

THE RUHLS OF RELATIONSHIPS: CONNECTING WITH OTHERS
THROUGH THEATRICAL AMBIGUITY

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ABSTRACT

The *Ruhls of Relationships: Connecting with Others Through Theatrical Ambiguity* aims to bring attention to the enjoyable relationship one should have with theatre that encourages ambiguity and to highlight the joy and connection one can find through plays that encourage unity among audiences. This will be done through an examination of the interpersonal relationships demonstrated in eight of Sarah Ruhl's major plays: *Melancholy Play: a contemporary farce* (2002), *Eurydice* (2003), *Late: a cowboy song* (2003), *The Clean House* (2004), *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (2007), *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* (2009), *Stage Kiss* (2011), and *The Oldest Boy* (2014). Through textual examinations and an analysis of professional productions, including a primary account of the world premiere of *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage* (2017), an exploration of Ruhl's presence in modern American theatre will determine the significance of and reason behind the popularity of her aesthetic. Ruhl has set herself apart as a successful playwright in contemporary theatre by combining magical realism with light-hearted tragedy, and, in turn, created an inclusive environment within the theatre community that audiences are grasping for.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “The Ruhl’s of Relationships: Connecting with Others Through Theatrical Ambiguity,” presented by Whitney R. Jury, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

THE THEATRE FOR EVERYONE

“I wish to remember the beauty of smallness. And of proximity. In a time when largeness is threatening to topple us—I want to remember the Davids of theatre, and the Goliath of loneliness.”

-Sarah Ruhl, *The Play That Changed My Life*

I would like to make a case for ambiguity. The glorification of political and religious ideals is a frequent habit for many artists. While it would be daunting to go into whether art is defined by its ambiguity, it is important to state the effectiveness of such “art.” Sarah Ruhl has accomplished something quite respectable as an artist: she has presented her opinions about politics, gender, religion, and relationships in a way that is both accessible and agreeable for everyone. Regardless of what her opinions are on any subject, Ruhl simply tells stories about people. In doing so, she has succeeded in getting points across that have to do with many agendas frequently addressed in our 21st-century society. The beauty behind Ruhl’s work lies in her ability to show audiences the lives of everyday people dealing with everyday things and to argue for things that are dear to her. The subtle way in which she promotes the success behind an interracial marriage, makes a heartfelt case for a baby born with androgen insensitivity, and comments on the growth of knowledge about female sexuality within the past few centuries is notable. While Sarah Ruhl may have many agendas she encourages and promotes within her life, she in no way forces those agendas on her audiences. Ruhl does not need her opinions glorified or echoed. She merely tells stories.

My relationship with Sarah Ruhl’s plays started in the middle of November 2016. I had, oddly enough, not heard her name before (or so I thought in the moment of introduction) and had no conception of what her plays had to offer. My undergraduate theatre program was severely deficient in the education of Theatre History, so one would be correct in saying I came into this program with an unfortunate lack of knowledge about literary movements and writing concepts.

A borrowed copy of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* accompanied me home from campus that day and I made the plan to read it that evening at a dimly-lit bar with a glass of red wine. Little did I know I would be having my first date with a concept I would eventually fall in love with. When reading something, be it for fun or out of an obligation, it is always enjoyable to come across a line that echoes the reader's own feelings or provokes their mind to think deeply about the world. For many pieces of literature, every few lines or possibly only a few lines within the book have this effect. My reasoning behind choosing to analyze the plays of Sarah Ruhl lies in the fact that I was unable to read two or three lines without having some sort of epiphany; I was unable to move on in the play unless I wrote a certain line down. This is what Ruhl's writing does to me, and it is likely what her writing does for many other people. I want to differentiate the experiences between reading her work and seeing her work performed (while in no way arguing that her plays are simply meant to be read). Plays are meant to be performed, to be seen, but some of them tend to develop into a one-on-one relationship with their reader if they have that special touch.

Not only does Ruhl know what she is doing as a playwright but she also has a great respect for and knowledge of the theatre. One can feel the empathy she has for actors when reading her stage directions. She also understands the capabilities of different theatre companies, whether they are for educational purposes or they put on professional shows. Reading Ruhl's plays is an entirely different experience from seeing them staged because, as a reader, one gets to see the stage directions clearly stated on the page. Experiencing the stage directions within the context of the performance is ephemeral whereas reading them on the page could be experienced as many times as the reader desires. For theatre artists who adore and focus on the words and the

language, reading could be the preferred experience. For the purpose of this paper, I encourage all theatregoers to read Ruhl's plays in addition to seeing them performed on stage.

Language tends to differentiate people while relationships are unifying. All humans of the world have one thing in common: they have relationships. I am not necessarily referring solely to romantic relationships. Within this I am including any type of human interaction that surpasses introduction. Relationship types range from platonic to romantic to simply having a relationship with someone because they are in your work environment because you hired them or have been hired by them. In Sarah Ruhl's plays, common types of relationships are demonstrated in front of audiences. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the concept of human relationships, their consistency and parallels throughout Ruhl's plays, and their ambiguous nature which encourages unique reactions from different audiences. Through Ruhl's act of story-telling, we get a taste of what it is like to be in these specific relationships. Family relationships, including sisters, mother-daughter, father-daughter, and husband-wives are witnessed both in strength and in the process of crumbling. Friendships develop before audiences' eyes between a house maid and a stranger and an actress and her stand-in kiss. Even a widow develops a friendly relationship with a woman who she believes has been sleeping with her now-deceased husband. Some friendships are in the process of possibly developing into something more, like that between a cowboy and a childhood friend who enjoys learning how to make soup more than she enjoys the company of her husband. Ruhl explores relationships between lovers who are breaking the bonds of marriage and lovers who are curious about what their spouse is up to all day. Within each of these relationships, audiences find something to relate to, something to empathize with: human interaction. Ruhl intersperses comedy into tragic situations and, by focusing on lightness during sad times, she illuminates the human desire for laughter.

Day to day, we live our lives interacting with people who are close to us and with people we just met and often these relationships are thought about and analyzed. Why do we have the desire to connect with people? Why do we sometimes get bored with the people we are with and go looking for relationships outside the ones we know? What channels our constant need for human interaction? For anyone questioning this, I have one direction to point you in: the theater. Playwrights around the world and all throughout time have been writing stories about the ways humans interact for ages. We are lucky enough to live during the same period as Sarah Ruhl, who has mastered the portrayal of different types of human relationships on the stage.

When someone realizes that they have met their love, their life partner, they become each other's. I will consistently be referring to a character's chosen life partner as "their person" throughout the entirety of the essay. Also, the concept of protagonist and antagonist will be completely absent from this essay. Because theatre is the recreation of human action, and there are no protagonists or antagonists in life, this means they do not exist in Ruhl's theatre. The characters in Ruhl's plays that are discussed will receive their due respect while their personal journeys are outlined. Humans with full-functioning bodies and minds have reasons for behaving the way they do within interpersonal relationships; the characters within Ruhl's plays have reasons also and it is my purpose to demonstrate what those reasons are.

CHAPTER 2

KEEP THEM CLOSE TO YOU: FAMILIES

Much like the directed roles actors take on in the theatre, children are heavily influenced by the scripts and objectives given to them by their parents. From a very young age, children begin to mimic what their parents say and do, not as a form of mockery, but as an attempt to learn. For traditional families, the mother and the father are most respected and loved by their child when the child is young and hungry for knowledge. Ruhl is well versed in the role as a mother as she has young children of her own. “Rather than seeing motherhood as something that stands in the way of her creative work, Ruhl finds ways to use that part of her life to help her understand her craft anew” (Durham 23). She is careful in her writing, though, and remains objective when creating the role of the parent. The examples of parental roles in her plays range from the mother who is heartbroken by her inability to breastfeed, to a mother who has a hard time controlling her urges towards men within her profession, all the way back around to a mother who refuses to understand the negativity in teaching her toddler to become too attached. We mustn’t forget fathers, of course. Although Ruhl herself is not a father, she has an educated guess and is a primary source to the realities of fatherhood. Her writing is careful not to exclude; it is inclusive of many important roles that are filled within the family dynamic. One of Ruhl’s plays introduces the dynamic between parents and a two-year old while two of her plays analyzed for the purpose of this discussion involve parents with infants. It makes the most sense to start there.

A Child is an Olive Branch

On raising an infant, columnist David Brooks had this to say: “The average baby demands adult attention of one kind or another every twenty seconds” (35). He then goes on to explain the exhaustion and frustration that comes with rearing a child and how it changes you as a person completely. This is the part that goes through the head of 20 to 30-year-old minds when they hear a baby scream, and it is the reason many people of that age are putting parenting a child off for quite a while. For some people that age, though, accidental pregnancies are always possible. In the world of Mary and Crick, that is exactly what happened. *Late: a cowboy song* (2003) opens to its audiences with a man sitting near dirty dishes as his girlfriend walks in the door. Because Ruhl encourages hyperrealism and fluidity in the scenery and lighting for the performances, designers have some options when it comes to her cleverly titled scenes (*The Clean House and Other Plays*, 121-22). For the Fall 2016 production of the play at the University of Kansas, they chose to project the titles across the back wall for the audience to read. The first reads: “You’re Late.” This can be taken literally by the audience until they realize two scenes later that she is, in fact, late this month. With the absence of her period and the quick thinking of Crick, they decide to get married, as many young couples do when faced with this same situation. Their relationship had been consistent since they were in second grade; these were the right choices to make for the baby. As we will discuss later in this chapter, children of separated parents have significantly lower odds of being in successful relationships as adults than children whose parents remained together.

The story of Mary and Crick’s baby is nowhere near resolved. The unique experience they have with their baby, whom Crick insists they name Jill while Mary will only call the baby Blue, is one that leaves the audience with questions they must answer for themselves. Part of the

beauty of Ruhl's work is that, while she plays the part of the storyteller, she is sure to leave bits and pieces up to the subjective mind of each audience member, encouraging critical thought through ambiguity. *Late: a cowboy song*, which received its premiere at The Ohio Theatre in New York City in 2003, is not an exception to this rule. Mary gives birth to Blue/Jill and is very quickly told that there is some confusion about the sex of the baby. It was born with androgen insensitivity, and even though they take care of the baby surgically to appear as a girl, Mary plans to be careful and respectful of her baby by naming it Blue and makes the decision to let the child decide things on its own. Crick, on the other hand, plays the role of father to his daughter as she grows up. He wants to call her Jill and goes on to buy her dolls and dresses for Christmas, creating a void (which Mary had already established through her own behavior) between them.

MARY: She's not a baby anymore.

CRICK: I know. She's a little girl.

MARY: Why does it have to be one thing or another?

CRICK: Because sometimes in life, Mary, you have to choose. You can't live on a fence.

I won't have my daughter living on a fence (Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* 205).

The wedge this brings between the two of them does end in a separation at the end of the play. Mary takes Blue out of the house and the final scene is them walking off in the sunset with Mary's friend, Red, who will come up in a later chapter. The ambiguity in the ending about whether Crick will see his darling baby girl again is left for the audience to decide, in regular Ruhl fashion.

In the Next Room or, the vibrator play (2009) is the second play of Ruhl's we will discuss that involves children at their infancy. The focus of this parent-child relationship is not that of

confused gender, but of the troubles involved in mother-baby bonding. The play opens with Catherine Givings, wife of Dr. Givings, an obstetrician, holding her baby while showing the child the magic of electricity in a lamp that sits in their living room. Ruhl takes us back now to the 1880s, the dawn of electricity and a time of advancement in the medical field. The costumes and set are detailed more fully for this play than in many of Ruhl's others because of the specificity of the time period. One of her purposes for taking us to this time of parenthood is to introduce the audience to an old tradition: wet nursing. Often, households would hire a woman to breastfeed their infants for various reason. In the purpose of this play, the reason happens to be Catherine's lack of milk. Due to the many medical stigmas created during that time about infants needing to be breast fed or else their mortality rates would rise significantly, Dr. and Mrs. Givings put out an ad for a wet-nurse (Golden 123). The unfortunate reality of another woman breastfeeding the baby, whom they call Letitia, is Catherine's inability to bond with her own child. Catherine's heart breaks multiple times throughout the play as she watches the wet nurse, Elizabeth, nurse baby Letitia. This process eventually brings both women to tears due to the fact that Elizabeth lost her baby recently, so the women are often able to feel distraught together.

Another mother with attachment issues in Ruhl's plays is a character she simply calls Mother. When we meet Mother, she is in her colorful, Tibetan decorated house attempting to meditate. She is the mother of *The Oldest Boy* (2014), whom we meet as the first scene goes on. Ruhl writes Mother in a most unique and loving manner. Inspired by the stories Ruhl's Tibetan babysitter Yangzom had told to her, Ruhl decided to write a play about an American woman with a half-Tibetan son.¹ The choice to make Mother American was simply to add dramatic tension to the play. This tension is established on the day Mother is told that her son, the Oldest Boy (named Tenzin), is the reincarnation of a Lama, a great teacher who had died three years

prior to the start of the play. After the initial trauma of the news, Mother has a dream in which it is revealed that the boy has no choice but to go to India and study with another Lama, who used to be his student. It is Tenzin's destiny. It does not matter how deeply she loves her boy or how terribly she will hurt when he is gone; it is the best option for his well-being to go. This is what mothers do for their children. They sacrifice their own happiness for their children's benefit. Mother even sacrifices by allowing the monks to give her boy his first haircut, which is a very important stepping-stone in a child's life to American mothers.

In regards to *The Oldest Boy*, some criticism has come up. This play is one of Ruhl's commissioned pieces and was first produced in the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater at Lincoln Center in New York City in 2014. It has since been performed professionally on numerous stages, including that of The Unicorn Theatre in Kansas City, Missouri, in 2015. These productions elicited many opinions in theatregoers regarding the blending of cultures and the slowness of Act II. While the play does seem to move somewhat slower than some of Ruhl's other work, criticizing this would be exhaustive. The need to analyze Ruhl's choice to incorporate a puppet or Mother's need to "replace" Tenzin with another child is never going to be as important as an audience's need to empathize with the character's purpose and the playwright's reasoning. Many American theatregoers likely know nothing about Tibet or Buddhism or the nature of becoming a monk but what the audience can empathize with is the Mother's connection to her child. One will always find something to connect to within Sarah Ruhl's work.

You Leave It On

There is only one play we will discuss within the context of this essay that involves the relationship between parents and a teenager, and that is *Stage Kiss* (2011). Let's create a

scenario: you are a famous actress who has been down on your luck until recently (recently, of course, meaning since your daughter was born fifteen years ago), when you are, out of the blue, cast in a leading role of a play. The initial excitement exists until you remember what kept you from acting in the first place: the job changed you. The birth of your daughter turned you away from your irresponsible urges being on stage stirred in you and you loved her for it. But you also loved acting; it is your original calling. What do you do? You take the job of course. You're an actor. You can't help it!

As one can easily assume, that is exactly what the characters are faced with in *Stage Kiss*. Our leading lady, She, is getting the chance to re-live her glory days as a star actress only to encounter her old flame, He, being cast opposite her. The quick downward spiral of She back in to the arms of He has some serious effects on She's daughter, Angela, who not only witnesses the affair, but expected it when she first heard of her mother getting a part. "Both parenting and theatre involve an embrace of impermanence, and both are embodied art forms" (Ruhl, *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write* 157). The potential for bitterness and hatred is rising during the play until we finally meet Angela. And, yes, she is vulgar. She is upset. But, most importantly, she is unchanged. The unique beauty behind Ruhl's choice in writing Angela as someone who still believes in the power and purpose of marriage after watching her mother defile it is a trustworthy act on the part of a storyteller. In life, the odds would be against her.

ANGELA: Marriage should be like a tattoo. *You leave it on*. That's the point of marriage and tattoos. There's this new removable tattoo ink it's such bullshit like why get one if you want a removable one that's like the *definition* of a tattoo, it's forever. If you're that much of a fucking coward don't get a fucking tattoo and don't get married (Ruhl, *Stage Kiss* 96).

Angela grew up (as it is suggested) with a mother who seemed discontent with a stagnant life, yet she reached her teenage years with a sense of what marriage is supposed to look like. She was possibly influenced by her friends or possibly her father made it a point to always explain to her what she was to expect in marriage because the one she had as a role model was not perfect. The rules are not steadfast; teenagers who grow up in somewhat broken households are not destined to be a part of failed marriages. Although Tom Inglis argues that “the ability of...children to engage in loving relationships later in life was directly related to them witnessing and participating in the love between their parents” in his book titled *Love*, Angela attempts to defy this (30). For Angela, seeing her parents in a strained marriage might be the best thing for her. That could be what pushes her to realize the purpose of marriage. The most important point I am hoping to get across with this paper is that everyone decides their own journey through the choices they make; it is one’s personal choice as to how much those decisions are influenced by the world around them.

Like Grieving in Reverse

Though our families remain defined as such up until the moment of our death, the relationships change and evolve constantly. Sisters who get along wonderfully in childhood have the potential to become distant when they are adults and competitive attitudes can arise in brothers who were once best friends. There are no steadfast rules to these relationship, only trends. The change comes from the choices made by each person and if there is anything Ruhl implements in her characters, it is choice. Each one of them will inevitably come to a fork in the road during their lifetime and their decision will affect their close relationships. That is the nature of Ruhl’s work and that is the nature of life.

The Clean House (2004) and *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (2007) were produced only three years apart. They were each given wonderful reviews and were well received by audiences, as Ruhl's plays tend to be. What aligns these two plays for our purposes, though, are the adult family relationships depicted within their stories. Each play depicts fallen relationships between family members and how those pieces are put back together. While each play addresses the subject in a unique manner, Ruhl certainly allows audiences to interpret whether the final construct of each relationship is worthy to be deemed as reconcilable. *Dead Man's Cell Phone* premiered at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington D.C. in 2007 and has since had runs in both New York and Chicago in 2008. In this play, we meet Gordon. He is the first person the audience sees on stage when the lights come up. Unfortunately, Gordon is dead. Fortunately, Jean is there to call for help. Through the course of the play, Jean consoles Gordon's family by giving his brother Dwight a reason to mourn when none could be found and causing his mother, Mrs. Gottlieb, to throw herself into a fire as an act of true love. Jean's confabulations to Gordon's family throughout the play put each of his family members in a better place than when they started. It would be hard to imagine the pain of a mother mourning the death of her son when it is supposed to go the other way around:

MRS. GOTTLIEB: When someone older than you dies it gets better every day but when someone younger than you dies it gets worse every day. Like grieving in reverse...I see it as my job to mourn him until the day I die (Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* 25-6).

The first time we hear from Mrs. Gottlieb, she grieves over her son in a strangely general way, almost as if she is grieving only because she feels that is what a mother does when her son dies. It then starts to transition into passionate sadness. Mrs. Gottlieb becomes the only person in the play to truly grieve over Gordon's death and eventually follows him to the grave. "For many

parents, it is clear, some degree of disbelief persists for many months after the child's death" (Bowlby 119).² When explaining her own grief during her elegy at Gordon's funeral, she feels it "requires height" (Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* 15). Meaning, she feels so much of it that she is thankful the ceilings of the church are high enough to contain it, almost as if her grief is endless or infinite. Mrs. Gottlieb then goes on to quote Charles Dickens, whom Ruhl herself brings attention to as an introduction to the play: "My friend is dead, my neighbor is dead, my love, the darling of my soul is dead" (Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* 5).³ The result of Mrs. Gottlieb's endlessly evolving grief, and the news of what her afterlife will look like once she finds out that Gordon is her truest love, is her own death by barbeque. Gordon's brother, Dwight, seemingly has the most negative remembrance of Gordon, consisting of disappointment with a career in illegal organ donation and, most likely, a disappointment in his relationship habits. However, much like his mother, he comes to terms with it by the end.

The Clean House offers a different version of sibling grief. The largest difference is that neither one of the two sisters is dead; they simply do not agree with each other's lifestyles. *The Clean House* was commissioned in 2000 by the McCarter Theater Center in New Jersey and the world premiere followed in 2004 as a production by the Yale Repertory Theatre in Connecticut. It became a Pulitzer Prize finalist the following year. It has since been produced on many stages, including the Goodman Theatre in Chicago (2006), The Lincoln Center Theater in New York City (2006), and The Unicorn Theatre in Kansas City (2008). The two sisters, Virginia and Lane, have differing opinions on who should be cleaning their house. Lane is under the impression that she should not have to clean her house considering she is a doctor with a medical degree, whereas Virginia believes that a woman who does not clean her house is going to be oblivious about things in her life beyond the dirt on the fans. In the end, Virginia is assumed to be the sister

with the most advanced opinion but this is only because the audience comes to pity Lane so much throughout the course of the play.

“The sibling rivalry between Lane and Virginia may be traced to that between Ruhl and her older sister Kate. The play is dedicated to her husband Tony and her sister, both of whom are doctors...” (Al-Shamma 42). Ruhl obviously added some extramarital affairs and the slight abuse of a maid for the sake of dramatic tension, but it is always nice to discover a playwright’s connection to his or her pieces. What evolves out of Lane and Virginia’s sibling rivalry is likely what evolved out of Ruhl’s own experience: a friendship.

CHAPTER 3

PART OF THE SOCIAL CONTRACT: FRIENDSHIPS

Friendships can blossom out of numerous situations and they can end without tension. The obligations to a friendship are quite different from the obligations one might have to their family or to their significant other; there is a sense of ease and freedom. A friendship based in a genuine enjoyment of the other person's time can be most relaxing and not at all taxing. One can find a friend while shopping at the grocery store or on their first day at a new job. Friendship is necessary for people to avoid becoming lonely because, as we all know, being lonely is not all that socially acceptable.

In *Late: a cowboy song*, Mary is lonely in her life until she meets Red. It does not matter that she has a live-in boyfriend (soon to be husband); she is restless and cannot explain why. Virginia, on the other hand, knows exactly why she is restless in *The Clean House*. Her house is too clean and her husband is too boring. Where is the fun in that? Her clean and boring lifestyle eventually leads her to Matilde, who becomes an immediate friend. Friendships like that of Catherine Givings and Sabrina Daldry from *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*, on the other hand, happen by chance. One woman is simply on her journey to end her depression induced “hysteria” and who should be waiting for her at the doctor's home but a new friend. While there are humans capable of living a fulfilling life with a small amount of interpersonal relationships, it is generally believed that when a person has no friends, they are unfulfilled. In David Brooks non-fiction book, *A Social Animal*, he outlines a reasoning for this belief: “We don't teach this ability in school—to harmonize patterns, to seek limerence, to make friends. But the happy life is defined by these sorts of connections, and the unhappy life is defined by a lack of them.

...Achieving limerence...can produce an overwhelming feeling of elevation” (211). This sense of loneliness and longing are demonstrated beautifully in Ruhl’s plays as the large majority of her characters seem to be either in search of or inevitably on the road towards limerence. Each of these relationships happen at different times for different reasons, but that does not lower their importance. The energy between new friends can be enough to set someone on a journey they did not know they needed.

A Real Individual-Type Person

Depression is often something hard to recognize. When a person is in a situation and slowly begins to become apathetic to the people (or person) he or she is around all the time, the reason can be challenging to pinpoint. Apathy is often caused by loneliness, and it is hard to realize you are lonely when there are always people around. Mary is someone who has become extremely apathetic about her life. Although she learns about her pregnancy within the storyline of *Late: a cowboy song*, which then causes her boyfriend to “propose” to her, the complete dissatisfaction she has with her life prevents her from feeling the joy these events are supposed to cause. What makes Mary even more confused is that Crick does not understand her personality whatsoever. His attempts at making her happy are all dead ends, and neither character can explain why. Mary starts to remember what happiness is like when she runs into Red, though. Red reminds her that the open fields are meant to ride horses through and that food was meant to enjoy. It was almost as if Mary could not taste until Red, “a real individual-like person,” teaches her how (Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* 147).

Red is a cowboy. The character is played by a woman though she behaves like a traditional man and prefers to be called a cowboy. Ruhl encourages that Red be dressed in full

cowboy garb to portray the importance of Red's individuality compared to that of Crick and Mary. For Mary, Red is an answer to the questions she does not even know she has. They spend meals and holidays together. Red teaches Mary about the importance of both music and silence. It is a great friendship; the only struggle comes with Crick's disappointment that his wife is never home anymore, which is quite reasonable. This only begins to occur to Mary when Crick's behavior becomes slightly more aggressive with the passing of each holiday. Red, on the other hand, is a gentle friend. For Red, horses are her best friends, her soulmates.

RED: Once a horse loves you, he'll do anything for you.

MARY: How do you make a horse love you?

RED: They just do.

MARY: You ever been in love – with a person?

RED: Naw. I'm not much for people.

MARY: Why?

RED: Always seemed – kinda mean – always talking – always trying to get up a hill or push someone down a hill. Horses are so damn smart. Nice too. You know any people who are nice and smart both? (Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* 181).

Mary's New Year's resolutions towards the end of the play explain her priorities: her relationship with herself, her relationship with her child, and her relationship with her most important friend, Red. When it comes to her relationship with Crick, their distance is such that it is almost palpable. An audience member could only expect her to leave him in the end, which she does. The process of her leaving had started way back when she met her good friend, Red, and realizes she found someone who understands her soul. Friendships from childhood are often

like that. They can be put on pause for long periods of time and then start back up again as if no time has passed.

I'd Rather Be an Almond with You

TILLY: When someone in your circle becomes so melancholic that they stop moving, it is your duty as a human being to *go find them*. It is not enough to seek medical attention. It is not enough to ask them how they are feeling. You must go where they are and *get* them. It is up to *all of us* to save Frances. It is part of the social contract (Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* 319).

Melancholy Play: a contemporary farce (2002) is the earliest of Ruhl's plays being analyzed in this essay. It is also the most ambiguous. The line just quoted is towards the end, after one of the characters, Frances, has entered into what Ruhl calls the almond state. The amygdala, which derives from the Greek word for almond, is the organ of the brain that regulates emotion.⁴ When the amygdala is not functioning properly, a person might go into a state of melancholy (the almond state) and not have any understanding of the reason for it. Tilly, who could be argued as the main character within a literary analysis, spends the entire first half of the play in this state of melancholy and comes out of it suddenly, for almost no reason, during a game of duck-duck-goose. This sudden change causes Tilly's melancholy to be transferred to Frances, who remains in the almond state until the end of the play. The quotation at the beginning of this section is a projection by Tilly about finding and freeing Frances from her almond state, which has literally turned her into an almond. Tilly is right: when your friends are in a state of grief or sadness, go to them. Never leave their side. For Catherine Givings and Sabrina Daldry in *In the Next Room*,

or the vibrator play (2009), following this guideline opened their minds to many opportunities for knowledge.

Catherine and Sabrina are new friends. They meet at the beginning of the play and, while they do not instantly hit it off for multiple reasons, their right-place-at-the-right-time friendship blossoms nicely into an opportunity for them to learn from each other and help each other through a period of grieving. Catherine is grieving over the inability to breastfeed her child while Sabrina is grieving the inability to have a child, which is likely what has caused her “build-up of fluids.” They become friends during a hard time in each of their lives.

MRS. GIVINGS: Mrs. Daldry, did you dream of love from a young age?

MRS. DALDRY: Yes.

MRS. GIVINGS: And what did you think it would be like?

MRS. DALDRY: I thought it would be—never wanting for anything. Being surrounded and lifted up. Like resting on water, for eternity.

MRS. GIVINGS: And is that what you have found in marriage?

MRS. DALDRY: There have been moments of rest. But as it turns out, the earth rests on air, not on water, and the air can feel very—insubstantial—at times. though it is holding you up, invisibly (Ruhl, *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* 128-29).

This is a conversation between two women who have become friends. Their friendship is created at first by constant contact but it develops into a relationship consisting of two women realizing they have quite a bit in common. The true basis of their friendship though was their discovery of sexuality. When the two women try out the vibrator together, it is likely they cross a boundary they had both not known existed and they can now never go back. They are unable to speak about it with their husbands, which makes their friendship all the more important.

A parallel can be made between *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* and *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. Jean and Hermia develop a similar friendship to that of Catherine and Sabrina in that both friendships come out of sad situations and each of the women are looking for relief. Jean discovers the body of Hermia's husband, Gordon, at the beginning of the play and the audience follows her trajectory until the end. One of the people she encounters is the massively unhappy Hermia. Because Hermia is under the impression that Gordon was having an affair with Jean (a sensible conclusion), she welcomes Jean in with open arms. Strangely, Hermia had come to terms with Gordon's affairs because she was having an affair of her own. Hermia's entire perspective is altered, though, when Jean's confabulations bring up the letter Gordon wrote to Hermia before he passed. Within the letter was understanding, grace, and forgiveness, as is true Jean fashion. Although it was based on an altered truth, Jean and Hermia found friendship through it.

Why Don't I Clean for You?

Chapter 2 very briefly discussed Virginia and her sister Lane. In Ruhl's *The Clean House*, audiences get a taste of irony as they watch women try to clean up each other's mess when, the reality is, their own lives are the ones needing the focus. The interactive nature of this play makes it stand out compared to Ruhl's other works as she introduces us to Lane, a self-empowered doctor who refuses to clean her own house; Matlide, a Brazilian house maid who can't get the memory of her parents out of her head; and Virginia, a lonely housewife who sees the importance of acknowledging one's own messes. The connections among these three women and the insertion of another member into the trio, Ana, allows for a very interesting view into the nature of how differently people react to the same situation, depending on their perspectives.

This reaction between characters within the play mirrors audiences' reactions to the play itself: while each member of the audience will witness the same thing, the beauty comes from our relative interpretations to its ambiguity. Inspired by a real-life encounter with a female, self-righteous doctor and by her own experiences with grief, *The Clean House* pairs Ruhl's internal concept of the use of humor and her knowledge of what it means to be a female in society to bring forth a portrayal of seemingly real-life experiences in the vein of magic realism (Weckwerth 30-31).

The dichotomy between Matilde and Lane is immediately addressed at the top of the show. We meet the house maid who is going through a bout of depression. Her reasonable explanation behind this is shown secondary to her comedic talent, which is constantly being practiced and perfected. After a joke is told by Matilde in Portuguese, audiences are introduced to Lane, who could be argued as the protagonist of the play if this essay was working within those narrowing contexts. Ruhl's work is reflective of human life, though, so it is important to put Lane's literary role in the back seat. Within the time of Lane's negative, short rant, we learn not only about Matilde's depression and the relationship between the two women, but also much about Lane's personality. As one who has graduated from medical school, Lane sees it as completely inappropriate to be the person who cleans the house she lives in. Essentially, she is above such behavior, and Matilde was supposed to be just the person for the job. Lane's outburst is followed by an introduction of her sister, Virginia, who explains her situation which, while from the outside view is spotless, contains many internal stains and messes Virginia fights to ignore. Ruhl's utilization of actors making asides to the audience imprints on the viewers a sense of what is to come within the play: realism wrapped up nicely in a metaphorical and symbolic package.

Matilde is quite alone before she meets Virginia. She has recently lost her parents and is only in this country to try to make her own life better after her loss. Virginia is also in a place in her life where she severely needs another person. Her relationships thus far have consisted of a boring marriage and an almost-too-clean house. She has not found satisfaction within her own home so she searches for it at her sister's. Although many people grow apart from their siblings and find friends outside of the family, Virginia has found herself in a situation where she needs to re-bond with her sister. In doing so, she meets Matilde and finds a connection. They both have something potentially worthwhile to offer the other.

Lane and Matilde's eventual friendship does not develop out of coincidence, though. Theirs is based on the success of the hiring process paired with forced pity. Virginia and Matilde, though, develop a friendship that is very enjoyable to witness on stage. They meet at the front door of Lane's white apartment. Virginia is stopping by to purposefully run into the new maid her sister hired so she can find someone to have a conversation with, thinking that the maid would also enjoy cleaning. Matilde does not, as it turns out, enjoy cleaning and her depression is not only affecting her job but it is also preventing her from coming up with the perfect joke, which is her true passion. Virginia's pity for Matilde's situation is the initial catalyst for their friendship; a friendship that will eventually be described as sisterhood. "...people can make snap judgements about a person's trustworthiness, competence, aggressiveness and likability within the first tenth of a second. These sorts of first glimpses are astonishingly accurate in predicting how people will feel about each other months later" (Brooks 9). It was not up to Lane to be aware of the feelings of the woman she hired to clean her house. In her opinion, their relationship was to be strictly professional. Thankfully, for the sake of theatre and entertainment, Ruhl wrote Lane to be just as close with Matilde as Virginia is by the end of the play.

Unlike relationships between family members and those between coworkers, friendships are based on choice. Much of that choice can be paired with chance when two people are in the right place at the right time, but the continued relationship after the initial meeting is what makes friendships unique to all other human relationships. Ruhl constantly proves herself to be not only a great writer but also a teacher for anyone yearning to empathize with a friend he or she does not yet understand fully.

CHAPTER 4

WHAT A STRANGE JOB: PROFESSIONALS

Normally, there is a clear line that divides professional and personal relationships. In the process of getting a job, it is understood how one is expected to communicate with the different levels of employees one will be getting the opportunity to work with. Many of these lines, of course, as with many things in life and many things in Ruhl's plays, are easily blurred and eventually crossed to the point of extreme inappropriateness. The behavior of Ruhl's characters is often that of whimsical romantics (though Ruhl herself does not like the word whimsical given its sexist connotations⁵) and one cannot but help to identify why it is that these characters make the decisions that sometimes bring them to their demise professionally.

On the other hand, there are professional relationships depicted in her plays that involve very matter-of-fact reasoning and logic behind their motives of ending professional relationships. It would be repetitive at this point to comment that, regarding the behaviors I just differentiated, her characters reflect real people. Should behavior lines, which are not consistently black and white in the day-to-day, reflect anything other than that in a play? Of course not. Theatre is the recreation of human action. Adding a dash of magical realism is not equivalent to separating the objectives of one's character from the objectives of real people; it's simply added stimulus that pushes audiences to think more deeply about their own relationships.

This chapter revisits three plays: *The Clean House*, *Stage Kiss*, and *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play*. These plays have the heaviest presence of employer-employee relationships, although they are all from completely different contexts and send completely different messages.

Nurse—Polish the Silver!

Let us start with Matilde and Lane in *The Clean House*. The outer surface of their relationship is established whenever Lane hires Matilde to clean her house for her. Though the audience does not see the actual hiring, we are all aware after hearing the first lines Lane utters about what the expectations of the job were and whether they were being met, which are directed towards the audience:

LANE: It has been such a hard month.

My cleaning lady—from Brazil—decided that she was depressed one day and stopped cleaning my house.

I was like: clean my house!

And she wouldn't!

We took her to the hospital and I had her mediated and she

Still Wouldn't Clean.

And—in the meantime—I've been cleaning my house!

I'm sorry, but I did not go to medical school to clean my own house (Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* 9-10).

Unfortunately for Lane, not only is the entirety of what she just said somewhat demeaning to people from Brazil and to people with chronic depression, but also her monologue happens to follow Matilde telling the audience a hilariously dirty joke, which creates an obvious dichotomy between the audience's feelings for each woman. Ruhl paired these two women together on purpose: she wanted to present a clash of ideals between characters who would eventually have a close relationship. More importantly, she wanted to portray an attitude of distress that cleaning can bring to people with certain personalities. Lane believes she is above cleaning while Matilde

feels unable to complete a task until she comes up with the perfect joke. The lesson both women learn by the end is that doing your own dirty work deepens your relationship with yourself and with other people. In the reality of the play, though, Matilde has been hired to do a job. Lane's frustration with Matilde is understandable but it would be a struggle for any person to have their employer speak like that. The job would be frustrating and it would be almost impossible to not bring emotions into the picture, blurring the lines of professionalism. Lane does have a moment of redemption later on in the first few scenes where she explains why she is unable to connect with Matilde and her humor:

LANE: That's very interesting. I don't—always—understand the arts (Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* 13).

Lane then goes on to explain to Matilde that, had she met her in another situation, they could sit and talk about humor or about Matilde's parents dying and her feelings about that. But because they met within the context of an employer-employee relationship, Matilde needs to get her work done, depressed or not or there is the threat of Lane hiring someone else. Everything Lane is saying is very logical; it is simply insensitive. It is not her position to be sensitive; it is her position to direct her maid about what to clean. Lane is not one interested in blurring the lines between professional and private subjects.

That's Not Love—That's Oxytocin

Professional relationships are often the only type of relationships people tend to have control over. If someone needs to be fired, bosses can fire them. If someone wants to quit a job, that option is there as well. There are consequences, as with everything, but we can still make the decisions about these relationships. Many of our other relationships are almost out of our control.

The relationship that develops between She and He in *Stage Kiss* as they were both cast in a professional show opposite each other is anything but destiny. Coincidence can often be mistaken for destiny, especially when that coincidence is as personal and intimate as theirs was. *Stage Kiss* is a story that promotes power behind choices. Even with the heavy emotional pressure a professional artist may encounter, She makes choices throughout the play that align her with her family in the end. The bumps in the road were seemingly romantic, yes, but the grotesque reality of having an affair surfaced itself for all to see eventually. She is pinned down as a professional actress who gets too swept up in self-indulging moments with her fellow actors, something many actors might find themselves vulnerable to. It would be hard not to fall for a person one kisses that often; eventually the mind starts to go along with the moments as if they are reality, which is why we see so many movie stars today abandoning their marriages for their on-screen loves. Her professional persona has blurred into her romantic persona and her behavior escalates from there. It did not help that her old fling admitted his feelings for her almost immediately, sweeping her up emotionally. Their biggest challenge on the job was kissing in character on stage and making it seem as if they were not emotionally involved with each other.

KEVIN: What a strange job to kiss strangers in front of people and make it look like you know each other. Or kiss someone you know in front of people and make it look like a stranger (Ruhl, *Stage Kiss* 40).

This quote, while presenting the entire basis for the play itself, promotes the fact that Ruhl's work is absent of antagonists or protagonists. Kevin is an actor who works alongside She and He; his actions do little to push the plot forward. In a literary analysis, he would not be considered a main character. But this line gives his character power; it reminds the audience of his importance and it reminds the audience that all characters in Ruhl's plays have power and

purpose. Without knowing it, Kevin has tapped into one of the internal struggles She will be dealing with: kissing He on stage and trying to make it look as if they've never kissed intimately before. When a couple that has been intimate together plays opposite each other on stage, the idea is that their on-stage encounters will not be as believable as it could be if they were strangers.

The next question to dive into would be whether the Director knew he was casting a couple who had a history into these parts. As it reveals in the text, he did not. Directors usually tend to be wary of this behavior when casting professional shows.

Enter the director, holding flowers, hearing the last two lines.

DIRECTOR: Right. You two know each other?

They nod.

SHE: Mmm.

DIRECTOR: Great. That'll make things easier.

They look at each other.

SHE: Flowers?

DIRECTOR: From your husband.

SHE: Oh! He remembered! (Ruhl, *Stage Kiss* 23).

To separate one's private and professional lives is the accepted and encouraged behavior. This might be the problem She faces the most: she blurs the lines between her professional life and private life (which would be easy to do as an actor considering certain demands on stage). Ruhl cleverly pairs this couple who "couldn't help" but fall back in love on stage with an oblivious director. He was oblivious to their relationship when he cast them and he remained oblivious to their relationship until he was confronted with the behavior outside of the theater. The Director is

eventually hired by She's husband halfway through Act II to put She and He into a whirlwind production that will make She realize how much she misses her life at home with her family.

So That She May Give Suck

MR. DALDRY: I don't know if she'd ever take it into her head to be a wet nurse, you know what they say about wet nurses—nine parts devil, one part cow—but that's what you want, isn't it? A nice young woman who never intended to be a wet nurse but who has milk, milk to spare (Ruhl, *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* 27).

The history of wet nursing in America is such a vast and data-filled topic, it is important to mention it will be discussed only within the context of the play. If one is interested in finding information on it, Ruhl recommends *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle* by Janet Golden. This book will be referenced when necessary for clarity throughout this section.

In the Next Room, or the vibrator play is a masterpiece. It is a play that not only involves the talents of an educated, professional playwright but also the talents of someone who has done extensive research of American culture during a specific decade. In addition to the discipline of the playwright, it requires the patience, respect, understanding from the audience about the purpose of theatre and storytelling. Ruhl prefaces her play with this comment: "Things that seem impossibly strange in the following play are all true—such as the Chattanooga vibrator—and the vagaries of wet nursing. Things that seem commonplace are all my own invention" (6). This play is based on the dynamics of Dr. and Catherine Givings, two well-to-do white northern Americans in the 1880s. Their problems are normal for the time: Catherine's clothes have too many buttons, Dr. Givings is often away with his science club, they are battling the dangers of new electricity,

and Catherine has discovered her own sexuality and is having trouble convincing her husband to help her explore it. In addition to these daily struggles, the Givings are in need of a wet nurse. Catherine's body is not producing milk, which could be caused by a range of "issues" (I use quotations only because these are no longer issues that trouble us so deeply today with the development of modern medicine). Catherine has put an ad in the paper for a wet nurse but it has not come to fruition. The couple are blessed when one of Dr. Givings' patients admits to them that the housekeeper on their property just recently lost her child to cholera and would have milk to spare. Once Catherine frees herself from the struggle over the fact that this woman is "a darkie," she welcomes the new employee with hesitant arms (Ruhl, *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* 27).

And so, Elizabeth finds a place for her milk. When she is hired by the Givings, she is told she will be paid well and will still work for the Daldrys at their home. Although Elizabeth is hired to work in their home and is, by the standards of the time, poorer and not as well off as the Givings, she slowly reveals herself to be smarter than Catherine on the topic of sexuality. Elizabeth's life experiences have made her knowledgeable and wary of other people. While the lines of professional and personal are never initially crossed in ways that were considered inappropriate at the time, Catherine eventually brings Elizabeth into a conversation between Sabrina Daldry and herself on the topic of orgasms (though they do not have a word for it yet). It is from the words spoken by Elizabeth that the two women receive the answer to their curiosity: the same intriguing sensation the vibrator brings to them is achievable during intimate moments with their husbands. This revelation makes Catherine begin to question the appropriateness of her husband's career. Sabrina never takes too kindly to approaching her husband with this information but Catherine begins to yearn for it terribly.

This yearning for human touch sends Catherine into behaviors that are deemed unacceptable. She begins asking her husband's patients personal questions and even befriends an attractive Italian artist. Her impatience and yearning for knowledge break down the barrier between herself, her hired help, and her husband's patients. Her slightly erratic behavior in conversation is what leads her to the eventual abandonment of each of these people, Dr. Givings excluded. In Ruhl's cleverly lined-up story, all this destruction ends up bringing together two people who cannot hold their passion in anymore: Catherine and her husband. The play ends with an orgasm, of course, but it is the ever-building emotional connection between a husband and wife audiences finally receive pleasure from.

CHAPTER 5

ROMANCE, BOTH LIVING AND DEAD

The exploration of love throughout Ruhl's plays is immense. Upon looking at how many diverse and beautiful options there were to use within this section, it was questioned whether this should be made into a few chapters rather than just one. This is a possible future study and enhancement of this paper because one could speak for days on the subject of choice and chance of love within these eight plays.

This chapter will go into the detail upon how each of these relationships began and whether they ended. Because the purpose of this is to express the inclusive mode in which Ruhl writes her plays, each character will receive their due amount of respect despite the fact that some of the characters in her plays do not make the most moral of choices when it comes to love and romance. Ruhl's plays are ripe with the battle between choice and chance, how karma affects one's love life, and the struggle of not choosing right the first time. Some of the love in her stories is unrequited, other examples are so overwhelmingly passionate she could only demonstrate it through stage directions. Either way, love is an ever-present beauty in everyday life therefore it is an endless topic within the theatre.

Destiny Comes Instead

We will begin gently with the relationship between Mother and Father in *The Oldest Boy*. Their relationship, out of the other examples, is the best one to begin with because it could be interpreted as the most everlasting and the least questioned; it was karma.

FATHER: (in Tibetan) My mother tried, but it didn't happen. Karma decided.

LAMA: Yes, yes. Whatever karma decides, will be (Ruhl, *The Oldest Boy* 35).

Mother and Father have a love-at-first-sight moment; the sort of moment people dream about. Mother and Father recall how they came to meet and then later discover how they knew they were each other's. Mother was in an extremely vulnerable state when she first met Father; her teacher had just passed away and she was unable to complete her graduate degree due to a hold-up on her thesis. To Mother, her relationship with her teacher was extremely important because of the level of respect she had for the work he was doing before he died. It was unique to what many of the teachers accomplished after him within the program. This broke her and she was unable to complete the most important assignment she had; she felt as if there was no point anymore. He was the only teacher who supported what she wanted to write her thesis over because its subject was somewhat controversial and very confusing for literary minds to read without seeing it as nonsensical. Once she met Father, though, things took a turn in a positive direction for a while. Life always turns in a positive direction when one meets their person. The set-up of the scene when the Mother and Father meet mirrors how their relationship developed: it did so without their knowing. At first they are speaking to the audience about how they met. Then, without any change in lighting or an aside to the audience, their conversation turns its direction away from the audience and, through a simple change in pronouns, they begin speaking to one another as if they were back, living in the moment they met. This fluid transition happens again later in the scene and they are back to simply telling the story as if being interviewed by members of the audience.

Though they end up together, able to tell audiences the story of how they met, the beginning of their relationship did not run smoothly. Father is Tibetan, which means he comes from a collective society, one that respects their families in a different manner. For many

Americans, the importance of this can be very hard to understand, as was the case for Mother. She was confused by his lack of immediate reciprocity to her advances. Although she was ready to give up her fiancé to be with Father, he was not as attuned to the idea immediately, out of respect for his family. While Father undoubtedly fell in love with Mother the night they met, his obligation towards his family did not falter immediately. He still felt as if he should marry the woman with whom he was arranged because his culture was dying and he had a high respect for his mother's wishes. This respect is unique to cultures in the East, cultures that still have arranged marriages today. People in the West tend to think arranged marriages are a "thing of the past" but, no, it is still practiced frequently and it should not be disrespected. There are many considerations that go into arranged marriages; it is not always the forceful, thoughtless tradition many Americans think it is. For Mother, though, being raised Catholic in America, relationships were a choice made by the person and not the parent. Both Mother and Father have their steadfast view of what marriage is and could be. Being in an intercultural and interracial marriage comes with its fair share of judgement and disappointment.

FATHER: Oh my mother...my mother would be so sad...And my father—my father would be so mad...

MOTHER: But you do love me?

FATHER: Yes, of course.

MOTHER: So?

FATHER: So in my country it is not like: oh I love you so that's the end of that. Love is not just this private romantic paradise. There is duty and family—

MOTHER: But you moved *here* (Ruhl, *The Oldest Boy* 53-4).

Mother then goes on to reason with Father that because he moved to America, he should be following the rules of engagement the way they are followed here. Father is an extremely logical and well-spoken man, though. He explains to her the difference between Americans and their obsession with being able to choose things and edit things to how they like but with many other cultures, you simply don't do that. But is your soulmate really a choice? Yes, you choose to act on establishing a life with them but does the world not go a little off-kilter every time soulmates do not choose each other?

FATHER: ...my mother tried an arranged marriage, but it didn't work. This is my wife, my—uh—my destiny? And he said something like, what you wish doesn't always come, your destiny comes instead (Ruhl, *The Oldest Boy* 35).

Individualization altered the boundaries of love. In western society, individuals are supposed to pursue what they want when they want it; that is the culturally accepted way to behave. This influences romantic relationships; people are not obligated to get married in this society, let alone to someone who has been arranged for them. It is all up to choice and chance.

According to Inglis, individualization is “the process by which individuals become detached from the all-encompassing, self-sacrificing lives of extended families, communities, religions and other social groups” (15). The challenge faced with this is that many people in western culture still feel the need to respect the wishes and traditions of their extended families. With constant outside forces encouraging one to break away from that tradition, one finds oneself stuck and confused. Do we continue the traditions our white, Christian families are encouraging us to follow or do we break from that because that is what has become culturally appropriate and encouraged? In *The Oldest Boy*, Mother does not have a strong religious sensibility. She grew up with a specific religion but has since grown away from that. By the time she meets Father she

does not believe in much. Father's Buddhist beliefs influence her at first through her love for him but as time passes, she discovers the wonders of the religion through her own experiences. Their influence comes from his passion and love for her, though, not for an actual interest in the religion. One can easily turn to something when they know it is for the good of their person. Mother's quest for salvation after life was reignited when she started to search through Father's religion and then more heavily when she realized this religion would be what raises her boy into a man.

FATHER: And so I turned the open sign to closed. The closed sign now faced the world, the open sign now faced us.

MOTHER: And that was that.

FATHER: There were some difficulties along the way (Ruhl, *The Oldest Boy* 51).

Within this discussion of destiny, it is important to include Charles and Ana. *The Clean House* has been mentioned in previous chapters in reference to friendships and professional relationships, but the real meat of the play lies in the dialogue and stage directions of the two characters who have found each other finally. Charles and Ana were meant to be from birth; they are each other's *bashert*⁶, which is a term used in the Jewish faith to describe one's other half, one's person. The joy of finding one's *bashert* is immeasurable and, per the dialogue within the play, hard to understand if one is not Jewish.

LANE: Well, I don't understand. What about Jewish law.

CHARLES: In Jewish law you are legally obligated to break off relations with your wife or husband if you find what is called your *bashert*.

ANA: Your soul mate.

CHARLES: You are *obligated* to do this. Legally bound. There's something—metaphysically—objective about it.

LANE: You're not Jewish.

CHARLES: I know. But I heard about *bashert*—on a radio program. And it always stuck with me. When I saw Ana I knew that was it. I knew she was my *bashert* (Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* 60-61).

When Charles finally found his person, Ana, he was already married to Lane. As an audience member during this scene, it is easy to become frustrated with Charles for being so careless about what his marriage to Lane means. Lane and Charles, one can guess, had been dealing with a lonely marriage to one another for a while. While there was a spark at the beginning, that soon died out when they became focused on their professions. It is possible that Charles was a passionate being who needed more in his relationship. When he found Ana, he found the intimacy he had been missing. This is a reason for the existence of many extramarital affairs. Before their affair, Charles met Ana at the hospital in a professional setting. She was being diagnosed with breast cancer and Charles was her gentle, caring doctor assigned to perform her mastectomy. They fell in love during the surgery, which is demonstrated beautifully on stage through the use of Ruhl's careful stage directions:

They look at each other.

They fall in love.

The look at each other.

They fall in love some more.

They fall in love completely.

They kiss wildly (Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* 55).

From these moments on, Charles and Ana's destiny is laid out; they had found each other at last and the next step is to explain it to Lane, which neither one of them is afraid of because their love is completely meant to be. They could not help it. Charles has a passionate love for Ana, unlike the love he had for Lane, which was logical and had turned mundane. Charles and Lane capriciously fell in love over a dead body during medical school. Once their careers took hold of them, all the passion that once existed between them slowly faded. Charles rediscovered that passion when he found Ana. When one finds a passionate lover, all other priorities are dropped. A passionate love is what people dream of, but rarely receive. Often, passionate loves are found but, while that passion quickly takes a backseat to logic and the relationship dies, the passion itself usually remains. That lost love will often be visited in the mind through daydreaming or sentimental reminders.

When presented with the information of Charles's affair, Lane completely loses all sense of what to do. For Lane to think she knows everything about Charles is also heartbreaking. When one finds one's person, it is normal to learn all of their habits and idiosyncrasies. But, when they are not your person and then they go and actually find their person, it is as if they become a completely different being altogether. Nothing makes sense anymore. They are not who you thought they were. It is believed we become fully who we are meant to be once we find our person, which is why people search and search. When a person doesn't find them, they are never satisfied. But sometimes, as it can be perceived about Lane, our person has been the one staring back at us in the mirror the whole time.

Eventually You Want Bread

Moving forward, the concept of destiny temporarily takes a backseat. Ruhl challenges this in her play, *Stage Kiss*, when the character of She plays opposite the man she believes is her destiny. The reality about their relationship is based on in-the-moment passion between two histrionic people. Before the affair, He is in a relationship with a woman, Laurie, for whom audiences feel immediate pity. Not only do She and He have the affair at the very same apartment in which Laurie resides, but they also refuse to tell her until after a strange amount of conversation in which she congratulates both the actors on their wonderful performance, stocks the cabinets, and is introduced to Angela and Harrison.

The temptation for She and He to be together lies in two large factors: they used to be madly in love and they are currently playing parts that recreate many of the moments they had and potentially could have in the future. Their parts are so relatable that they begin to forget what is real and what is staged. Thus begins the battle inside of She between a passionate love affair and her safe, logical, loving husband.

SHE AS ADA: He was like champagne, *champagne*, but you can't live on champagne your whole life, eventually you want bread, my husband is like bread – oh the smell of toast in the morning! (Ruhl, *Stage Kiss* 17).

When an actor or actress resonates with or finds their own memory within the lines he or she is speaking, per Stanislavski's method⁷, the acting will be more natural and realistic. Even though She and He are performing what seems to be a melodrama, Ruhl has cleverly paired realistic moments next to the ridiculousness of melodramatic action. When She and He break character while acting on stage, it is done because they are saying scripted lines that are very believable to them.

SHE AS ADA: I was mad about you! Mad! Don't you see?

HE AS JOHNNY: Then why'd you leave, Ada!

SHE AS ADA: It was impossible! Perhaps if I'd loved you less it would have been hunky-dory! I loved you too much!

They look at each other.

For longer than is required (Ruhl, Stage Kiss 55).

The whirlwind love affair of a reunited couple can stir up quite a bit of emotion. Through the process of the show, they get into arguments and have slip-ups. They also learn about each other's current lives. He has a live-in girlfriend named Laurie (though He keeps the live-in part to himself, choosing not to let She in on that important piece of information) and has not ventured to have children. She, as has already been discussed, is married with a teenage daughter. Their different life choices are very telling of the kind of people they ended up becoming, but it also expresses who admired whom the most during their younger years. He's reason, as is so violently expresses to She, for not having children is that he only wanted to have them with her. Unfortunately, She brought He's self-esteem so far down that he never felt he would be able to raise children properly. He is now dating a woman out of social obligation. It is likely there are still feelings residing in him for She, as there always have been, and since hearing about her marriage and the subsequent birth of her child, He has been trying to date other people (unsuccessfully, unfortunately). Dating will always be unsuccessful when someone is stuck on a past love or a past passion if that passion has not been matched.

SHE: You have a girlfriend?

HE: Yes.

SHE: Are you in love?

HE: She's a schoolteacher. She's nice. So it probably won't work out.

SHE: You could be nicer.

HE: You could mind your own fucking business.

SHE: Yes. Well. She could be meaner.

HE: That's right. She could. That would be helpful actually (Ruhl, *Stage Kiss* 24-25).

The dichotomy between what He and She have become as a result of their choices adds deliciousness to the play. Then, throw in a depressed husband who does not know how to buy groceries, a vulgar teenage daughter who refuses to “fuck bad artists,” and a soon-to-be ex-girlfriend who smokes weed, and the play only becomes juicier.

The entrance of Harrison towards the middle of the play is quite important. It reveals information about She that audience weren't aware of: She has a habit for this adulterous behavior. She is apparently prone to falling for the cute male lead and having small affairs. Ironically, once she realizes her ridiculous behavior, she has this to say:

SHE: You don't understand how marriage works—how you sacrifice momentary pleasure for long-term satisfaction— (Ruhl, *Stage Kiss* 128).

She is in the process of realizing what she gave up once she decided to go on her adventure with He. We find ourselves witnessing a trivial moment for She as she tries to explain to He what it meant for her to be a part of a family. She misses her daughter, something any mother would do, and the choreographed fight on stage between She and He finally brings out her anger and emotions that have been suppressed during their affair. While many people think about having casual relationships that rely on passion and intimacy, there will likely be more they yearn for from each person they meet. She will never be satisfied with who He really is. “When the

relationship between a couple is primarily sexual, there may be greater passion and eroticism, but less long-term attachment or indeed care and concern for each other” (Inglis 29).

The Effects of Death on Love

Just as love is a concept that we are unable to completely define, death confuses us as well. Humans tend to obsess over defining, labeling, and attempting to understand what life brings forth when the reality is the most important things are beyond our understanding. The balance between knowing what you can and cannot control while also wanting to control everything life throws at you is part of what makes our time here tragic. As long as one is responsible with love and death, one will find peace within love and death. When love and death come hand in hand, things can go awry.

Ruhl wrote her own version of Book Ten of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and titled it *Eurydice* (2003). It is one of her more autobiographical pieces in that she wrote it to reflect the reaction of a young girl to her father’s death, an important parallel as Ruhl lost her own father in her early twenties. Ruhl might have thought *Eurydice* could act as a medium between the dead and the living, as a possible loud speaker that might transcend into the actual afterworld and give a message to her own father. *Eurydice* is what one would call loosely based, though, on the piece that inspired it. Book Ten in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is focused on the talented musician Orpheus descending into the underworld to bring back his young wife who has recently died from a snake bite. Ruhl takes this story and gives us an updated twist. She focuses it on the young heroine who makes the choice to stay in the underworld with her father, who had died many years ago and with whom she is reunited during the play. Although the love between Orpheus and Eurydice is true, Eurydice’s death and descent into the underworld causes her to eventually forget about, and

become slightly frightened of, her time on earth and her husband. During her time in the underworld, she is able to learn from and play with her father, as she did when she was a child.

This chapter is on the topic of romantic love, though, and it is what must be the focus. At the top of the play, we immediately meet Orpheus and Eurydice. They are happily basking in the sun on the beach and telling each other how much they adore books and music and flying. They agree to get married that very afternoon and the following scene is their wedding party. Ruhl describes them as “a little too young and a little too in love” (Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* 332). What she seems to be presenting with this is their obvious immaturity. While they do probably adore each other, the realities of life and sadness have not set in yet. Upon Eurydice’s death, though, Orpheus begins to feel the heavy heartbreak that is inevitable with the loss of a loved one. Eurydice falls down the stairs of an apartment building after their wedding, and his life is altered forever. Because his attempts at getting her back do not pay off, he pays the ultimate price to be with her: his life. As we all know, though, things aren’t that easy and he is too late to the underworld; Eurydice has already dipped herself into the river of death by the time he arrives in the rainy elevator. The ending of the play leaves the audience with the feeling of sadness and, yet, a glimmer of hope, making *Eurydice* a bittersweet reflection of life itself.

Can it Get Bigger than Two People?

It is said that once one stops the search for happiness through a romantic relationship, it will finally be found. People often find what they are hoping for once they take a break from looking. This irony in life paired with confusion on the culture of right and wrong is what George finds herself servant to in Ruhl’s *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage* (2017). This play, which premiered at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater at Lincoln Center in New York City in

2017, is packed with questions about life and love. One could easily generalize about all Ruhl's plays with that definition, so it is important to look at them each individually. In the case of *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage*, the biggest question revolves around the definition of love. This play pulses with issues of self-identity and maintaining sexual desire within a marriage, while on the surface it is a play about family. A loving husband and wife, Paul and George (short for Georgianna), have been together for a number of years. At a New Year's party, they find themselves in a night of drug-induced confusion when they are enticed into a foursome with their close friends, Michael and Jane, who have also been married for several years. So, the question is asked: "can it get bigger than two people?"

"The concept of loving more than one person...has been around since the dawn of sexuality—or, at the very least, since the dawn of the written word" (Johnson 7). Human sexuality is a concept that has been studied endlessly and with each study coming to its own conclusion. It can be agreed that each person's sexuality is relative not only to their desires but also to their upbringing and to the influences they have each day. Some people are more susceptible to fluidity in their romantic lives because the influences they have had were not as concrete as monogamy. George considers herself a monogamous woman when we meet her and gradually starts to question her "animalistic" side when she meets Pip, a polyamorous woman with two husbands. Pip and George are both obsessed with language: George is obsessed with the structure of it while Pip is obsessed with its endless options. This reflects each woman's perspective on romance and, by the end of the play, each perspective has been subjected to experimentation. Because George's values about family are quite stable, she finds herself to be even more in love with her husband after their adventure.

The search for love and romance is often simply a search for common ground. The world is filled with people harboring different opinions on various subjects and it is a challenge to start a stable romance with someone who thinks differently about the specifics of raising a child or how to properly fold a fitted sheet. So, we look for common ground. The challenge lies within maintaining that common ground throughout the many years spent together. Humans are constantly evolving, not only physically, but also mentally and emotionally. The chance of finding the person (or persons) that are your equivalent are close to none and yet it happens every day. The ironic existence of love in humanity is reflected deeply in the theatre and even deeper in the plays of Sarah Ruhl.

EPILOGUE

“Recently, my son said to me after seeing a ballet on television: “It’s beautiful but I don’t like it.” And I thought, Are many grown-ups capable of such a distinction? *It’s beautiful, but I don’t like it.* Usually, our grown-up thinking is more along the lines of: I don’t like it, so it’s not beautiful. What would it mean to separate those two impressions for art making and for art criticism?”

–Sarah Ruhl, *100 Essays I Don’t Have Time to Write*

The future of this world is not just for me and it is not just for the person reading this; it is for everyone, collectively. We are all looking forward to a brighter future that, if we’re being honest, will never come. Not because the future only holds terror, but because that utopian vision we all have simply has not and never will exist. This does not mean we should lose hope, though; hope is something that keeps us moving forward. What needs to exist within our hope is logic, rationality, and inclusion. Of those three, inclusion is the most important. The ability to feel comfortable and welcome might not always be possible in our daily life, but it can always be found in the theater. The plays that stand the test of time are the ones grounded in their ambiguity; they function to allow critical thinking about personal development that is unique to each audience member. My hope for the future is different from the next person’s, but the beauty of theatre brings forth the fact that these hopes can be brought to life and demonstrated for all right in front of us, temporarily. Everyone enjoys a break from reality. Sarah Ruhl’s writing fits into the category of plays that inspire hope by creating epiphanies within audience members all through the power of ambiguity, which is why we will be seeing them produced well into the future.

NOTES

¹See “Playwright’s Afterword in the Form of Five Questions” in the published version of *The Oldest Boy*.

²See Chapter 7 of *Volume III: Loss* by John Bowlby. This was based on a study Bowlby conducted with parents who had recently lost a child to an illness.

³See Chapter 3 of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*.

⁴Ruhl quotes A. Jaruwat, M.D. as a preface to *Melancholy Play: a contemporary farce*.

⁵See Ruhl’s Essay 61 in *100 Essays I Don’t Have Time to Write*.

⁶See https://www.torchweb.org/torah_detail.php?id=129.

⁷See Sonia Moore’s *The Stanislavski System: The Professional Training of an Actor*.

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VITA

Whitney Jury was born on 14 November 1990 in Liberal, Kansas to Jim and Sharon Jury. While growing up in Liberal, she attended Liberal High School and received her first taste of what the world of theatre had to offer. After playing in American classics such as *Fools* by Neil Simon, *Arsenic and Old Lace* by Joseph Kesselring, and the notable musical *Into the Woods* by Steven Sondheim and James Lapine, her future to be a part of the theatre machine was determined.

Upon attending William Jewell College from 2009-2013 for her liberal arts education, Jury further discovered how theatre could influence and enhance the education she desired. While at William Jewell, Jury participated in all aspects of the theatre, including acting (Christopher Durang's *The Idiots Karamazov*, Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, and Moliere's *The Misanthrope*), directing (scenes from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*), stage managing (*The Misanthrope*), technical design (Francis Warner's *Living Creation*, and Frank D. Gilroy's *The Subject Was Roses*), and analysis. In addition to becoming president of the National Theatre Honor Society, Alpha Psi Omega, Jury was able to demonstrate the accumulation of her knowledge gained at the college during her senior year by directing, designing, and acting in the Reduced Shakespeare Company's *The Complete Works of Hollywood, abridged*.

In addition to completing a degree in Speech and Theatre, Jury also pursued a degree in Education with the hope of teaching theatre at the high school level. Upon graduating in 2013, Jury became a substitute teacher and subsequently a full-time teacher at Cristo Rey Kansas City, where she spent two years building a theatre company. After directing students in one acts such as *Check Please* by Jonathan Rand and *Selfie* by Bradley Hayward, Jury felt she needed to

further educate herself on the history and analysis of theatre. She applied to the University of Missouri-Kansas City's Master of Arts program in the spring of 2015 and was soon accepted.

Throughout the two years spent at UMKC, Jury was active within the Kansas City theatre community while receiving unmatched guidance from Dr. Felicia Londré. During her first year, she worked as a Dramaturg for the fall production of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* and continued teaching and directing at Cristo Rey Kansas City, where a production of *Dreamgirls* was in the works. Upon completion of her first year at UMKC, Jury was hired as an acting director with Stars Unlimited Dance Company in Liberty, Missouri, where she is still actively working with elementary and middle school aged students. Following graduation, Jury plans to pursue a Ph.D. in Theatre with the hope of one day directing at the university and professional level.