

S. E. A. I.

(island)

By

(john) B. R. A. Y.

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...* Seal Island, by John P. Bray, is a love story with elements of myth and mystery woven throughout a magically delicious trip to a tiny island in Maine, where three friends are renting a cottage for a reunion. The characters in the play all take turns telling the story, but the main perspective comes through the eyes of Jessie, who spent her childhood summers coming to the island and wants to unplug and reconnect with her friends in her “old happy place.” Trouble is, everyone was sleeping with each other in college, which pretty much put the kibosh on their relationships, and no one’s been in touch for over ten years. Enter Facebook, and suddenly there’s the distinct possibility of reliving that shit all over again - but that’s also why Steven wasn’t invited. Here, it’s just Jess and John, who are wondering if they should rekindle their spark, and Claire, who discovers that the fabled waters of Seal Island might provide more answers than questions if she can just take the plunge. This play is the next best thing to having your own transformative spiritual experience vis-à-vis a potentially dangerous (yet sexy) encounter with a mythical creature. Even better - you don’t have to get your hair wet. John P. Bray’s writing is gorgeous and economical right down to his stage directions

It’s so good, we’re giving it Five Selkie Stars.

CLAIRE

And then this face leaps out of the water at me! This face. (A moment). I had never seen a seal that close. But...it wasn’t a seal’s face! It disappeared under the water, and...

CLAIRE (Contd.)

must have imagined her. It. Her. I don’t know.

Seal Island
A Play in One Act
By
John Patrick Bray



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Characters:

Jessie, F, (early 30s)
Claire, F, (early 30s)
Jon, M, (early 30s)
Sellers, F, (late 20s-early 40s)

Note:

This has been written for four performers and little-to-no set, relying on the movement of the actors' bodies and, if available, subtle lighting shifts.

Seal Island can also easily be adapted for Zoom as the characters are all telling us a story.

There should be music – when the fog rolls in, the cabin becomes a place of magic. Whatever that means to you.

The characters can be played by any ethnicity.

(LIGHTS UP. We see three people on stage. There might be some sounds suggesting that we are by the water. There is no set. Everything should be implied/mimed.)

JESSIE

My parents used to take me and my brothers every summer to a cabin on a small island in Southern Coastal Maine. Westport Island, or Seal Island as the tourists call it. It was almost always cool. Screened in porch facing Sheepscoot Bay. The sound of lobster boats humming. The sun creeping in the windows. Inside, it was all wood, except for the fireplace, which was brick and covered in seashells and hollow crab carcasses.

JON

If I eat lobster, I get gout.

JESSIE

(To him.) We're not there yet. (To us.) It became my happy place. I couldn't afford to rent the exact childhood cabin, so I settled for the one next door.

CLAIRE

It was a little smaller than the one Jessie described.

JON

Bunk beds instead of full bedrooms. Bunk beds are awesome.

JESSIE

The porch was screened-in, except for the floor. In between the boards, mosquitoes find their way in.

JON

And small black spiders. Nature is not awesome.

JESSIE

I needed us to come together. To my old happy place.

JON

Something happened in college.

JESSIE

It wasn't a big deal.

JON

We all met in college.

JESSIE

But it became a big deal.

CLAIRE

We all had sex. With each other at different times.

JON

Not like...all together. More like trading partners over the course of four years.

JESSIE

And it ruined our friendship.

JON

I wouldn't say "ruined."

CLAIRE

Ruined.

JESSIE

Ruined.

JON

(Relenting.) Ruined.

JESSIE

Ten years after I graduated, I realized. I don't really have friends. What happened? I didn't want to be alone. So...I friended Jon on Facebook. And then I found Claire. And we made a plan.

CLAIRE

It was a good plan. Stay in a cabin on Westport Island. No internet, no phone. Force us all just to...*be* with each other. And see if there was a friendship to save.

JESSIE

Just the three of us.

JON

I thought there'd be four. Nobody called Steven?

CLAIRE

After what happened between her and Steven in college...

JESSIE

(Almost defensively.) It shouldn't have happened but we're grown-ups now, right? So we can try to get back how it used to be before...before.

CLAIRE

We're grown-ups because Jessie says we're grown-ups. If Jessie says it's so, it must be so.

(Awkward beat.)

JON

No WiFi no phonenumber.

CLAIRE

The front yard. All water. Smell of salt. Seaweed. That's where I saw her.

JON

You have to believe what Claire says is true. Because...I didn't.

JESSIE

There was like a long parchment on the wall. Like torn out of a scroll. Old, yellow.

JON

Hashmarks on it. As if days had passed.

JESSIE

Months.

JON

Years.

CLAIRE

And a pen. A fountain pen. It was gorgeous.

JON

Jade.

CLAIRE

I didn't even think it would write. So, I lifted the pen.

JESSIE

Never lift a strange pen.

CLAIRE

And I decided to keep track of our time, too.

(She makes a mark. The sound of magic. They all look around.)

JON

The fog rolled in. All around us.

CLAIRE

I can't see the land on the other side.

JESSIE

It'll clear up by morning. But it's weird, though. Like, you know Boothbay Harbor and whatever must be on the other side somewhere. But, like, you can't see it.

JON

I take a flashlight down to the water. I thought I might take the boat out. Prove to myself that nature isn't really that scary.

(He sits.)

Just a little plastic dinghy. Can hold about three-hundred and eight pounds, and if you sit right in the center, you won't flip it. But if you sit on the back –

JESSIE

Like *he* did –

JON

AHHH! SPLASH! I FLIPPED THE BOAT!

JESSIE

It came up under him!

JON

AAHHH!!!

CLAIRE

It pushed him up!

JON

No, GOD, NO!!!!

CLAIRE

The most...playful seal I'd ever seen.

JON

Wait, what?

JESSIE

It moved him toward the float at the end of the dock.

JON

And I was up.

CLAIRE

And then this face leaps out of the water at me! This face. (A moment). I had never seen a seal that close. But...it wasn't a seal's face! It disappeared under the water, and...I must have imagined her. It. Her. I don't know.

JESSIE

We got Jon in –

CLAIRE

We found some towels –

JON

I hadn't unpacked mine yet –

CLAIRE

And we dried him off –

JON

Nice.

JESSIE

I dry him off.

(A moment between them.)

And I felt grateful. I know it sounds crazy, but with the fog, the dark skies, the cold, dark water. The seal was just a reminder that nature isn't really that scary.

JON

Nature is terrifying!

CLAIRE

It wasn't a seal, it was a woman, a beautiful woman. I don't say it out loud. The next morning. I'm sitting on the porch and I can see the sun just start to rise.

JON

I get off my bunk bed and see Jessie sleep below.

JESSIE

I'm pretending to be asleep.

JON

Why can't I find the words?

CLAIRE

As an experiment, I make another mark on the paper and the fog rolls in again.

(The sound of magic. SELLERS enters.)

CLAIRE (Contd.)

And she's...beautiful. Soulful eyes.

SELLERS

Hello.

CLAIRE

Hello. (Awkward beat.) Can I help you?

SELLERS

No, I'm fine, thank you. Your friend that fell in the water. Is he okay?

CLAIRE

Yes, he's fine, thank you. Are you staying in a nearby cabin?

SELLERS

I'm staying nearby.

CLAIRE

It's beautiful here, isn't it. I mean, if the fog will ever lift.

SELLERS

It will. Soon. It all goes away.

CLAIRE

Jessie, my friend who brought us up here, she said this happens sometimes. The fog rolls in and....

SELLERS

Yes?

CLAIRE

Sorry, I tell her. For what, she says. And I realize I don't know her name.

SELLERS

Sellers.

CLAIRE

And I tell her, your eyes are magical. (She looks at SELLERS and quickly says to us) No, I don't tell her. I mean to tell her but I can't get the words out even though I'm standing here and my heart is suddenly pounding and and and did I mention I didn't call anyone? I could have called someone. Steven. I could have called Steven. (Looks at Sellers.) I look into her

CLAIRE (Contd.)

eyes and there's magic, and I want to say I see the magic, but my heart is tongue-tied and before I can tell her about the magic, she says –

SELLERS

Thank you. Your eyes are magical, too. That was the first thing I thought when I saw you yesterday.

(Sellers exits.)

JON

The fog rolls out.

CLAIRE

And she disappears with the fog.

JON

Who are you talking to?

CLAIRE

(To Jon.) I put another hash on the paper. Another mark. But...the damnest thing. My last mark disappeared. And look there's something I hadn't noticed before. It says "One perfect night." (To us.) By the time Jon leans in to see, the words...they're gone.

JESSIE

I see Jon and Claire standing close to each other and I say, "let's spend the day in Wiscasset!"

CLAIRE

We head out to buy trinkets.

JON

And they don't have any local wine. Why don't they have local wine?

JESSIE

(To Jon.) I think I still love you. I don't say this out loud.

JON

(To Jessie.) I know. I don't say this out loud.

CLAIRE

We wait in line two hours for lobster rolls.

JESSIE

I pull Jon aside, and say I invited Claire out here because there were issues, meaning, there should be a buffer.

JON

Steven. Jessie slept with Steven when I thought we were finally going to get together. So, yeah, inviting a buffer makes sense, but I feel a little guilt. (Looking at Claire.) Friends shouldn't be buffers. (Claire reacts. To Jessie.) I think she heard me.

JESSIE

We get back to the cabin.

JON

My toe is already getting stiff. I ate the damn lobster. It was amazing. I should have picked up cherry juice from Shaw's, but I thought, "one little lobster. Where's the harm?"

CLAIRE

I make a mark on the paper.

(The sound of magic.)

The fog rolls in.

JON

Again. I get in the hammock. I'm going to stay on the porch for the night. It's like someone stuck a fork in the base of my big toe and is twisting and pulling everything up. I don't want Jessie to hear me writhe.

JESSIE

I brought ibuprofen. And weed.

JON

I use both.

CLAIRE

I try to tell them. About a woman on the water.

JESSIE

It dawns on me! I remember hearing a story when we first came up here when I was a kid. The Selkie of Seal Island. Her story is a little different than traditional selkie myths. I tell them how many years ago, a lobsterman sat out for thirteen nights trying to catch a glimpse of the mythical Selkie of Seal Island. How he stole her coat when she slipped it off of one night in the fog. How he disappeared with it. And how the woman, frozen in time, immortal, swims in the bay, helping those who need help, looking for someone to love her, for one perfect night, so she may be freed from the curse and live one full, human life.

JON

Jessie laughs.

JESSIE

Jon laughs.

CLAIRE

I say nothing. And then I say everything. I know the selkie. I'm the one she loves.

JON

Oh. Uh. I mean. I knew Clare had issues.

JESSIE

Especially after Steven. And Claire sits outside. We leave her be. I talk with Jon until I need to go to bed.

CLAIRE

What the hell am I doing here?

JON

Jessie still likes me.

CLAIRE

Jon still likes Jessie. And I like...God, I'm going nuts.

JESSIE

There's something here. Between us. And Claire is like this crazy-ass fifth wheel. And we know it. And she knows it. And...man.

JON

I stay in the hammock.

JESSIE

I tell him he needs rest. I go inside.

CLAIRE

I stay on the porch with Jon. Unnoticed. I go to the paper, and I'm going to make a mark. Because maybe, somehow, this is the thing bringing her in. But I decide not to. And the fog rolls out, just a little. But I see her in the water. I step outside onto the deck.

SELLERS

It might be too cold for you.

CLAIRE

It might be. (Beat.) Who are you, really?

SELLERS

Just a friend. You didn't try to go out on the boat today.

CLAIRE

(To her.) Should I? (To us.) And then something amazing happens. She gracefully stands and the water seems to lift her to me.

(They face each other.)

SELLERS

Who is Steven?

CLAIRE

Someone I thought I loved. Who are you?

SELLERS

Someone who –

CLAIRE

I interrupt her. My mouth against hers. Oh my God.
I'm not bold, I tell her. Not usually, I say. I don't know what came over –

(SELLERS kisses her.)

SELLERS

You could come with me.

CLAIRE

The water is cold, I tell her.

SELLERS

It isn't always.

CLAIRE

I'm a terrible swimmer.

SELLERS

You can learn. Or I could come inside and stay with you whenever the fog rolls in.

JON

(As if waking.) There's a sound. What was that sound?

JESSIE

I heard something, too. I look at him and don't kiss him.

JON

She doesn't kiss me.

JESSIE

I look at the parchment with the hashmarks.

JON

Something wrong?

JESSIE

New...writing. Blurry, distant. Did you write on this?

JON

I can't move, I tell her. Gout. Why didn't she kiss me?

JESSIE

Selkie and...Claire, it reads. Did you write Claire's name on this?

CLAIRE

One perfect night.

SELLERS

One...perfect.

CLAIRE

What do you do?

SELLERS

Swim. Eat. And love. Love you. If you'll let me.

JESSIE

Claire?

CLAIRE

My friends are calling.
My heart is calling, I don't say.

SELLERS

I understand.

CLAIRE

She kisses me. And in the moon light I see her body move gracefully into the water and speed away.

JON

Claire?

JESSIE

I hear Jon fall out of the hammock.

JON

Gah!! Curse you, gout.

CLAIRE

I lean off the dock, looking over the waves. I don't want to chase anyone anymore. Not Steven. Not even her, out on the waves. I can be loved. Someone can love me. That's the last thought I remember having because -

ALL

Splash!

JESSIE

She fell in!

JON

Pitch black out there!

JESSIE

She'll die!

JON

But then-

JESSIE

This woman picks Claire up, brings her inside...

JON

Kisses her unconscious lips.

JESSIE

And leaves.

JON

She was...she was...

CLAIRE

(Smiling) Something magical. We spend the rest of the two weeks in peace. We play board games and buy pottery.

JESSIE

I finally kiss Jon.

JON

You do? Nice!

CLAIRE

And I look out on the water. I say goodbye to Sellers – that was her name, Sellers. And I say goodbye to Steven. And finally, I say goodbye to Jon and Jessie.

JON

Less than a year later, me and Jessie, we get engaged.

JESSIE

We message Claire, but her responses are short messages or emojis.

JON

It's hard to keep up with her social calendar on Facebook and stuff. And then one day she writes –

CLAIRE

I returned to Seal Island.

JESSIE

Which is what we all started calling it. For our honeymoon, Jon and I rent a cabin. My childhood one.

JON

And a lobsterman tells us about this girl who had been staying here, and how she took a boat out on the Sheepscot one night –

CLAIRE

-One perfect night/-

SELLERS

-and was last seen holding hands with someone

CLAIRE

-and jumping in the water.

(LIGHTS FADE. END OF PLAY.)

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *My in-laws used to rent a cabin on Westport Island in Maine, close to Wiscasset, for two weeks every summer. As a wedding present, they let my wife and I honeymoon there for a week before joining us for the second week. And in the years that followed we joined them, nearly every year, for two weeks in a cabin with no television, no WiFi, no phone. We did all of the tourist things up there, buying pottery and eating lobster rolls. Visiting the Tugboat Inn and the Boothbay Railway Museum. Every morning, though, I'd find myself getting up and going to the porch as the sun would rise. Watching the seals along the Sheepscot. The last time we were there was 2019, and it felt like Westport Island was saying goodbye to us: a seal made friends with my wife and kids while*

they were out in the dinghy. It got to the point that it started looking for them every day. We saw an osprey up in the osprey nest. I visited a bookstore in Wiscasset run by a man that knew Ginsberg, Corso, and poet Richard Rizzi, who I knew from growing up near New Paltz, NY. I ended up buying a book there that I desperately wanted at age eighteen but couldn't afford; and here it was, years later, for sale at a used bookstore price. My father-in-law died in 2020 and my mother-in-law is no longer up to traveling. My wife and I talk about getting back there when the pandemic ends, but we also know that is truly a way off. Plus, would it be the same?

Stylistically, I wanted to write a play where characters tell their story. No set, just four bodies moving. It ended up adapting well to Zoom and has had an online production with Planet Connections Zoom Festivity (Glory Kadigan, Artistic Director) and a wonderful online reading with Tiger Heart Players (Wayne Paul Mattingly, Artistic Director). I like plays where characters overcome obstacles using humor and magic, and that blend genres. Seal Island is dedicated to my wife, her parents, and our friends back in college, and to the folks that have staged the play.

AUTHOR BIO:

John Patrick Bray has written plays under grants from The National Endowment for the Arts and the Acadiana Center for the Arts in Louisiana, and has earned commissions from theatre companies and arts agencies around the country. He has been a Semifinalist for the O'Neill National Playwrights Conference and for the Princess Grace Foundation Playwriting Award, a Finalist for the Kernodle Playwright Prize, and Winner of the Appalachian Festival of Plays and Playwrights (for Friendly's Fire, which led to its premiere at Barter Theatre). His plays have been developed at The Actors Studio, the Last Frontier Theatre Conference, The Word at the Road Theatre, Epic Rep. at The Players' Club in NYC, Athens Playwrights' Workshop, The New School for Drama's Alumni Play Project, the SF Olympians Festival at EXIT Stage Left, and have been produced around the US (including productions with the Samuel French Off-Off Broadway Festival, FRIGID NY, and Planet Connections Theatre Festivity all in NYC), and in Canada. His plays and monologues are published with Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, Smith and Kraus, Original Works Publishing, Next Stage Press, JAC Publishing, Heartland Plays; and in The Coachella Review and Masque and Spectacle. A collection of his shorts, Cart Before the Horse, has been published by Polychoron Press. Bray is also the co-screenwriter of the BEA Award-Winning indie feature Liner Notes (based on his stage play) which was an official selection of the Woodstock Film Festival and Hoboken International Film Festival (finalist, Audience Choice Award). Bray co-edited The Best American Short Plays 2015-2016 with William Demastes and edited The Best Plays from American Theatre Festivals 2015 for Applause Theatre and Cinema Books. Bray served as a Dramatists Guild Atlanta Region Ambassador and he is the co-founder of Athens Playwrights' Workshop. He earned an MFA in Playwriting from The Actors Studio Drama School at The New School and PhD in Theatre from Louisiana State University. He teaches in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies at the University of Georgia.