

P.L.A.Y.

(Performance = Literature + Art + You)

Student Matinee Series 2009-2010 Season

Discovery
Guide



THE CLEAN HOUSE

Written by
Sarah Ruhl

Directed by
Emma Griffin



Dear Educators,

January 2004. I was living in New York City, and I had been invited to a script-in-hand reading of a new play called *The Clean House*. Now, play readings can be an acquired taste. With no staging, no costumes, and only a few hours of rehearsal, a reading is a chance to focus on dialogue and what the playwright conveys through language only. But since the script is the blueprint for a theatrical event, it also asks you to imagine how the full performance might take shape. Certain stage directions are read aloud: do they add to the minds-eye view of the play, or interrupt the flow of the storytelling? There's a lot to hold in mind at once and it can be difficult to appreciate a play's full potential, just as many find reading a published script so much less satisfying than attending a performance.

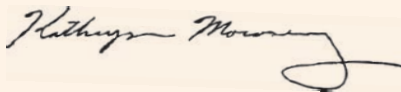
My discovery that day was this: Sarah Ruhl makes it easy. Here is a writer who crafts elegantly simple, witty dialogue and whose vibrantly theatrical images are too delicious *not* to begin to imagine, each one exploding from the page and begging to be translated into live action. What's more, these images are not only dazzling, but utterly essential to the journey of what each character must face, in themselves or in the world. Ruhl is not unique in this ability, but undeniably quite gifted.

*They start taking bites of each apple
and if they don't think it's a perfect apple they throw it into the sea.
The sea is also Lane's living room.
Lane sees the apples fall into her living room.
She looks at them.*

During the reading I could feel the audience lean in, imagining together with the playwright. As I hope you will do with us, here at Geva.

Most agree that *The Clean House* is a remarkable play, a literary and theatrical tour de force. But, I've been asked, is it a great play for students? I answer: it's a play about finding a way to live in touch with one's own life, sorting through roles and expectations and entitlements and ideas about success in order to make choices that feel authentic and personal. It's a play about what we can control and what we can't. And it gives us the space to laugh at our own ridiculousness; it glows with generosity. The high school students I know are juggling such pressures to perform while simultaneously exploring identity and "finding themselves." I see them watching their own families, mentors and friends, looking for insight as they face these same challenges. I do believe this play can touch students deeply. We can't wait to share it with all of you.

Sincerely,



Kathryn Moroney
Associate Director of Education

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Cover image: Scenic designer Jo Winiarski's scale model for the Geva production

Cast of Characters

Matilde

Lane

Virginia

Charles

Ana

**Participation in this production and supplemental activities suggested in this guide support the following NYS Learning Standards:
A: 2, 3, 4;
ELA: 1, 2, 3**

"The perfect joke is the perfect music. You want to hear it only once in your life, and then, never again." - Matilde

The Playwright



At age thirty-five Sarah Ruhl is one of the most produced and most celebrated American playwrights of this decade, with plays performed both around the United States and internationally. Ruhl is the recipient of the Helen Merrill Emerging Playwrights Award and the Whiting Writers' Award. In September 2006, she received a MacArthur Fellowship, also commonly called a "Genius Grant," which is awarded for originality and dedication in creative pursuits. The announcement of that award described her as a "playwright creating vivid and adventurous theatrical works that poignantly juxtapose the mundane aspects of daily life with mythic themes of love and war."

Ruhl is the recipient of the prestigious Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for *The Clean House* in 2004, which was also a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2005. She explains that the story of *The Clean House* began its life at a cocktail party: "A woman came in and basically delivered Lane's first monologue. I was interested in the idea of a maid who was said to be depressed because she didn't want to clean. I wondered if she just hated cleaning." While the play is not autobiographical, she acknowledges, "the emotional underpinnings are personal. My father died of cancer, my two grandmas died of breast cancer, my grandpa died of leukemia. I've been at a lot of deathbeds. And my sister's a doctor, my uncles are doctors, there are a lot of doctors in my family." ♦

Synopsis

Somewhere in a "metaphysical Connecticut," Matilde is hired as a live-in maid to clean the house for two busy married doctors, Lane and Charles. But Matilde hates cleaning; she prefers to spend her time concocting jokes and remembering her recently deceased parents, the funniest couple in Brazil. When her mother died laughing at one of her father's jokes, her father killed himself, and Matilde left Brazil for the United States. Lane finds that medication doesn't improve the maid's depression, and isn't sure how to cope. Lane's older sister, Virginia, enjoys cleaning and also has a lot of free time on her hands, and so she makes a secret bargain with Matilde to clean Lane's house. This tidy arrangement unravels when Lane discovers their secret, but Charles confesses an even more disruptive development: he has fallen in love with a patient battling breast cancer, and announces that he must leave Lane to build a life with his new soul-mate, Ana. Forced to re-build their routines and examine their priorities, these characters discover unexpected bonds while facing life – and death – together. As Ana's cancer advances, Charles departs on a desperate mission to find a cure, and Lane brings Ana to live with her. When she knows that she is dying, Ana asks for Matilde to help her die laughing. Matilde has used her time as a maid to develop the perfect joke; she gives it to Ana. Charles returns, and the family mourns. ♦

A note on pronunciation:

"Matilde" is pronounced by the Americans in the play as "Matilda." It is pronounced by Ana as "Mathilda" at first, until Ana realizes that Matilde is Brazilian. And it is pronounced by Matilde, and the more observant characters in the play as "Ma-chil-gee," which is the correct Brazilian pronunciation.

In addition to English, Spanish and Portuguese are also spoken in this play.

Discuss the choice to follow one's heart: good? responsible? wise? moral? How does Sarah Ruhl characterize the choice for each of her characters? What do you believe?

"Everyone's always dying lying down. I want to die standing up." - Ana

“Big invisible things”

Compare any of these “big invisible things” which walk in on Ruhl’s characters, and their appearance in other works of literature and art. Which of these impact your own life?

Use the discussion on the facing page to discuss the idea of *bashert* as it applies to each character – is there a missing piece each needs to find?

What signs of loss or grieving do any of these characters display? How does it influence their actions?

Look for instances of failure, and listen for the recurrences of the words “generous” and “compassion.” Which characters have failed? Which demonstrate compassion or generosity?

Who is blamed for a transgression? Do you think they are forgiven? Is there an act of mercy? Consider the distinction: can there be one without the other?

In Act Two Charles says, “There are things – big invisible things – that come unannounced – they walk in, and we have to give way.” Might he be describing the core of the entire play? “On some level all my work is asking questions about that invisible stuff,” says Sarah Ruhl, and in *The Clean House* those huge and unexpected obstacles describe some of the most universal and enduring themes of human experience.

Love and *Bashert*: “People imagine that people who are in love are happy,” the Brazilian maid observes. “That is why, in your country, people kill themselves on Valentine’s Day....Love isn’t clean like that. It’s dirty.” The characters grapple with the irrationality of love, and all five have something to say about it, from the pragmatic (comparing a husband to “a well-placed couch”) to the idealistic. “We had plans. There was justice in the world. There was justice in love. If a person was good enough, an equally good person would fall in love with that person,” recalls Charles, before amending: “Justice had nothing to do with it.”

Charles reveals to his wife, Lane, that he has to leave her because he’s found his *bashert*, his soulmate according to Jewish law. In Yiddish something that is *bashert* is destined or fated. Used as a noun, a *bashert* is the person with whom someone is fated to share his or her life. Forty days into development, before conception, or before birth (interpretations vary), a heavenly voice announces who a person is destined to marry, and that is the one and only person they should be with. “You are obligated to do this. Legally bound. There’s something – metaphysically – objective about it,” Charles explains.



Promenade by
Marc Chagall, 1917-18

Life and Death: While death does not directly enter the plot of *The Clean House* until the second act, an awareness of mortality is present from the very beginning. Two characters are doctors; one is a patient; one dresses all in black grieving the loss of both parents. Virginia, the least obviously touched by death, laughs off her own self-professed morbidity, and reflects, “I didn’t trust myself to cope with how sick and ugly the world is and how beautiful children are, and the idea of watching them grow into the dirt and mess of the world....” Mortality and life’s limitations – real or perceived – affect these characters. Virginia also says: “...I wish that I could sleep through the whole day....I wanted something – big. I didn’t know how to ask for it.” Director Emma Griffin observes, “I think in many ways *The Clean House* is a play about how to have a life well-lived.” An unanticipated event can provide a wake-up call about how to spend one’s time on earth:

Charles: I don’t expect you to – understand this – immediately. But since this thing – has happened to me – I want to live life to the fullest. I know – what it must sound like. But it’s different. I want to go apple picking. I want to go to Machu Picchu.

Failure and Mercy:

Lane: If you were really sorry, you wouldn’t have done it. We do as we please, and then we say we’re sorry. But we’re not sorry. We’re just – uncomfortable – watching other people in pain.”

Griffin notes that the play examines characters coming to grips with failure – failed choices, failed ambitions and failed relationships. “But one of the things that makes them all able to survive this, is that they all stay open, even when they want to shut down, they don’t,” she explains. “I think fundamentally the play is about the importance of mercy, and how one learns to have mercy in one’s life and towards others. Not even forgiveness, but mercy.” ♦

“It’s as though I suddenly tested positive for a genetic disease that I’ve had all along.” - Charles

The right relationships

Virginia: Since I was twenty-two, my life has gone downhill, and not only have I not done what I wanted to do, but I have lost the qualities that would help me reverse the downward spiral – and now I am a completely different person.

Ana: I don't want a relationship with a disease. I want to have a relationship with death.

The Clean House suggests that most of the characters – whether by circumstance or by choice – have formed relationships not aligned with their priorities, passions and values. Separating what is significant and personal from habits and clutter isn't as easy as it might sound. As Director Emma Griffin says, "*The Clean House* is a play where every single character has something to learn."

Before the performance: based on Sarah Ruhl's character descriptions and a few of each character's lines, what can you guess has been a most important or defining relationship for each? What do you think each might discover that s/he needs or wants to change? Can you imagine what "big invisible thing" might cause that change?



Lane: A doctor, a woman in her early fifties. She wears white.

"But life is about context."

"I've never been jealous, I've never been suspicious. I've never thought any other woman was my equal. I'm the best doctor. I'm the smartest, the most well-loved by my patients. I'm athletic. I have poise. I've aged well. I can talk to anyone and be on equal footing."

"I'm always capable of making a rational decision!"



Virginia: Lane's sister, a woman in her late fifties.

"If you do not clean: how do you know if you've made any progress in life? I love dust. The dust always makes progress. Then I remove the dust. That is progress."

"I don't like to laugh out loud."

"I'm not the company. I'm your sister."

After the performance: did the character form a new relationship? How did his/her existing relationships change? "I want a stranger to clean my house," says Lane. Did a stranger cause an important change? Can a stranger have greater potential to transform our lives than our loved ones? Choose an example from the play, literature or your own life that illustrates your point of view. u

Matilde: Lane's cleaning lady, a woman in her late twenties. She wears black. She is Brazilian. She has a refined sense of deadpan.

"It would kill her, [my mother] said, to have to spend her days laughing at jokes that were not funny."

"I've never liked to clean. When I was a child I thought: if the floor is dirty, look at the ceiling. It is always clean."



Charles: Lane's husband, a man in his fifties. A compassionate surgeon. He is childlike underneath his white coat.



"The difference between inspired medicine and uninspired medicine is love....I loved her to the point of invention."

"I want us all to know each other. I want to do things right, from the beginning."

Ana: An Argentinean woman. She is impossibly charismatic. She is older than Lane.

"I have avoided doctors my whole life. I don't like how they smell. I don't like how they talk. I don't admire their emotional lives. I don't like how they walk. They walk very fast to get somewhere – tac tac tac – I am walking somewhere important. I don't like that. I like a man who saunters."

"I don't cry when I'm supposed to cry."



This page:
costume designer
Jessica Trejos'
preliminary
sketches for the
Geva production

"Everybody needs to be taken care of." - Virginia

A modern malaise?

While Sarah Ruhl writes plays evoking enduring themes, her work is also described as “fresh,” “contemporary” and “keenly observed.” A play like *The Clean House* can resonate powerfully because it feels not only timeless, but also timely: relevant and responsive to real-life experiences that most of her audience will recognize as familiar. On observing the world she notes: “For me the work emerges out of the ordinary. I mean, of course work emerges out of extraordinary moments of loss and ecstasy and all that, but it also emerges from day-to-day observations, having time to stare out the window. And I think that many, many people right now are losing the ordinary, we’re so plugged in all the time.”

- 60% of Americans feel they do not have enough time to get everything done.
- 78% of adults say they wish they had more time to stop and smell the roses. Women feel more strongly about this than men.
- 81% of Americans consider themselves organized, yet 83% say getting more organized is among their goals.
- The demand for home organization products in the US will increase 4.3 percent annually to \$8.9 billion in 2013.
- Men who owned a Palm Pilot were four times more likely to forget their spouse's birthday than men who didn't own a Palm Pilot.

(Statistical information from the National Association of Professional Organizers)

Lane: It's ridiculous – living so close and never seeing each other...Next week is crazy, but soon.

Ruhl observes: “Cell phones, iPods, wireless computers will change people in ways we don't even understand. We're less connected to the present. No one is where they are. There's absolutely no reason to talk to a stranger anymore – you connect to people you already know. But how well do you know them? Because you never see them – you just talk to them. I find that terrifying.”

Virginia: We clean together. We talk and fold laundry, as women used to do. They would gather at the public fountains and wash their clothes and tell stories. Now we are alone in our separate houses and it is terrible.

Between 1985 and 2004, the number of people who said there was no one with whom they discussed important matters tripled, to 25 percent, according to Duke University researchers.

“Today's consumers buy bike helmets and ski helmets and antibacterial soap; they fret about partially hydrogenated fats and consume less tobacco than their parents. But by some reckonings social isolation is as big a risk factor for premature death as smoking,” suggests a *Washington Post* editorial. “Modern society creates tools that extend your casual networks – e-mail, instant messaging, social-networking Web sites – while doing nothing to remove the basic need for soulmates. Meanwhile, people work more hours. They commute longer because they've moved to the exurbs in search of larger homes; they've got spacious entertainment rooms but no mental space for entertaining.”

Antidepressants have become the most commonly prescribed drugs in the United States; the use of antidepressants and other psychotropic drugs – those that affect brain chemistry – has skyrocketed over the last decade. Between 1995 and 2002 the use of these drugs rose 48 percent, the CDC reported.

Ruhl has written several characters in her plays who may or may not be depressed. A 2005 article in *American Theatre* described Ruhl's concern that modern Americans are “losing a whole category of emotion.” She acknowledges that depression is a serious illness, but is wary that in the desire to control and improve our lives, perhaps “all sad emotions just get swept into the category of depression. We're failing to make distinctions, and that's scary.” Cleaning house, for Ruhl's characters, is about really getting to the root of problems, the root of sadness, the root of happiness, and slowing down to get back in touch with one another. ♦

“I go to work exhausted and I come home exhausted. That is how most of the people in this country function.” – Lane

What's so funny?

“Comedy is the blues for people who can't sing.” – Chris Rock

Comedy, like the blues, is built on rhythm and timing, a musicality essential to the success of a good joke. When Matilde says that “most jokes go in threes ... [so she is] making up one that goes in sixes,” she's referring to this musicality. It is hardly incidental, then, that the language of the blues – riffs, beats, improvisation – is similar to the vocabulary of comedy nor that these concepts are integral to the creation of a joke or a song.

Matilde: Ask me what my profession is then ask me what my greatest problem is.

Virginia: What's your profession?

Matilde: I'm a comedian.

Virginia: What's your --

Matilde: Timing.



Left: comedian Margaret Cho;
Right: blues singer Mississippi John Hurt



Many of Matilde's jokes are told in Portuguese, leaving most of the audience to guess at the humor at hand. And yet we know a joke has been told – partly from her body language but also from her cadence and rhythm, stylistic choices we would recognize in any language so accustomed are we to their forms. Matilde says that heaven may be a “sea of untranslatable jokes. Only everyone is laughing.” – the telling of a joke, like the singing of a song, is universal. Think about a selection from an opera – many operas are sung in foreign languages. Even a casual listener, though, can tell when a moment is comedic or tragic, silly or serious. One need not be bilingual to appreciate the story being told. When done right, a joke can make the same linguistic leap.

Comedy also shares with the blues a history of taking serious topics and approaching them in humorous ways – by taking stock of the absurdity of a certain situation, for example, or examining the strangeness of the circumstances. Director Emma Griffin sees *The Clean House* as a “black comedy” since “terrible things happen to people in this play ... and [yet it] wears a lot of that tragedy very lightly.” Sickness, infidelity, and death all make appearances in *The Clean House* and yet are handled with a delicacy which cushions their darkness. Sarah Ruhl refers to this lightness as “a philosophical and aesthetic viewpoint ... a stepping back to be able to laugh at horrible things even as you're experiencing them.”

How should we respond to Charles' telegram from Alaska as he seeks a cure for Ana's illness ...

“Dear Ana. Stop.
Have cut down tree. Stop.
Cannot get on plane with tree. Stop.
Must learn to fly plane. Stop.
Wait for me. Stop.
Your beloved, Charles”

... or Matilde's standing in her family's comedic ranks?

“I was the third funniest person in my family. Then my parent died, making me the funniest. There was no one left to laugh at my jokes, so I left.”

Similar is Matilde's contention, while discussing Ana's deteriorating health, that God must eat chocolate ice cream when He's tired. Death is looming, Ana's husband is far away and the topic of conversation turns to the preferred dessert choice of a deity. The conversation may not exemplify the height of gravity but there is little denying the importance of the issues in the room. Lightness, says Ruhl, “is deeply serious.” And anyone, be they comedian, blues singer or housekeeper, can find humor in the darkest of moments. ♦

Try to write a joke of your own. What was the easiest part? The hardest part? How many different ways could it be told?

Think about your favorite joke. What makes it funny? Can you break it down into its individual parts?

Some people believe there are certain topics that should be considered “off-limits” for humor while others believe that any subject can be approached humorously, often seeking to provoke further discussion. What do you think? Can we joke about everything or should some topics only be dealt with seriously?

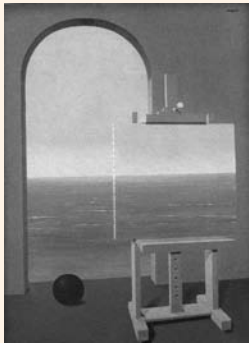
“I didn't know that jokes had time signatures.” – Virginia

Three-dimensional poems

“One of the things that this play does well – and I think it’s one of the reasons that people respond to it so strongly – is that it has a really very satisfying synchronicity between the narrative impact, complexity and closure of a novel, the way a novel arcs and ends, and the emotional impact and imagery of poetry. And I think the marriage of those two things is what makes the play feel so exciting.” – Director Emma Griffin

Sarah Ruhl originally began her writing career as a poet, with a collection of poetry published at age twenty, and she has sometimes referred to her plays as “three-dimensional poems.” Filled with vivid, fantastical and improbable imagery, her scripts have earned diverse labels from the attempts to define

their style. Noted critic John Lahr calls Ruhl a fabulist, and has described her interest in the work of Italo Calvino, who wrote, “In the even more congested times that await us literature must aim at the maximum concentration of poetry and thought.” Ruhl’s surprising visual imagination can also suggest surrealism and magical realism and she acknowledges the discussion:



The Human Condition
by René Magritte, 1935

“I would love to be thrown in with the Magical Realists if that means being counted with [Gabriel García] Márquez, who I think is brilliant. But I do wonder about the idea of genres. I don’t think the writing needs to fit into a genre in order for magical things to happen onstage. Maybe we’re all still a bit afraid of that, so we reach for a category rather than believing magic could happen at any moment. I think somehow our culture is sorely in need of magic.”

Lahr notes: “Ruhl writes with space, sound, and image as well as words.” One of the key ways that she does so is through the use of her stage directions, which are precise and evocative while remaining quite open-ended for each production to interpret uniquely. “I very specifically don’t use parentheses when writing stage directions, because I don’t want actors or directors to see them as optional or parenthetical. They are as intimate and integral as the dialogue, even if a director doesn’t follow them in a literal way. In *The Clean House*, I was interested in using stage directions to communicate with actors in a more direct way – to give them little poems that only they would have access to...”

Imagine creating the following moments on stage. As a director, actor, or designer, what choices might you make to bring these events to life?

They dance.

They dance until laughing makes them kiss.

They kiss until kissing makes them laugh.

Matilde watches.

Matilde longs for them.

* * * * *

Ana lies under a sheet.

Beautiful music.

A subtitle projects: Charles Performs Surgery on the Woman He Loves.

Charles takes out surgical equipment.

He does surgery on Ana.

It is an act of love.

Director Emma Griffin has decided not to use Ruhl’s optional subtitles for the Geva production. (“I think those are a conversation with us, the director and the actors, and then we translate it into our production.”) Do you think you would use the subtitle to create the scene above? Why or why not?

What are the poetic qualities of this play? What elements, scenes, or moments would you assign to other genres or styles of writing? How would you describe the play to someone who did not see it?

García Márquez reflected: “My most important problem was destroying the lines of demarcation that separates what seems real from what seems fantastic.” In this production, do the magical elements appear as separate and distinct from daily life, or are they merged with the ordinary? u

“Will you hold my tree?” – Charles

New play, old influences

“We’re in the theatre and people are speaking to us. You could say it’s more real,” says Sarah Ruhl. *The Clean House* often uses passages of direct address, where characters speak directly to the audience to share their opinions and observations. This is not a new convention, (as any lover of Shakespeare knows,) but Ruhl employs such classical and overtly-theatrical techniques to create an expression she finds more satisfying than the twentieth century’s interest in psychological realism.

“If you distill people’s subjectivity and how they view the world emotionally, you don’t get realism. I don’t want to smooth out the emotions to the point where you could interpret them totally rationally, so that they have a clear reference point to the past. Psychological realism makes emotions so rational, so explained, that they don’t feel like emotions to me....I’m interested in the things theatre can do that other forms can’t. So theatre as pure plumbing of self, in a psychological way, seems very readerly to me.”

“In *Clean House*...you can see the structural bones of a different theatrical relationship with the audience, be it medieval, Jacobean, or impressionist,” said Paula Vogel in conversation with Ruhl, her fellow playwright and former student. “What’s exciting about your work and that of the other rising playwrights in your generation is that there’s a reclaiming of theatre out of that mishmash of assumptions made about realism. Assumptions that were not even theatrical issues in previous centuries.”

Ruhl reflected, “I think our generation has to look at Freud and Freud’s impact, and many of us say, Oh, maybe Freud didn’t have it right. Something that he was right about he got from literature: the Oedipal complex, from the Greeks. So maybe we ought to go back to the Greeks instead of back to Freud on the Greeks...”

Indeed Ruhl has gone back to the Greeks: one play *Eurydice*, is her own adaptation of a Greek myth for the stage. But in the case of *The Clean House*, that aesthetic of heightened emotion, language and spectacle is applied to an extremely accessible, domestic setting; Ruhl is keeping one foot firmly rooted in contemporary dramatic tradition. As Director Emma Griffin explains, “One could say that classical drama takes place in the public square but modern drama takes place in the house...and almost always there is something wrong with the house....Lane’s clean house will not remain clean.”

John Lahr wrote: “Her plays are distinguished by a minimum of backstory; the audience is submerged in a series of unfolding dramatic moments. As a storyteller, Ruhl marches to Ovid’s drum rather than Aristotle’s. ‘Aristotle has held sway for many centuries, but I feel our culture is hungry for Ovid’s way of telling stories,’ she said, describing Ovid’s narrative strategy as ‘one thing transforming into another.’ She went on, ‘His is not the neat Aristotelian arc but, instead, small transformations that are delightful and tragic....The Aristotelian model – a person wants something, comes close to getting it but is smashed down, then finally gets it or not, then learns something from the experience – I don’t find that helpful. It’s a strange way to look at experience.” (continued on next page)

What plays do you know that use direct address? Does it feel more classical or contemporary to you? Do film or television stories ever use direct address? How is it similar or different?



Scenic designer Jo Winiarski referenced the architecture of Kabuki stages for inspiration during the Geva design process. Above see the “house portals” of the Geva design compared with one of the research images. (Note the discussion of Kabuki theatre which follows on the next page.)

Consider a novel or play you know well. Do you think the structure is more like Aristotle’s or Ovid’s?

“The perfect joke makes you forget about your life. The perfect joke makes you remember about your life.” - Matilde

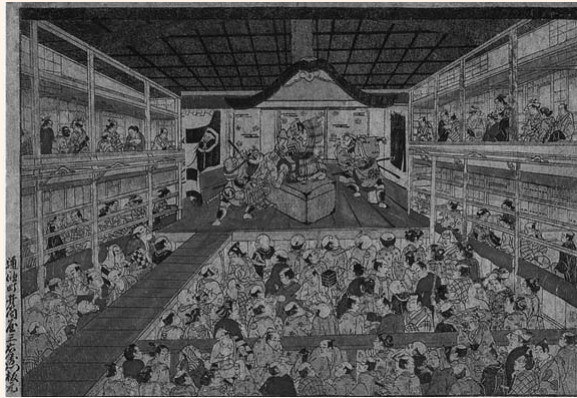


Above: research image for the scenic design

When setting the stage for Geva’s production, scenic designer Jo Winiarski was challenged to create a world that would support the naturalistic behaviors of modern life in Lane’s well-appointed home, while remaining abstract enough to suggest almost any home, or all homes. She says, “This play is an interesting balance of the poetic and the realistic. Having a set that can offer both, and fulfill the needs of the play was tough.”

Director Emma Griffin explains, that she had “spent a lot of time looking at Kabuki, and looking at Japanese architecture. The cleanliness of line, and the way it deals with space made a lot of sense to me.” The use of space is contemporary but also elegantly timeless, much like Ruhl’s writing. This Asian influence introduced another opportunity as well. “In Kabuki,” Griffin explains, “there is this thing called *hanamichi*, which is a long platform that extends out through the audience. I knew we needed a special place for some of those monologues.”

The *hanamichi* (“flower passage”) of the Kabuki theatre is a runway which reaches from stage right to the rear of the theatre at the level of the spectators’ heads. An integral part of the Kabuki drama since the 18th century, it is used for climactic scenes – spectacular entries, exits, processions, and battles – and for scenes when intimacy and emotional rapport with the audience are desired. Geographically, it may represent a forest, a mountainous road, an inlet of water, or a street or ceremonial path to the inner courtyards of palaces. While it does not extend into the audience, Winiarski included a version of such an elevated walkway on the right side of the Geva set, and it is utilized for many of the same purposes as the traditional *hanamichi*.



Left: The *hanamichi* is visible on the left side of the drawing; Right: Winiarski’s scale model of the Geva set.

In an intriguing piece of synchronicity, Ruhl herself explored the Kabuki aesthetic in her own writing. “In her first piece, a ten-minute exercise assigned by her teacher...Ruhl synthesized Kabuki stage techniques with a suburban American environment to evoke her grief over her father’s death,” notes John Lahr. This early experiment offers one more example of Ruhl’s expression of contemporary life through heightened theatrical experiences.

Once Winiarski had designed the form and function of Ruhl’s home in “a metaphysical Connecticut,” her task was to furnish it with realistic, modern touches that would underscore aspects of the lives inside. “*Metropolitan Home* (the magazine) was a great source. Especially for her furniture,” said Winiarski of researching and creating the decor of Charles and Lane’s affluent lifestyle. The idea of a living room that is not really lived in has important resonances for the story, and Winiarski enjoyed discovering the subtle embellishments which hint at that disconnect. “My favorite are the silver knick knacks I gave Lane for her coffee table. They are balls. Perfectly un-useful.”

The set also transforms as the direction of the story shifts with Ana’s arrival. “I think Ana’s balcony is very important,” says Winiarski. “Her reveal is about color. When she comes into the play – she breathes color into Lane’s world.” The entire house becomes a canvas to illustrate the “small transformations” Ruhl cherishes in Ovid, as classical tools are re-imagined to tell a new story. ♦

“I don’t know the punch line.
There must be a punch line.” – Charles

Further Explorations

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Published plays by Sarah Ruhl

The Clean House and Other Plays - includes *Eurydice*, *Melancholy Play* and *Late: A Cowboy Song*
Dead Man's Cell Phone

Staff

Skip Greer

Director of
Education/Artist
in Residence

Kathryn Morozzy

Associate Director
of Education

Eric Evans

Education
Administrator

Susan Hagfner

Artist Educator

Margz Bztlyz

Literary Manager/
Resident Dramaturg

Jean Gordon Ryan

Dramaturg/New
Plays Coordinator

Mark Cuddy

Artistic Director

Greg Weber

Managing Director

Nan Hildebrandt

Executive Director

Articles

"Surreal Life: The plays of Sarah Ruhl" by John Lahr from *The New Yorker* (March 17, 2008)

www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/03/17/080317crat_atlarge_lahr

"Sarah Ruhl," an interview with Paula Vogel from *Bomb Magazine* (Spring 2007)

www.bombsite.com/issues/99/articles/2902

"The Golden Ruhl" by Celia Wren from *American Theatre Magazine* (October 2005)

www.tcg.org/publications/at/Oct05/ruhl.cfm

"Why So Lonesome?" Op-Ed by Sebastian Mallaby from *The Washington Post* (June 26, 2006)

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/25/AR2006062500566.html

Cancer resources in our community

The Breast Cancer Coalition of Rochester provides support to those touched by a diagnosis of breast cancer.

www.bccr.org

Gilda's Club provides a meeting place for men, women and children living with cancer, along with their family and friends.

www.gildasclubrochester.org

Melissa's Living Legacy is a national non-profit organization dedicated to the unique challenges that face teens and young adults living with cancer, and hosts many activities and services right here in Rochester.

www.melissalivinglegacy.org

"Sometimes you have to suffer for the really good ones."
— Matilde

2009-10 P.L.A.Y Student Matinee Series

A Christmas Story

December 1st, 2nd, 3rd,
10th & 16th at 10:30 a.m
Recommended for all
audiences (ages 5 and up)

Almost, Maine

January 21st at 10:30 a.m.
Recommended for middle
school audiences and up

The Price

March 11th at 10:30 a.m.
Recommended for high
school audiences

Two Trains Running

April 8th, 13th &
15th at 10:30 a.m.
Recommended for high
school audiences

**To reserve seats please call
(585) 232-1366, ext. 3035**



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Education Department: (585) 232-1366, ext. 3058
www.gevatheatre.org/learn