats some food.

BA: The cats are meowing again. I'm so weak. They took gallons of blood from me. Like when I sold my blood to three different hospitals to make money. If there's a war, Dao, I've hidden money under the couch. You remember it if we get in trouble.

DAO stares at her. MA ignores her.

MA: So how did you find Auntie Chi?

DAO: We got along really well. She told me heaps about the family when you were living back in Vietnam.

MA: Tomorrow is your father's death anniversary. I need your help to cook tomorrow morning.