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Act 1, Scene 1, zzzzz

A new radio play about insomnia is also designed to send listeners to sleep

Few writers would thank you for telling them that their work sent you snoring. But Janice Kerbel would be rather pleased if a few audience members are tempted to nod off during her first radio play. Commissioned as part of Artangel Interactive's Nights of London series for BBC Radio 3, Nick Silver Can't Sleep tells the story of a group of night-blooming plants. Written in soothing, soporific prose, softly whispered by Rufus Sewell, Fiona Shaw and Josette Simon, it lasts 20 minutes – just a shade longer than it should take a person to fall comfortably asleep.

London-based Canadian artist Kerbel has long been interested in plants we can't see: either because their activities take place at night, or because they don't exist. She is best known for geometric blueprints for "very plausible but impractical gardens": wall-mounted flower beds for council flats, or gardens for gyms. She has also spent time thinking about those who creep about in the inky hours: her works include Bank Job and 15 Lombard St (meticulously detailed schemes for robbing one of London's city banks), and Home Fittings, mocked-up building plans that show where to step without creaking or casting shadows.

In her huskily childlike voice, Kerbel explains how her fascination with nocturnal plants entwined in her mind with the life of insomniacs – "a community that's unseen and unformed because nobody wants to belong to it". She interviewed many insomniacs about their frustrated sense of the night. "A lot of people talked about the strange conflation of time," she says, "how it can be fast and slow at the same time. How you would not want the night to end so that you could fall asleep but you also want the torture to be over."

For the play, Kerbel then imagined parallels between sleepless humans and

nocturnal plants. The eponymous Nick Silver (voiced by Sewell) isn't a person but a breathy specimen of *Nicotiana sylvestris* – a woodland member of the tobacco family which blooms (or wakes) both at night and during the day.

Nick, however, is more alert at night; during the day, his petals droop. "He is sweet-smelling from sundown," says Kerbel, "with an offensive scent during the day. He has hallucinogenic properties – he's a stimulant in low doses and a depressant in high doses and is at his best when separated out from other plants."

In the play, Nick recalls a dream that describes the blooming/awakening of *Cereus Grand* (voiced by Shaw). He longs to return to the dream so he can be reunited with her, though he does not know that she is *Selenicereus grandiflorus*: a perennial climbing cactus from the rainforest. "Cereus blooms just one night a year," says Kerbel, "with an intense scent of vanilla. I tried to write the play as a classic love story."

Senses are beautifully, agonisingly teased in the script. Vanilla and smoke are on the breeze. Colour is hinted at. There's an ache to the double meaning of Kerbel's use of "maroon". Each member of this botanical chorus is adrift in the dark and their lack of connection casts off the meaning of words from their sounds, until the listener is left with that Shipping Forecast feeling – of distant dramas that are simply syllables to the sleepless.

'Nick Silver Can't Sleep' is on BBC Radio 3 at 9.30pm tonight.