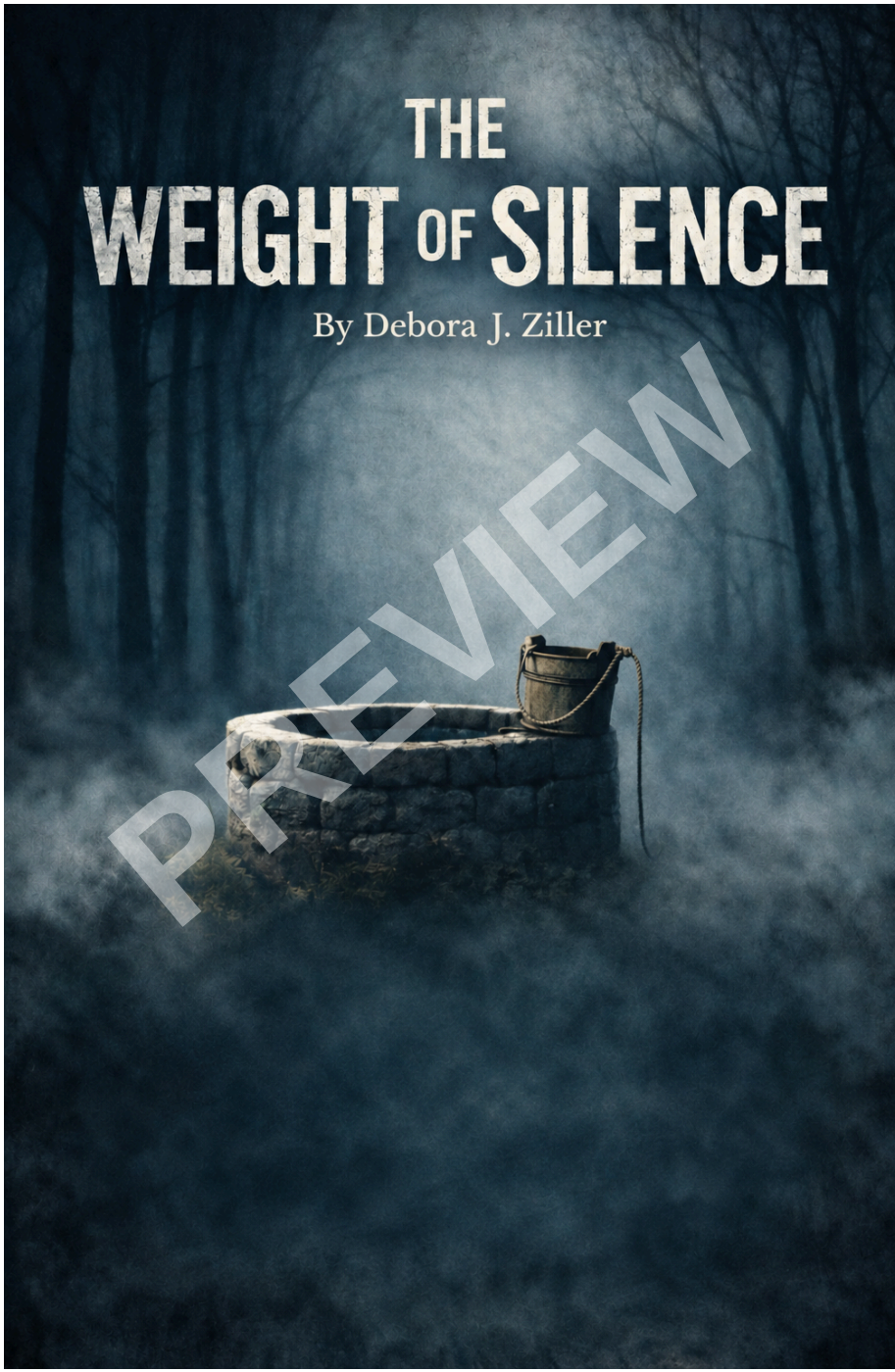
THE
WEIGHT OF SILENCE
By Debora J. Ziller
PREVIEW

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Cut Permissions

Directors may:

• Trim up to 10% of dialogue for timing

• Shorten transitions or stage business

• Adjust entrances, exits, ensemble movement, and pacing

• Consolidate or omit non-speaking villagers or congregants

Directors may not:

• Add, paraphrase, or rearrange dialogue

• Change character names, genders, relationships, plot, setting, or period

• Reassign pivotal lines belonging to Silence, Elias, Bethia, Josiah, Thomas, the Widow, or Reverend Stone

• Censor language or alter Puritan diction

• Alter the Epilogue's action or the final tableau

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Foreword

In 1692, the small farming villages near Salem, Massachusetts lived under strict religious rules that shaped every part of daily life. Faith guided decisions, neighbors watched one another closely, and fear of wrongdoing was constant. In this environment, even simple actions could be questioned, and private worries often turned into public suspicion.

The Weight of Silence does not retell the famous Salem witch trials. Instead, it focuses on the quieter moments that allowed them to happen: the pressure to appear righteous, the fear of disappointing family and authority, and the difficult choice between obedience and compassion. The play follows a group of young people as they struggle to navigate these forces and discover how easily fear can spread through a community already on edge.

Although the story is rooted in a specific moment in history, its themes are timeless. The fear of being judged, the weight of expectation, and the cost of remaining silent in the face of injustice continue to affect communities today. Through its characters, the play asks how judgment forms, how authority shapes belief, and how young people find their voices in systems that discourage questioning.

This play offers a glimpse into everyday Puritan life and invites audiences to reflect on how fear, faith, and social pressure combined to create one of the most troubling chapters in early American history.

— Debora J. Ziller

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Characters

Silence Dane—age 17—Steady, devout, carrying more than she speaks aloud. Approx. 51 cues.

Bethia Stone—age 17—Torn between loyalty and fear; struggles to find courage. Approx. 33 cues.

Josiah Dane—age 18—Burdened with responsibility after his father's death. Approx. 23 cues.

Elias Dane—age 12—Gentle, hopeful; carries innocence and clarity. Approx. 26 cues.

Thomas Stone—age 15—Dutiful son navigating fear of his father and love for his sister. Approx. 18 cues.

Reverend Stone—age 40s—A righteous man whose fear clouds discernment. Approx. 18 cues.

The Widow—age 50s—A solitary woman with knowledge of the earth's healing. Approx. 13 cues.

Goody Parsons—age 40s—Anxious mother driven by fear and duty. Approx. 11 cues.

Ruth Parsons—age 17—Impressionable, eager to be righteous, quick to accuse. Approx. 20 cues.

Patience Ward—age 16—Observant, cautious, the quiet voice of reason. Approx. 6 cues.

Grace Harlow—age 15—Soft-hearted, uneasy with conflict. Approx. 5 cues.

Sarah Harlow—age 14—younger sister to Grace, small and meek. Approx. 2 cues.

Ensemble—various ages and genders— Approx. 10 cues.

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Setting

Middleton, near Salem, Massachusetts, year 1692—the meeting-house, the village well, the grave site, and the wooded paths leading out from the village center.**Scene List**

Prologue—Between Rumor and Rope
Scene One—Justice
Scene Two—Prudence
Scene Three—Faith
Scene Four—Charity
Scene Five—Truthfulness
Scene Six—Fortitude
Scene Seven—Hope
Scene Eight—Obedience
Scene Nine—Mercy
Scene Ten—Judgment
Epilogue—The Weight of Silence

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Production Note

The Weight of Silence is designed for simple staging in a single playing space. Lighting and sound can be minimal; crossfades are sufficient to mark scene shifts. Theatricality lies in performance and pacing.

Herbal Knowledge (1692 New England)

In 17th-century New England, many rural women—especially widows and midwives—relied on the practical healing properties of local plants. Yarrow (Achillea millefolium) was commonly used to reduce fever, ease coughing, calm inflammation, and soothe restless sleep. Willow bark, rich in the natural precursor to aspirin, was known to lessen pain and bring down “hot fevers.” Though these remedies were widely recognized by healers and Indigenous communities, Puritan ministers often viewed such knowledge with suspicion, fearing it blurred the line between God-given wisdom and forbidden practice. In this play, the Widow’s herbs reflect real, effective treatments of the era—remedies that could bring relief to the sick while provoking fear in those who mistrusted anything outside Scripture.

For my mother.

"Kindness costs less than rumor."

—Elias Dane, The Weight of Silence

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Original Cast

The Weight of Silence premiered at the Estebo Performing Arts Center in Redwood Falls, Minnesota, on January 24, 2026, with the following cast and crew.

Reverend Stone	Maddox Thole
Goody Parsons	Naomi Doerr
Ruth Parsons	Ava Ahlbrecht
Thomas Stone	Neil Kadlec
Josiah Dane	Maddox Thole
Bethia Stone	Ariana Frank
Silence Dane	Harper Thole
Elias Dane	Colton Ebbers
Widow	Devyn Frank
Patience Ward	Mara Strandberg
Grace Harlow	Sophia Ahlbrecht
Sarah Harlow	Kynnlea Lentsch
Stage Manager	Aidan Grund
Assistant Stage Manager	Kaydence Meints
Props Master	Preston Stuhl

Ensemble: Aidan Grund, Elisa Renner, Phyllis Fank, Clare Frank, Camarie Dobel, Ilsa Dahlgren

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Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgement is extended to:
Ross Okins and Cameron Schultz assistant directors
Heidi Mages set/props designer
Carrie Mages costume designer
Janell Marmon former teacher, mentor, and friend

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PROLOGUE — Between Rumor and Rope

(Night. Inside the meeting-house, REVEREND STONE delivers a sermon.)
(Music cue: SATB.)
(Lighting: Dim amber backlights suggest dusk. As the villagers disperse, the backlights fade to a low wash. GOODY PARSONS and THOMAS carry lanterns.)
STONE. The Devil lies between rumor and rope. With this warning, I bring troubling news from Salem Town— young girls seized by strange afflictions, crying out against spirits no earthly eye can see. If fear takes root here as it has in Salem Town, no house will rest easy. Keep watch of your hearts. Go now, and guard your house.
(As the final "Amen" fades, congregants quietly gather shawls and lanterns and move outward through the playing space. GOODY PARSONS, RUTH, REVEREND STONE, and THOMAS remain at the doors. STONE steps down and passes among them as the crowd disperses into the village.)
STONE. Thomas, see to the woodpile.
THOMAS. Aye. Father.

SCENE ONE — Justice

GOODY PARSONS. Reverend. A word? We are grateful you spoke plain of what is happening in Salem Town before danger finds our doors and our daughters.
STONE. Danger comes swift when a village sleeps.
GOODY PARSONS. If the Devil has been conjured, who is to say that he will not bring fear to us as well? I would give anything to see my Ruth spared from these strange fits.
STONE. The Devil seeks first those who imagine themselves safe.
GOODY PARSONS. We thank God for placing so watchful a shepherd over this village.
STONE. The Lord blesses the vigilant. Go now—let no shadow cross your threshold.
GOODY PARSONS. Good evening, Reverend.
RUTH. Good evening.

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(STONE nods. GOODY PARSONS gathers her shawl, and RUTH follows her down the lane.)
RUTH. He praised you, Mother.
GOODY PARSONS. He did. Truth spoken plain pleases the Lord—and the Reverend. Come, now—before this night breeds more shadow than it should.
(GOODY PARSONS takes RUTH's arm. Their lantern fades from sight as the congregation disperses. THOMAS exits toward the woods. JOSIAH appears in silhouette upstage left, carrying an axe and a lantern. BETHIA comes down the path looking for THOMAS and sees JOSIAH.)
(Music cue.)

SCENE TWO — Prudence

(Lighting and music: Downstage right fades to black. As the melody is sung, bring up a dim light on JOSIAH upstage left. BETHIA enters with the lantern GOODY PARSONS handed off backstage.)
BETHIA. Josiah.
JOSIAH. Bethia. I was not expecting to see anyone. It is near dark. Is all well?
BETHIA. Aye. Did my brother pass this way? Father sent him out for wood, but Mother worries he will stray too far and be lost to the darkness.
JOSIAH. *(Hiding his sorrow.)* Do not fret, I am sure he will return soon. Elias never once strayed so far into the wood as to lose the path home again.
BETHIA. *(Softly, looking around for signs of Thomas. Pause.)* I am deeply sorry for your loss. *(Pause.)* It is good to see you. Time passed feels like an eternity. *(Pause.)* How do you fare? Is Silence well?
JOSIAH. We do what we can with what little we have left. Silence tends to Mother diligently, although her breath weakens. And without Father, I must bear the rest of the burden.
BETHIA. Your troubles weigh heavy upon my heart. Please let me shoulder a portion of your sorrow, lest you break. The Lord did not fashion us to bear such weight alone.

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JOSIAH. I am quite capable of carrying the weight of which you speak.
BETHIA. I worry. Your absence has grown greater with each day passing.
(JOSIAH does not answer.)
BETHIA. Josiah?
(THOMAS appears in silhouette upstage right with a hatchet. He waits there before approaching.)
JOSIAH. Father loved this land. Do you see that clearing, just beyond that oak tree? That is where he taught me how to chop wood. *(Pause.)* He stood just there, his hand over mine, helping to steady the weight of the axe. *(Pause.)* Now I stand in his place, whether I am ready or not. Axe in hand. *(Pause.)* There is no room for softness.
BETHIA. When Father prays for mercy upon this village, you must know that my prayers are saved for your family. For Silence—for you.
JOSIAH. Your father would call that sin.
BETHIA. Then let it be sin. Time has not extinguished the spark between us, no matter what fear has demanded of me. Do you not feel it? Let us be as we once were.
JOSIAH. *(Sorrowful.)* I cannot make room for it in my heart until the Lord unties my hands. *(Gently.)* Were times kinder, I would stand proud before your father and speak plain what is in my heart, to gain his favor.
BETHIA. His favor lies with the Lord alone. He fears anything that grows outside his Scripture.
JOSIAH. Let the fear your father keeps stay under his roof. My hands are full with what the Lord has already laid upon mine.
(A branch cracks offstage. THOMAS approaches with a bundle of wood.)
THOMAS. Sister!
BETHIA. Thomas! *(Surprised.)* Mother worries.
THOMAS. *(Looking sharply between them.)* Aye, she worries, and with cause. Bethia—you must not linger. Father's temper has been sharp of late. Did you not heed his warning at the meeting house? He will not look kindly upon this.
BETHIA. Condolences have been offered. *(Slightly embarrassed.)* Nothing more.

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THOMAS. Nothing—can become something. His hand will fall hard if he sees you here. We must retreat at once.
JOSIAH. No wrong has been done.
THOMAS. Sister, I cannot always stand between you and danger. And when I find you without my guard, the sin becomes mine as well.
BETHIA. I shall mind my own soul.
THOMAS. It is not your soul for which I fear. It is Father's judgment. He sees danger where others see none when he believes Scripture has been tested.
JOSIAH. *(To Thomas.)* Your father does not have the right to claim every word spoken beneath the sky.
THOMAS. This matter is not yours. You know him not as we do. Father carries the weight of his congregation on his back. He believes the Lord has placed every step of ours beneath his watchful eye and the eye of the Lord.
BETHIA. Thomas.
THOMAS. Bethia, go home.
BETHIA. Speak not to me as if I am a child. Mother sent me to fetch you, not to be judged by you.
THOMAS. Then fetch me, and be done. *(Gathering some of the wood he has carried in.)* But do not ask me to lie if Father asks where I found you.
JOSIAH. *(Gathering the wood.)* It is late. *(Kindly, to Bethia.)* Go. Before the night makes sinners of us both.
(Music cue.)
(THOMAS watches Bethia, then turns. She follows, shaken. JOSIAH remains a moment, bundles the wood in the carrier, then exits. SILENCE enters immediately and kneels at the grave. ELIAS crosses quietly behind her.)
(Lighting and music: Fade from warm evening light to near blackout, then to pale yellow dawn during the melody. Extend the humming if needed to cover the transition.)

SCENE THREE — Faith

(Lighting: Bring up Light 1 downstage left on SILENCE at the graves.)

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ELIAS. *(Skipping.)* You are up early.
SILENCE. *(Startled.)* There is much work to be done and prayers to be said.
ELIAS. You look worn. Has Mother's fever worsened through the night?
SILENCE. It is hard to say. Her breath catches as though the Lord Himself pulls it from her.
ELIAS. *(Kneeling beside her, taking the same form.)* Do you think prayer will finally bring answers?
SILENCE. It must. I have nothing else left to offer.
ELIAS. Father always said. "The Lord will surely send the message we need, if our hearts are open to hearing it."
SILENCE. Then I shall pray. And listen. With all I have left.
(ELIAS nods faintly, then steps back into the trees. SILENCE bows her head; looks up again, and ELIAS is gone.)
(The WIDOW appears in silhouette upstage left. She reaches into the branches and holds as SILENCE prays.)
SILENCE. Elias? 'Lord, I have prayed without ceasing. I have labored in Thy name. Please—show mercy and spare our Mother. My faith grows weary with each breath You claim from our home. Tell me what sin bars the door to Your grace, and I shall face it.'
(The WIDOW approaches SILENCE.)
(Lighting: Fade the silhouette and bring Light 2 at the well to three-quarter intensity as the WIDOW approaches.)
WIDOW. 'Tis a hard prayer, child.
SILENCE. Forgive me. I thought the woods empty at this hour.
WIDOW. Few rise this early—unless sorrow drives them from sleep.
SILENCE. Sleep is scarce and it is difficult to keep a prayer that goes unheard.
WIDOW. The good Lord hears all prayers, do not doubt that. *(Pause.)* I beg your pardon, I mean no harm. I seek the willow trees for leaf and bark. The Lord set them up here for safe keeping, away from the salty shores of the raging sea.
SILENCE. Mother once spoke of a woman from the docks who claims knowledge of bark and root.
WIDOW. Your mother?
SILENCE. Aye. Goody Dane.

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WIDOW. *(Pause.)* I believe your mother once crossed my path as I now cross yours. You carry the same steadiness. The same sorrow— behind your eyes. If I am to remember correctly, her love for your father was fierce enough to knock at my door when illness set in his chest, yet her faith kept her hand shut against mine. She feared the Lord would not look kindly upon her if she took gifts from His earth. These gifts. *(Opening the bundle slightly.)*

SILENCE. You know not what you judge. My mother did not fear the Lord—she leaned on Him when death stood at her side. If she turned from your hand, it was not out of weakness but conviction. Our family has prayed over every grave until the earth itself grew weary—and yet I still kneel before the Lord and pray, hoping not to bury another.

WIDOW. Perhaps it is time to do what prayer alone has not. Everything before you was placed here by God. Shall we praise His sky and scorn His soil? *(Pause.)* The sin is not in the healing, but in the fear that turns from it.

SILENCE. I fear there is little hope left.

WIDOW. Hope dies when we refuse the mercy set at our feet. Your mother feared His gifts because she was afraid of the judgment of men. You need not share her in fear. The good Lord will steady your hand if your heart is willing.

WIDOW. Take this. Strip the bark and boil it in clean water ‘till it runs dark. A thimble at dusk, another at dawn. If it be God’s will, it may steady a fever and bring rest.

SILENCE. If it be God’s will, did Mother truly turn her hand away, for those we have lost. Did she fear the Devil’s hand in the making? Shall I fear the same? If I take what you offer, will they name me sinner? If I do not, have I sealed her fate with death?

WIDOW. God does not scorn the hand that tries.

SILENCE. *(Deep breath. Pause. Contemplate.)* Will it cure—or only ease?

WIDOW. Sometimes they are the same. One mends the body, the other lends rest. Both are mercy.

(Lighting: As the WIDOW exits, fade Light 4 upstage right and Light 7 if used. Bring up Lights 3, 5, and 6 on the village downstage right. Lower Light 1 at the graves to quarter intensity once the area clears.)

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(SILENCE takes a long breath and clutches the bundle. The WIDOW disappears into the trees. At the sound of footsteps, SILENCE hides the bundle in her satchel and rises. RUTH, PATIENCE, and GRACE enter carrying buckets.)

SCENE FOUR — Charity

RUTH. Silence Dane—did I not just see the old widow at your side drawing water?
SILENCE. The Lord's earth gives water freely, Ruth. Yet you watch as though she stole it. Why fix your gaze to the well?
RUTH. I watch because the well stands plain for all to see. And I speak plain of what I saw—the widow at your hand. Mother says she meddles in things no righteous woman should touch, and I know it to be true.
PATIENCE. *(Sharply.)* You repeat your mother's talk as though it were Scripture. Drawing water is no sin.
RUTH. I am certain that was the widow. The one who dares call herself a healer. Did you not see her?
GRACE. Does not matter who took water.
RUTH. I know what I saw and what she gave.
SILENCE. You know only your fear, Ruth—not the truth of what passed.
RUTH. No one with sense would take anything from a stranger's hand. The Reverend has preached about the afflictions of girls in Salem Town. Shall we not fear the sins of the Devil here as well?
GRACE. Fear can make shadows where there are none.
RUTH. Mother says fear keeps a village clean.
PATIENCE. The Lord bids us love thy neighbor. Shall we not choose kindness in her time of grief?
ELIAS. Kindness costs less than rumor. Best we all not forget it.
(PATIENCE helps GRACE draw water. RUTH stands staring at SILENCE accusingly. From down the path, BETHIA enters.)
BETHIA. Silence, it is good to see you about the village. I have missed you—and your family. How fares your mother?
SILENCE. Mother waits upon the Lord's mercy.

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BETHIA. I am truly sorry for your loss. You must know Father forbade us from the path while sickness was at your door. He fears God's hand is not yet lifted from your house. He keeps us close. Please know that we have prayed for you. That God's will may soon bring peace that we may once again find the path to your door.
SILENCE. Once, the path from your door to mine was known as well as the backs of our hands.
(BETHIA turns to walk away.)
PATIENCE. Do not turn so quick. She was once your sister in all but name.
RUTH. Sister or no—she ought keep her distance still. We all should. The Lord will not lend His peace to those who take mercy from anyone but Him.
BETHIA. Of what do you speak, Ruth? Say it plain.
RUTH. I speak of what I saw here. Silence Dane took from the widow's hand. Surely it was the work of dark spirits.
BETHIA. The widow? Silence, is this true? You must tell me she is mistaken. *(Pause. SILENCE does not answer.)* If Father hears of this, he will see only sin. You must go to him and speak plain of what you have done or he will name the Devil's hand in yours.
SILENCE. I took nothing the Devil could claim. Fear in this village runs far ahead of truth.
BETHIA. Aye. I know not which fear now holds me tighter—Father's judgment or the cost of keeping my tongue on what I now know. If he learns of this, he will close the path to your home for good. Your family will be marked.
GRACE. *(Interrupting.)* Let us go home before the Devil finds our hands as well.
SILENCE. *(Upset, to BETHIA, as she leaves.)* I sought only to save what remains.
(SILENCE exits.)
RUTH. She walks where the Reverend warned the Devil waits—the next she feels will be His noose around her neck.
GRACE. We know not what truly passed here. We bear only Ruth's telling. Best we mind our hand and grant Silence time to speak her truth.

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BETHIA. Grace speaks plain. I fear my father's judgment—but I know Silence would not bring harm to her family to this village.
RUTH. *(Scoffs.)* Then she has deceived you, too.
(GOODY PARSONS enters.)
GOODY PARSONS. Ruth. Come away.
RUTH. Silence has been careless. *(Pause, resolute.)* Mother will surely inform the Reverend of what I saw and Silence will then answer for what she has done.
(SILENCE enters near the graves. ELIAS follows her path and sits beside her.)
(Music cue.)
(Lighting: Fade Light 3. ELIAS appears in silhouette. Bring up Light 1, then Lights 6 and 4 as ELIAS approaches SILENCE. Raise Light 4 slightly for a soft wash.)

SCENE FIVE — Truthfulness

ELIAS. Sister, what keeps you?
SILENCE. Elias! You come in like a fox through reeds.
ELIAS. A fox wears better boots than I.
SILENCE. You shall track the lane with that mud, from here to the house.
ELIAS. I left no mark on the lane; I walked through the trees. *(Pause.)* What hides there, in your satchel?
SILENCE. Needle, thread, a bit of cloth. Woman's work.
ELIAS. Then I beg you to mend the hem of your worry, so it drags not in the mud. *(Pause.)* The sap is up. Might you tap the maple by week's end? *(Licks his lip.)*
SILENCE. *(Small smile.)* Last Spring, you came home sticky with sap….ear to ear. Mother was not pleased.
ELIAS. *(Giggling. A brief pause.)* Let us break from whatever work it is you are doing and fetch straight sticks for a kite. When the summer winds come we can take to the meadows and soar them up to the heavens.
(JOSIAH appears in silhouette upstage right.)
SILENCE. Perhaps later. This work must be done before dusk.

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ELIAS. Then I shall find my own sticks.
(ELIAS gathers sticks.)
(Lighting: Raise Lights 6, 5, and 2 as JOSIAH approaches SILENCE. Add Light 3 if needed.)
(ELIAS notices movement beyond the trees. JOSIAH enters carrying the water bucket. ELIAS withdraws to the edge of the space, remaining visible.)

SCENE SIX — Fortitude

JOSIAH. Silence—why have you not returned home? I have been waiting.
SILENCE. I am sorry, brother. I was….. reading.
JOSIAH. *(Noticing the herbs.)* That is not your Bible. Those are scraps. Where did this come from?
(SILENCE refuses to answer.)
JOSIAH. This is not prayer. Nor is it Scripture. You must rid yourself of this, this, nonsense! At once—before someone notices.
SILENCE. It is not a prayer as you wish it to be, but perhaps it is a prayer's answer. Mother is failing, Josiah. The nights grow long and her breath grows short. The Lord has given no answer—no comfort—no sign. I can no longer sit idle while she slips away.
JOSIAH. Where did this come from? You must tell me at once.
SILENCE. It came from prayer.
JOSIAH. Do not deceive me. Do not make light of what you have done.
SILENCE. *(Defensive.)* I did not seek her. While praying for mother, the old widow stumbled upon me at the grave and offered her hand. You must know; I took what she gave only to ease Mother's suffering. Perhaps this knowing is the answer we seek.
JOSIAH. We cannot trust the knowing of that widow. Only the Lord can ease suffering, through prayer and Scripture.
SILENCE. Which we have prayed until our hands shake and our knees grow weak. Mother fades. Can you not see that? Please, let us ease her sickness with what the Lord set forth in His earth.
(SILENCE shows him the bundle. JOSIAH's anger heightens.)

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JOSIAH. You know not of what you have risked. The Reverend? The village? They will not see it as such. They will claim it born of the Devil and name you witch just as swiftly.
(Lighting: Fade the stage to near darkness. Hold Light 2 at three-quarter intensity while they are downstage center so the light seems to close in around them.)
SILENCE. The Lord has been silent.
JOSIAH. The Lord will answer in His time.
SILENCE. Time is something Mother has not. What more can I offer? How much more must be sacrificed before the Lord turns His face toward this house and shows His mercy?
(SILENCE gasps—horrified by her own words, forcing control back into her body. She straightens. She wipes her eyes, steadies herself.)
JOSIAH. Gather these scraps now. We will dispose of them in the fire at home—before another soul finds it in your hand and names you for taking that which is not allowed.
SILENCE. You care more for your name than for her breath.
JOSIAH. You know nothing of my duty.
SILENCE. Then speak plain what you fear. *(JOSIAH cannot speak.)* You fear them. More than you fear losing another.
JOSIAH. *(Breaking.)* I fear losing everything that remains.
SILENCE. As do I, brother. *(Pause. Softer.)* As do I. *(Pause.)* I will gather the scraps and keep them hidden, but I will not burn them if ease for Mother lies within.
JOSIAH. Then you have sealed your fate. I cannot bear witness to what may happen for what you have done.
(JOSIAH takes the bucket and exits. SILENCE hides the herbs and follows him. GOODY PARSONS and RUTH cross toward the meeting-house, whispering. STONE enters upstage left beyond the trees, reading his Bible.)
(Music and lighting: The SA melody begins. STONE appears in silhouette on the upper level. Bring up Lights 4 and 5 upstage right as GOODY PARSONS enters the area. Raise Lights 2 and 3 if needed.)

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SCENE SEVEN — Hope

GOODY PARSONS. Reverend Stone! I beg a word.
STONE. Goody Parsons, what brings you here at this hour?
GOODY PARSONS. We fear the Devil was seen at the well this morning. The old widow put her hand upon Silence Dane. Surely this is the hand of something unholy.
RUTH. Reverend, at dawn I witnessed Silence Dane with the widow and she pressed a wrapped bundle into her hand. Bethia heard me speak of it.
STONE. Bethia? My daughter spoke nothing of this to me.
GOODY PARSONS. We do not want to accuse, Reverend—only to warn and to keep the village pure, as the Lord intended.
STONE. You have done right bringing this to me, Goody. Go now—I will attend to this news.
(GOODY and RUTH exit the way they came. The door closes. A heavy silence. Unseen in the shadow, THOMAS has heard enough to fear. He stiffens, the kindling still in his arms.)
THOMAS. Father…is all well? Is it true what Ruth spoke of Silence?
STONE. Go. Find your sister. She shall answer to me for keeping her tongue. I will not have my house bound by deceit.
THOMAS. Aye, Father.
(STONE sits as THOMAS leaves to find BETHIA.)
(Lighting: Fade all lights except Light 5 upstage center. Hold it at half to three-quarter intensity, adding Light 2 at the same level if needed.)
(STONE exits.)
(Lighting: Raise Light 2 downstage center as BETHIA enters downstage right.)

SCENE EIGHT — Obedience

(BETHIA enters, gathers water. THOMAS enters after her.)
THOMAS. Bethia—Father sent me to collect you. He will not wait.
BETHIA. There is work waiting at the hearth. I must bring water to Mother. Please tell him I will be but a moment.
THOMAS. You must go to him now. He states wickedness has taken root by the well—and that you knew what transpired. He believes your refusal to inform him is deceit.

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BETHIA. I thought only to keep peace. Silence will surely be in danger now. I must go to her at once.
THOMAS. Bethia, no. Father is already angered. His hand is heavy. If he finds you on the path to the Dane house he will mark you as well; bringing judgment down without a moment's pause.
BETHIA. If I go to him, he will see my fear and mark me just the same.
THOMAS. Then let him see obedience, at least. Do not hesitate. If you stray one step further, he will believe your heart wanders where it should not.
BETHIA. Thomas—
THOMAS. You know his mind on the matter. I beg of you, do not bring his wrath upon us. I cannot return without you.
BETHIA. *(Turning toward the wood, calm but firm.)* Then tell him you could not keep me.
THOMAS. Father warned us, Bethia! Walk not between rumor and rope.
(Lighting: Raise Light 5 slightly at BETHIA's upstage-left exit. Fade Light 2 at center when THOMAS leaves.)
BETHIA. *(Stopping, looking back, voice quiet but burning.)* Then that is where mercy stands.
(BETHIA exits toward the Dane house. THOMAS remains a beat and exits. SILENCE and ELIAS enter at the grave.)
(Lighting: Once SILENCE is visible, slowly raise Light 1 downstage left. BETHIA enters downstage left.)

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SCENE NINE — Mercy

(SILENCE prays at the graves. Beside her, ELIAS works on his kite. Only the tail is missing. BETHIA hurries in, clutching her shawl.)
BETHIA. Silence! Ruth spoke plain to my father. If he confirms that I knew of what you took from the Widow—he will bind me to it as well. I fear for you—and for myself. He will not see mercy in your actions.
SILENCE. It matters not what your father sees. What matters is keeping breath in my Mother.
BETHIA. We must burn what the widow gave you. Without evidence, it is your word against that of Ruth. Give me something—anything—I

may carry back to him so my breath does not falter when he questions me.
SILENCE. What questions might he seek, Bethia? Your hand in what mercy might save my mother? Or the steps you fear you have strayed from the path? The trees are not so silent as you think. And I guard your heart from their whisper.
BETHIA. Silence, please.
SILENCE. The only hope I have left is that from the widow. I will not cast aside mercy for the sake of duty. *(Pause.)* If your father's terror governs you more than love and mercy, return to him. Speak what you know. I will not beg for your keeping. But know that I will still protect you. And my brother.
(BETHIA shakes her head helplessly. SILENCE's voice steadies—calm, resolute.)
BETHIA. I do not deny I have sinned—not by malice, but by weakness. I kept from you what stirred between Josiah and me. For that, I am sorry. When sickness fell upon your house, Father barred our door—and I obeyed out of duty. Not for lack of care, nor want of being at your side for comfort, but because fear held me tight to his walls. *(A breath—she gathers the courage she has never shown before. BETHIA softens, her voice trembling with realization.)* I have been taught that faith must walk before mercy—that Scripture must lead. But standing here—now—seeing you fight for breath that is not even your own. If mercy does not go first—then faith becomes but a stone we cast at one another. And I have cast mine at you. I can face Father's wrath and the scorn of the village, but only if it means I can keep you. I shall no longer be guided by fear. The weight of my duty shall bind me no more.
SILENCE. Then we shall walk together.
(SILENCE absorbs this moment—her expression softens, but she does not break.)
BETHIA. Let mercy lead the way.
(SILENCE and BETHIA exit in opposite directions. The stage is nearly dark. VILLAGERS enter from several paths, humming the SATB melody, and gather in uneasy clusters. STONE steps onto the block beside the well.)
(Lighting: Bring Lights 2, 5, and 6 to three-quarter intensity.)

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SCENE TEN — Judgment

(The humming gives way to low chatter.)

STONE. Good citizens of Middleton village, I fear the enemy has taken root here as it has in Salem Town. I speak of the old widow who walks among us—offering remedies brewed in shadows, beyond Scripture, beyond God's design. *(The villagers' chatter swells and continues under STONE.)* This is how temptation took root in Eden. The serpent did not force Eve's hand—it only placed fruit within her reach.

(Gasps and whispers ripple through the crowd.)

STONE. We must demand truth from those who take the forbidden fruit and let the Lord bring judgment upon them.

(The villagers fall silent as SILENCE enters. ELIAS follows a few steps behind.)

(Lighting: Add light for SILENCE's entrance if needed.)

GOODY PARSONS. She comes boldly.

RUTH. She fears no judgment at all!

STONE. Silence Dane, you have been accused of taking forbidden remedies and inviting darkness into this village. Only the Lord's path is acceptable.

GOODY PARSONS. Amen.

RUTH. Amen.

SILENCE. Reverend Stone, upon my word I have walked no path but that of the Lord.

GOODY PARSONS. She took from a forbidden hand!

RUTH. —from the widow's grasp itself!

GRACE. Ruth, you know not her reason.

RUTH. Mother knows I speak truth and so does the Reverend.

STONE. We must all be diligent and pray—as the Lord commands—lest we bring sin upon ourselves.

SILENCE. I sought mercy, not sin. I took not from the Devil's hand, but from God's Earth, that it may ease our mother's suffering.

GOODY PARSONS. That is a confession, Reverend.

RUTH. Aye.

GRACE. We saw no wickedness at the well. We were but witness only to what Ruth claims to have seen plain.

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SARAH. ‘Tis true, Reverend.
RUTH. You are all blind with pity!
STONE. Mercy taken in disobedience becomes corruption. Silence Dane, you have put every family in this village at risk.
SILENCE. The only risk I took was to save a life. Would you not do the same for the one you love? *(Pause.)* You preach that the Lord gives His gifts freely in heaven. Does He not do the same with His gifts here on earth?
BETHIA. Father, mercy must come before fear. She speaks truth.
STONE. Bethia—silence your tongue.
BETHIA. Truth has been silenced long enough!
STONE. We must not let the serpent strike. Silence Dane, we shall call upon the magistrates to cast judgment upon your sins.
(Lighting: Return to the dusk colors from the opening.)
(VILLAGERS react—fear, shock. BETHIA crumbles at the thought of losing SILENCE again.)
SILENCE. If that is the Lord’s will, I shall appear with my head held high. I fear no truthful judgment.
STONE. Enough! The path to Dane house is shut to all until the magistrates have judged her case.
(STONE turns to BETHIA. She stays beside SILENCE. STONE dismisses the crowd and exits. GOODY PARSONS and RUTH leave. GRACE follows reluctantly. BETHIA sees JOSIAH at the edge of the woods. He nods, and she crosses to him. PATIENCE waits until the others turn away, then approaches SILENCE.)
(Lighting: Focus on SILENCE and PATIENCE.)
PATIENCE. For your mother.
(PATIENCE presses a sprig into SILENCE’s hand and leaves. ELIAS appears in silhouette, holding the unfinished kite at his side. He waits as the SA melody ends.)

EPILOGUE — The Weight of Silence

(SILENCE sinks to the ground. ELIAS approaches with the kite and a red ribbon that matches SILENCE’s.)
(Lighting: Bring up Light 1 slowly once SILENCE is on the ground.)

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ELIAS. Sister, Mother's fever is cooling.
SILENCE. Truly? I must go to her at once.
ELIAS. *(He nods.)* Stay with me. Please. Josiah and Bethia are at her side.
SILENCE. *(Relieved. Teary eyed and thankful.)* Whether it was the hand of God in heaven or the hand of God in His earth, mercy found her first.
(SILENCE opens the bundle and looks at the bark. ELIAS smiles slightly.)
ELIAS. When you spoke with the old widow, you asked if bark would heal or only ease…
SILENCE. You must know I asked those words out of fear.
ELIAS. No, Sister. Fear would have turned away. Love brought the healer; and love—brought mercy.
(SILENCE presses the bark to her lips, then plants it in the earth at the second grave as a marker.)
SILENCE. You are right, little brother. Let them judge me if they must. I have seen what fear destroys—and what love saves.
(Lighting: Bring up Light 3 on ELIAS, then Light 6 as he moves back.)
(ELIAS ties the red ribbon to the kite and smiles at SILENCE. She takes a sharp breath and presses her hand to the earth. She looks up at him.)
SILENCE. And though I could not spare you—I can now set you free.
(SILENCE's shoulders drop. ELIAS backs toward the trees and lifts one hand. The kite rises. He lets the invisible string slip through his fingers and turns back to SILENCE.)
ELIAS. Tell Mother I will see her when she dreams.
(ELIAS holds her gaze, then looks up after the kite.)
(Lighting: ELIAS falls into silhouette upstage. Shift the light downstage center and downstage left until only SILENCE remains lit at the grave.)
SILENCE. *(Pause.)* Tell Father I was brave.
(Music cue.)
(Lighting: Hold the downstage-left light on SILENCE at the grave. Blackout on the final note.)

End of Play.

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About the Author

Debora J. Ziller, born just outside Salem, Massachusetts, is a theatre director and theatre educator with a passion for helping young actors discover depth and authenticity in their work. Her directing emphasizes character analysis, emotional truth, and ensemble collaboration—values that shape her writing as well.

The Weight of Silence challenges students not only to perform, but to examine motive, morality, and the weight of their characters' choices. Debora believes that when young performers are trusted with complex material, they rise to meet the challenge and the outcome is powerful characters and an even more powerful production.

Debora currently lives in central Minnesota, where her year-round theatre program thrives through student-centered training, strong community support, and a commitment to developing young artists. Directors choosing this play are encouraged to reach out with questions or comments: deborajziller@gmail.com.

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