The Clean House
by
Sarah Ruhl
Discussion Series

**Page to Stage** discussions are presented in partnership with the Portland Public Library. These discussions, led by Portland Stage artistic staff, actors, directors, and designers answer questions, share stories and explore the challenges of bringing a particular play to the stage. Page to Stage occurs at noon on the Tuesday two weeks before a show opens at the Portland Public Library’s Main Branch.

**The Artistic Perspective**, hosted by Artistic Director Anita Stewart, is an opportunity for audience members to delve deeper into the themes of the show through conversation with special guests. A different scholar, visiting artist, playwright, or other expert will join the discussion each time. The Artistic Perspective discussions are held after the first Sunday matinee performance.

**Curtain Call** discussions offer a rare opportunity for audience members to talk about the production with the performers. Through this forum, the audience and cast explore topics that range from the process of rehearsing and producing the text to character development to issues raised by the work. Curtain Call discussions are held after the second Sunday matinee performance.

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the Clean House
by Sarah Ruhl

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Thoughts from the Editors:
What’s Your Favorite Joke?

How do you keep a bagel from getting away?
Put lox on it!
- Isabella Brezenski, Education Intern

What did one tidepool say to the other tidepool?
“Show me your mussels!”
- Madison Worthington, Education Intern

There are two muffins baking in the oven. One muffin says to the other, “Phew, is it hot in here or is it just me?”
The other muffin says, “AHHH!!! A TALKING MUFFIN!!!”
- Meredith G. Healy, Directing & Dramaturgy Intern
Where does the King keep his armies?

In his sleevies!

- Kaylee Pomelow, Directing & Dramaturgy Intern

As Matilde says in The Clean House, “The perfect joke is stupid when you write it down.” Nevertheless, I will attempt to do just that. So: A boy asks a girl to prom, and she says yes! So, they begin to get things prepared for the big event. The girl goes to buy her dress, which is a beautiful emerald green. The boy buys a suit and a matching emerald green vest. On the day of prom, the boy and girl pick up their matching corsage and boutonniere and head over to the best park in town. There, they take gorgeous pictures, give each other the corsage and boutonniere, and ride off in a limousine that they rented to take them to the venue. At the venue, there is a full spread of refreshments, a light up dance floor, a DJ, and a photobooth. After taking pictures and dancing, the girl tells the boy that she's thirsty, so he goes to get her a drink. At first, he tries to get her water, but finds that the line is too long. Next, he tries to get her lemonade, but finds that the line is also too long. Finally, he goes to get her punch, and is able to do so quickly because........there is no punch line.

- Lizz Mangan, Directing & Dramaturgy Intern
Focus Questions

**Focus Questions**

**by Isabella Brezenski & Madison Worthington**

1. In *The Clean House*, Matilde tries to come up with the perfect joke. Do you have a favorite joke? What makes a joke funny? With that in mind, can you come up with your own joke?

2. In *The Clean House*, Ana and Matilde speak Spanish and Portuguese, while the rest of the characters do not. In fact, the play opens with a long joke in Portuguese. The language barriers within the play are reflections of circumstances in everyday life. What other forms of communication bring us together despite these barriers?

3. The female characters within *The Clean House* have varying occupations, as well as different levels of satisfaction with their work. How do we find happiness within our work and how does our work contribute to our happiness? (See *A Life Well Lived*, pg. 25)

4. In *The Clean House*, Ana and Charles have different views of how to treat Ana’s illness. What are some ways we deal with illness and death? With a partner debate Charles’ and Ana’s points of view.

5. In *The Clean House*, there are comparisons made between cleanliness/dirtiness and happiness. Some characters in the play love cleaning, while others do not. How do you feel about cleanliness and how does it affect your happiness?

6. In *The Clean House*, Ana and Charles declare that they are soulmates, referencing a Jewish law that speaks of finding one’s bashert (soulmate). Do you believe in soulmates? Why or why not?

**Pre-Show Activities**

**by Isabella Brezenski & Madison Worthington**

1. Research the playwright Sarah Ruhl (see *About the Playwright*, pg. 9 and *Sarah Ruhl’s Impact on American Theater*, pg. 27). What are some fun facts you discovered? What intrigues you most about her life and journey as a playwright? Write a letter to Ruhl including any questions you may have about her work, career, and life.

2. Housekeeping is integral in the play. Create a new housekeeping invention, draw it, and pitch it to the classmate sitting next to you.

3. This is Sarah Ruhl’s description of the play’s setting:
“A white living room. White couch, white vase, white lamp, white rug. A balcony. A metaphysical Connecticut. Or, a house that is not far from the city and not far from the sea.”
Given this description, draw a set design.

4. What are some things that make you feel good when you are down, or help you get better when you are sick? Make a collage using images and drawings to represent these items and activities. While watching *The Clean House*, note how the images in your collage are similar to or different from the healing methods used in the play.

5. In *The Clean House*, as Portuguese and Spanish speakers, Matilde and Ana have a language barrier with the audience and other characters. Reflect on a time you were in a situation with a language barrier. Write about the situation, how you handled it, and whether or not you would respond differently today.
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About the Play

BY KAYLEE POMELOW

A gifted playwright and a fed-up doctor walk into a cocktail party. The doctor says, “I’ve had such a hard month. My cleaning lady from Brazil wouldn’t clean, so I took her to the hospital and got her medicated, and she still wouldn’t clean. So, I had to clean my own house. I didn’t go to medical school to clean house.”

Bizarrely enough, the story is true. While sitting at a cocktail party, acclaimed playwright Sarah Ruhl overheard a fellow partygoer utter these very remarks, which inspired her to write the play that would later become a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Drama: The Clean House.

After this strange occurrence, Ruhl began to think about the implications regarding gender and class that accompanied the doctor’s story and wondered if the cleaning woman was indeed clinically depressed or just hated to clean. In an interview with the New York Times in 2006, Ruhl posed one of the central questions of The Clean House: “How much responsibility do you have, not just literally, for the mess of your own life, and how much do you try and avoid chaos?” Ruhl also stated that in many ways, The Clean House is about “cleaning as transcendence, spiritual cleansing.”

The Clean House also explores the idea of how humor and laughter possess cleansing qualities. In a 2005 interview with National Public Radio (NPR), Ruhl shared how her father, even in his last few days of life, was constantly making up jokes, and that his “desire to put other people at ease, yet the desire to make other people laugh while [he was] dying” influenced her exploration of these themes.

The Clean House had its world premiere at Yale Repertory Theatre on September 17, 2004, and later made its off-Broadway premiere at Lincoln Center’s Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater on October 29, 2006. The Clean House has also been produced by many regional theaters including South Coast Repertory, the Goodman Theatre, the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, and the Barksdale Theatre. The play made its European premiere in 2006 at the Crucible Theatre in England. The Clean House received the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, a prestigious award given annually to recognize women who have written outstanding plays for the English-speaking theater across the world, in 2004.

The Clean House at Williamstown Theatre Festival, 2017.
About the Playwright:
Sarah Ruhl

BY KAYLEE POMELOW

Sarah Ruhl grew up in Wilmette, Illinois, with her mother, father, and older sister. Her father, Patrick, marketed toys and surrounded his daughters with a love of puns, language, and reading. Her mother, Kathleen, who now holds a PhD in Language, Literacy, and Rhetoric, from the University of Illinois, was local high school English teacher, actress, and director. As a child, Sarah would often be brought along to Kathleen’s rehearsals, observing her mother and the other actors and developing a further appreciation for storytelling.

Ruhl is a playwright who writes with what John Lahr of The New Yorker describes as a “lightness”: a story packed with “astonishments, surprises, and mysteries,” yet “low on exposition and psychology,” featuring language that is “quick, terse, and almost innocently” direct. Regarding her work, Ruhl has said, “I try to interpret how people subjectively experience life. Everyone has a great, horrible opera inside him. I feel that my plays, in a way, are very old-fashioned. They’re pre-Freudian in the sense that the Greeks and Shakespeare worked with similar assumptions. Catharsis isn’t a wound being excavated from childhood.”

Although she originally intended to become a poet, Ruhl earned her BA in English in 1997 and her MFA in Playwriting in 2001 from Brown University, where she studied under her mentor, playwright Paula Vogel. Ruhl also spent a year studying at Pembroke College, Oxford. She received the Whiting Award in 2003, the MacArthur Fellowship in 2006, the PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater Award in 2008, the Lilly Award in 2010, the Samuel French Award for Sustained Excellence in American Theatre in 2016, as well as a Tony Award nomination in 2010, and has had two of her plays honored as finalists for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Currently, she is on faculty at Yale School of Drama.

Ruhl’s plays include Stage Kiss; In the Next Room, or the vibrator play (Pulitzer Prize finalist and Tony Award nominee for Best Play); The Clean House (Pulitzer Prize finalist and recipient of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize); Passion Play (PEN American Award and the Fourth Freedom Forum Playwriting Award from The Kennedy Center); Dead Man’s Cell Phone (Helen Hayes Award); Melancholy Play; Eurydice; Orlando; Demeter in the City; Late: A Cowboy Song; Three Sisters; Dear Elizabeth; The Oldest Boy; For Peter Pan on her 70th Birthday; and How To Transcend a Happy Marriage. She has also written a New York Times Notable Book of the Year, 100 Essays I Don’t Have Time to Write (2014), and co-authored a book of letters with Max Ritvo, Letters from Max, which was published in 2018. Her newest work, 44 Poems for You, will be released in February 2020.
Play Synopsis

by Todd Brian Backus

Matilde's parents were the funniest people in the world. After her father told her mother a joke so funny that it killed her, Matilde decided to pack up her life in Brazil and move to the United States. Lane has it all, a successful career, a handsome husband, a beautiful house, and, most recently, a Brazilian maid. Virginia, Lane’s sister, sees cleaning as progress and, as a stay-at-home woman who never had children, has a proposition for Matilde: What if Virginia cleans Lane’s house instead? In the midst of their cleaning, they find evidence that Lane’s husband, Charles, is having an affair. As Lane comes to the same conclusion, she also catches Virginia cleaning her house, leading to an explosive end of Act One and Matilde’s firing.

In Act Two we meet Ana, Charles’ lover and former patient, who has come to meet Lane. Charles and Ana offer Matilde a job, and Lane feels like Charles is taking everything from her, so Matilde agrees to split her time between the two households as she works on her jokes. Unfortunately Ana’s cancer returns. Ana decides she is done with hospitals, but Charles, refuses to give up, and goes on a quest to find a cure for her. Ultimately Lane is faced with a series of tough questions: Can she care for the woman her husband has left her for? Can she let her sister take care of her? Can she ever forgive Charles?

The play explores ideas of love, loss, and the way we care for others. While her maid, Matilde, tries to invent a joke so funny it could kill someone, we see Lane’s life strain to the breaking point. As we witness the fallout of her life we also experience the many ways love, laughter, and purpose can save us from ourselves.
An Interview with the Director:
Cait Robinson

Edited for Clarity and Length by Kaylee Pomelow

PlayNotes sat down with Cait Robinson, director of The Clean House, to chat about the show and working in regional theater.

Kaylee Pomelow (KP): How does it feel to return to Portland Stage (PS) as a director after starting here as an intern?
Cait Robinson (CR): It feels amazing. It really does. It feels like coming home to a community and a space and a group of people that you’ve been away from for a long time. You’re going back to all of the things you remember so fondly you know, and then also you’re encountering them as an adult and as a professional. When I was here, I was a student, and these are the people who brought me up. This is the theater that brought me up and made it so that I could have a career that I have. They made it so I could function and have a vocabulary and know how to behave professionally. I knew absolutely nothing when I got here, and it’s been so amazing to come back and see all of what I loved then and also encounter the institution and the community as an older artist.

KP: Can you speak a little bit about your journey as a director?
CR: It’s been a little circuitous. I left college wanting to be a director and knowing correctly that I couldn’t just move to New York and start doing shows in basements in Brooklyn. I knew that it wasn’t something I really had the fortitude to do. I knew I needed support and training which is how I ended up here. After my PS internship, I spent a while freelancing. I became really focused on regional theater and the value of regional theater is something that has really been guiding me. So I moved all over the country and spent time in a lot of different regional theaters of different sizes. I think my experience as a director is guided very much by the places that I’ve been and the audiences that are there. I find my work is really shaped by responding to a community rather than thinking “I’d like to direct Chekhov.” I think more about the theater I’m at and what my audience needs and finds interesting. That’s something that has structured pretty much everything I’ve worked on.

KP: What qualities should one possess in order to be a good collaborator? In other words, what are the qualities that make you excited to work with someone?
CR: I like working with people who can communicate well. I think that’s the first thing. There are a lot of different communication styles that are enjoyable to work with I think, but they have to have one. People who are insular in their process or people who don’t check in are harder for me to work with than people who are excited to talk about their work, even if I don’t particularly agree with them. To me, initially, the conversation is more important than the content. When we started looking for a set designer for The Clean House, I had a lot of coffee with a lot of different interesting designers, and the first sign to me that we had found the right person was that our dialogue was easy, whether we were talking about the play, or our other work, or our lives, the dialogue was easy and clear.

KP: Could you speak a bit about how you initially approach a script?
CR: First, I like to try to read it and think as little as possible, and that’s really hard for me because I tend to get really cerebral. I tend to right away start to worry about how we’re going to stage
something before I even know what’s going to happen next. So I try to have the purest state of mind when I read it, and then I try to have it read to me. I try to find actors, or friends, or strangers to read it so I can hear it off the page. I can see on the page the play works structurally, but that second read aloud tells me a lot about how it works rhythmically and sonically.

KP: Could you give us a bit of insight to your process inside the rehearsal room?
CR: One thing that's important to me as a director is having high expectations when I walk into a room. By that I mean that I assume the other people in the room are going to be successful and that it's going to go really well. And even when it doesn't entirely go really well, I'm always looking for the thing that is. Then I try to put the pieces in place to try to get the rest of it to go well. I approach rehearsal with an attitude that something brilliant could happen at any moment.

KP: What was one thing that struck you after reading The Clean House or that you find particularly compelling?
CR: I read The Clean House for the first time when I was in college. That's when this anthology of Sarah Ruhl's was published. And it had your Eurydice in it, which blew everybody's mind. There should be a support group for people in their late twenties and early thirties who read Eurydice in college. So we all had this anthology, and it was like nothing we had ever read before. The level of poetry, the level of beauty, the evocative quality of her language, and her visuals mixed together was earth-shattering. But then I didn't read it again, so coming back to it however many years later, the thing that struck me is the amount of presence it demands from the reader, from the director, and from the actors. It demands that you be perfectly present in the language and in the action and that anything extraneous or added or subtextual immediately throws off the balance of the kind of perfect piece that I remember reading when I was 20 years old.

KP: What have been some challenges that you’ve encountered so far while working on The Clean House?
CR: Itself is the biggest challenge, and what I mean by that is the space and the house itself is the biggest challenge because its demands that you are present in it all the time. It demands that you put your ideas and stereotypes about a pair of rich doctors who are workaholics, who rarely see each other, who live in Connecticut, who have a perfectly white living room aside. You have to put aside your assumptions and your stereotypes because you have to create a space that can evolve as all of the characters evolve too. The journey that they go on, the house also goes on. And that's really tricky because the house starts out as a place that is beautiful in a certain way, but it's not a comfortable space exactly. It's challenging to walk the house along its on arc as you're walking the characters through theirs. It's like another character in the play.

KP: Do you have any advice for young artists?
CR: “Comparison is the thief of Joy.” It really is. There is not a path. You are bushwhacking. You have your machete, you’re in the jungle, and you have to go your own way. There is information you can get from other people, there are referrals, there’s your network, there are your teachers and mentors, and all of those things are important, but the actual path of your journey isn't something that you can follow from anybody else. And always remember that the universe is good.

KP: Is there anything else you would like to add?
CR: I think the only thing I would like to add is that there is a moment in the play when Matilde says “the perfect joke was not made up by one person,” and in the same way the play is not about one person. There are all of these simultaneous journeys happening, and so I think the fun of being in the world of this play is experiencing all of the different strands of music that are playing all at once.
Meet the Cast

BY LIZZ MANGAN

Name: Rob Cameron
Character: Charles
Lane’s husband, a surgeon.

Name: Abigail Killeen
Character: Lane
A doctor, with a cleaning lady.

Name: Jennifer Paredes
Character: Matilde
A Brazilian maid who hates cleaning.

Name: Michelle Rios
Character: Ana
An Argentinian woman who is impossibly charismatic.

Name: Tod Randolph
Character: Virginia
Lane’s sister who loves cleaning.
The World of The Clean House

In-Home Service Work in the US Today

by Jae-Yeon Yoo

“I’m sorry, but I did not go to medical school to clean my own house,” says Lane, in her opening monologue in The Clean House. Lane is a rich doctor who, although clearly uncomfortable with giving orders to a maid, has hired one because she feels it fits her socioeconomic status. While The Clean House is a surreal, darkly comic look at domestic service, the reality is more stark: many maids and housekeepers—especially those that are employed by individual households, like Lane’s—struggle with poverty and overtime work, with little legal protection.

Households hire in-home workers for a variety of reasons—help with cleaning, need for childcare, or support for those with disabilities or the elderly. Yet, their hard—and essential—work is not only largely unrecognized, but also often exploited; positions involving manual labor or service are often stigmatized by the larger society as a “lower” position. As Heidi Shierholz writes in her groundbreaking study on in-home workers, “They are professionals but tend to work in the shadows, socially isolated and often without employment contracts, leaving them with little job security and vulnerable to exploitation.”

Some facts & figures, as presented by Shierholz’s 2012 study with the Economic Policy Institute (EPI):

- In-home maids and housekeeping cleaners are workers who perform cleaning and housekeeping duties in private households. In 2012, there were 328,000 such workers who were paid directly by someone in the household.
- In-home workers are more than 90% female, and are disproportionately immigrants. One out of every nine foreign-born female workers with a high school degree or less works in an in-home occupation. Additionally, being a maid is the in-home occupation that has the highest share of non-naturalized foreign-born workers, and has the highest share of Hispanic workers (at 54.3%).
- In-home workers rarely receive fringe benefits. Only 12.2% of in-home workers receive health insurance from their job, compared with 50.6% of workers in other occupations.
- In-home workers receive very low pay, and many have trouble getting the hours they need. The median hourly wage for in-home workers is $10.21, compared with $17.55 for workers in other occupations. After accounting for demographic differences between in-home workers and other workers, in-home workers have hourly wages nearly 25% lower than those of similar workers in other occupations.
- In-home workers have a higher incidence of poverty than workers in other occupations. Nearly a quarter—23.4%—of in-home workers live below the official poverty line, compared with 6.5% of workers in other occupations.

The EPI calls for state and federal policies that would help regulate and improve the job quality of in-home workers. As Shierholz writes, “These [policies should] include measures such as a sizable increase in the minimum wage, a stronger social safety net, and the provision of paid sick days. Additionally, comprehensive immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for unauthorized immigrant workers would raise their wages and working conditions by making them less vulnerable to exploitation.” Unauthorized, non-naturalized immigrant workers usually do not have the legal rights to work within the US, a fact which many employers—whether personal households or big companies—exploit to their own benefit.

So, what are the policies and legislation in place to help protect in-home workers today? The answer is that, in 2019, legal regulation is still exceedingly low. Many in-home workers face not only poverty, but also struggle with sexual harassment and other undocumented, illegal actions from their employers.

In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) was enacted to help protect workers. This included overtime compensations and minimum wage requirements; however, it did not protect those directly employed by individuals. In 1974, the FLSA was extended to cover domestic service workers; in 2015, the US Division of Labor again amended the FLSA in an attempt to help more direct care workers, such as health/personal care aides and

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The Clean House
nursing assistants. Yet, there are still exemptions: live-in domestic workers, like maids, are not covered by the FLSA.

Live-in, in-home workers with one employer—like maids who reside at their employer’s house—are also not covered by the National Labor Relations Act, Occupational Safety and Health Act, and federal antidiscrimination laws (Civil Rights Act, American with Disabilities Act, and more). This means that maids are unable to bargain collectively in labor unions and organize for better working conditions; have little protection when working with toxic products; are susceptible to overtime work without compensation; and can face active discrimination from their employers. In addition to this alarming lack of legal support, the issue is further complicated by the fact that many in-home service transactions take place “under the table,” or without a legal contract. As an article in the Boston Globe cites, “A survey of Brazilian housecleaners around Massachusetts found that 97% of them did not have written contracts with their bosses. About 53% said they did not receive any breaks, not even for eating, during the work day. And 44% said they did not earn enough money to pay for their basic needs.” This Massachusetts survey is a small representation of a more national issue.

However, there are many actively working to stop these injustices today. The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), which formed in 2007, is the leading organization in the US for domestic workers’ rights. The Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights, which addresses many of the above issues (like overtime, vacation, and mandated breaks), has been passed in some states, such as New York, Hawaii, and California. In 2018, Senator Kamala Harris and Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal announced their goal to make the first federal bill protecting in-home service workers’ rights: the Federal Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights. As Lynn Wallis writes in her article, “Private Households: Employing the Nation’s Invisible Workforce,” this new bill would “become the first national legislation extending basic labor protections, including the right to unionize, protection from discrimination, and the right to safe working conditions. Among many safeguards, the ‘Bill of Rights’ would close legal loopholes excluding domestic workers from certain federal labor and civil rights laws. It would also create meal and rest breaks, and establish fair scheduling practices, as well as strengthening support networks for domestic workers who are survivors of workplace sexual harassment and assault.”

As discussed, many of the two million in-home service workers struggle to obtain basic necessities and be treated with respect and dignity; the new federal bill would be a big step towards addressing these issues. The rights of these workers in the US play into a larger conversation about the rights of minority groups, such as how low-income workers, immigrants, and women are treated in American society today.
In The Clean House, Matilde dedicates much of her time to searching for the perfect joke. Get to know some comedians who could get a cup of coffee with Matilde and laugh at her latest punchline.

Cristela Alonzo is a Mexican American stand-up comedian. She first gained attention in 2010 as a finalist on Last Comic Standing. In 2014, she made history as the first Latina to create, write, and star in a network sitcom, Cristela. Alonzo’s stand-up sets often include stories about her friends and family, and address issues like race and politics.

Margaret Cho is a Korean American stand-up comedian who became popular in the early 1990s as a result of her show All-American Girl. As a comic, Cho tends to address big issues including sexuality, race, gender, and politics.

Dercy Gonçalves was a Brazilian comedian and actor who lived from 1907 until 2008 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Gonçalves ran away from home at the age of 15 to join a traveling theater group and continued working as an actor until 2008. She currently holds the record for the “longest career as an actress” in the Guinness Book of World Records.

Tiffany Haddish is a black stand-up comedian and actor. Her breakthrough came in the 2017 film Girls Trip. Haddish recently created the show Tiffany Haddish Presents: They Ready with Netflix to provide a platform for comics (mostly women of color) who have struggled to find their big break. She is known for her candor in her comic sets.
Anjelah Johnson is an American stand-up comedian of Mexican and Native American descent. Most people would recognize Johnson’s character “Bon Qui Qui,” whom she created during her time as a cast member on MADtv. More recently, Johnson had a stand-up special on Netflix called Not Fancy.

Leslie Jones is a black actor and comedian. Jones is best known for her work on Saturday Night Live (SNL), where she was a cast-member from 2014 until 2019. She also appeared in the 2016 reboot of Ghostbusters, and will have a comedy special premiering on Netflix in 2020. Jones is also known for her enthusiastic live-tweeting of television shows, like Game of Thrones, and sporting events.

Mindy Kaling is an American actor, writer, and comedian of Indian and Bangladeshi descent. Kaling’s big break came in 2003 when her play, Matt & Ben (co-written with Brenda Withers), received critical acclaim at its debut during the New York Fringe Festival. Kaling then went on to work as a writer, actor, director, and producer on The Office. She is also the creator and star of the Hulu original series The Mindy Project.

Nasim Pedrad is an Iranian American comedian and actor. Pedrad is best known for her work on SNL, where she was a cast member from 2009 until 2014 and impersonated celebrities like Kim Kardashian and Arianna Huffington. Since departing SNL, she has appeared in a variety of television shows and feature films, including Scream Queens and Aladdin.
Issa Rae is a black comedian and actor. She created the YouTube series *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* in 2011. The show gained popularity primarily through word of mouth and a large social media following. In 2013, Rae began developing a television pilot, and, in 2015, HBO picked up the show, which became *Insecure*. Rae often addresses the black experience in her work.

Jessica Williams and Phoebe Robinson are the best friend duo that created the live podcast *2 Dope Queens*. Both Robinson and Williams are black comics. On each episode of the podcast, Robinson and Williams are joined by another comedian to discuss topics including race, romance, and living in NYC. Robinson is the New York Times best-selling author of *You Can’t Touch My Hair (And Other Things I Still Have to Explain)*. Williams got her start on *The Daily Show*, where she was the youngest correspondent in the show’s history.

Wanda Sykes is a black comedian, actor, and writer. In 1997, she joined the writing team on *The Chris Rock Show* where she worked until the show ended in 2000. In 2009, Sykes was the first black woman to appear as the featured performer at the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner. She has a new comedy special on Netflix called *Not Normal*. Sykes, who identifies as a lesbian, often addresses LGBTQ issues in her performances.

In *The Clean House*, Ana introduces an intriguing and complex question to those around her after deciding she no longer wants to continue her cancer treatments by pursuing further help from a hospital such as chemotherapy: Do we have the right to choose when/how we die? When Ana asks Matilde to help her die by telling her a joke, Ana is suggesting a magical-realist take on something called euthanasia, which has been a highly-debated topic in America for many years.

The definition of euthanasia, according to *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, is “the act or practice of killing or permitting the death of hopelessly sick or injured individuals (such as persons or domestic animals) in a relatively painless way for reasons of mercy.” Why is this subject so heavily contested? On one hand, this could help an individual who feels as though they are suffering. If a patient is deemed mentally competent and able to make this decision, shouldn’t they have the right to do so? On the other hand, the decision to end one’s life affects not only them, but also their family and loved ones, as we see in the case of Ana and her relationships with both Charles and Matilde.

In the United States, eight out of fifty states have legalized euthanasia as of 2019. These states are: Maine, New Jersey, Oregon, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Vermont, and Washington state. In Montana, the euthanasia request must go through a court proceeding in order to be considered legal. Other countries also have laws regarding euthanasia, with countries such as Belgium, Luxembourg, Colombia, and the Netherlands allowing it.

A region’s religious and cultural background may contribute to whether or not euthanasia is legal. A study conducted in the *Social Science and Medicines Journal* found that, in regards to the legalization of euthanasia, “…weaker religious belief was the most important factor associated with a higher acceptance…” Social factors also hold a place of importance in this conversation, with the study finding that “younger cohorts, people from non-manual (meaning work that involves the mind versus hands) social classes, and people with a higher educational level tended to have a higher acceptance of euthanasia.” Though these factors all have an influence over how euthanasia is viewed, this does not mean that one religion or culture always accepts this procedure while another does not. A study conducted by *BMC Medical Ethics* tells us that “…positions are not neatly matched with national cultures or religious denominations,” and that the most influential factors are actually “the relevance of the specific situatedness of religious beliefs and cultural communities:” The terms “situatedness”, in this context, refers to religions and cultures and “Their status and role in individual situations, for example, as consensual or conflicting on the level of personal perspectives, family relationships, or broader social contexts…”

What would Ana experience if she were to undergo chemotherapy for her breast cancer? According to the American Cancer Society, “chemotherapy (chemo) uses anti-cancer drugs that may be given intravenously (injected into your vein) or by mouth. The drugs travel through the bloodstream to reach cancer cells in most parts of the body.” Aside from the heightened cost of chemotherapy, the side effects can include hair loss, lowered blood cell count, loss of appetite, nausea, and fatigue. According to women who have undergone chemo for breast cancer, there may be “a slight decrease in mental functioning. They may have some problems with concentration and memory, which may last
a long time.” There is also an increased chance of developing other health issues, such as nerve damage from the drugs used in treatments. While chemo can help patients in their battle against cancer, the process itself can be taxing, and it is not always a perfect cure. Because of this, some patients may decide that the process and risk is not worth the result, which is why someone in Ana’s position may refuse to go to the hospital.

Despite the backlash that Ana receives from Charles for not wanting to go to the hospital, she is well within her right to deny treatment. For patients who don’t have something like euthanasia as a viable and/or legal option for them, they can voluntarily choose to discontinue medical care. This option is referred to as “palliative care,” which is discussed in the book *Giving Death a Helping Hand* as “the standard of care when terminally ill patients find that the burdens of continued life-prolonging treatment outweigh the benefits.” If a patient is deemed mentally fit, meaning their condition has not inhibited their capability for decision-making, then there is little than can be said about their decision. There are only a select few instances where an individual is unable to refuse treatment: being diagnosed by a psychiatrist as mentally unfit, receiving workers’ compensation, or receiving social security disability. Other than that, denying care is within the patient’s right.

While the topic of euthanasia sounds daunting on paper, it has been addressed in a more digestible way in pop culture, especially in TV shows such as *Grey’s Anatomy* and *How to Get Away With Murder*. *Grey’s Anatomy*, a medical drama that has been running since 2005 and is currently in its 16th season, offers an example of a case somewhat similar to Ana’s. In the 18th episode of the sixth season, we come across a case of a woman named Kim Allen, who, like Ana, is suffering from a form of lung cancer. Kim’s lung cancer causes fluid build-up in her lungs, making it hard to breathe and creating a constant state of pain. After being told she has less than six months to live, Kim begins to review her options: she can either receive hospice care, which would put her under heavy sedation in an attempt to alleviate the pain, or she can request physician-assisted suicide. Because Kim lives in Washington state, and has been declared mentally fit, she is eventually able to have her request fulfilled. She is sent home with a drug that will stop her breathing 45 minutes after taking it.

There is no “right” or “wrong” view on euthanasia, but its inclusion in theater and pop culture, though dramatized, allows us to recognize it as something that is part of our world. Ana wants to end her suffering in a way that allows her to keep her agency over her life, even at its conclusion. The ending of *The Clean House* does not lead us to make any one judgment about the situation, and instead allows us to come to our own conclusion on whether Ana’s decision was the right one, and what the lasting effects might be for the rest of her loved ones.
Post Show Activities

by Isabella Brezenski & Madison Worthington

1. Think about the differences between Ana and Charles’s relationship and Lane and Charles’s marriage. What are their views on love and partnership? How do they react to the challenging circumstances they are in? Pick one of these three characters and write a monologue expanding on their views.

2. Apples are seen many times in the play. What could they represent? With a partner, pick a moment in which apples are used and discuss how it contributes to the scene.

3. Think back on watching Matilde’s long joke that opens the play. Even if you do not speak Portuguese, did you understand the essence of the joke? Did you laugh? Come up with a joke and find a way to tell it without using English. In small groups, take turns telling your joke. See if you can get your classmates to laugh and guess what your joke is about.

4. Flashbacks featuring Matilde’s parents are seen in the show. Think of another flashback you would be interested in seeing in order to learn more about Matilde. Write that flashback scene and have classmates read it aloud.

5. Some of Sarah Ruhl’s stage directions are abstract and written in a poetic format, and meant to be interpreted by the director. One example of this is on page 25 of The Clean House:

   A pause.
   For a moment,
   Lane and Virginia experience
   a primal moment during which they
   are seven and nine years old,
   inside the mind, respectively.
   They are mad.
   Then they return quite naturally
   to language, as adults do.

How was this staged in the show? Given these stage directions, how else could this moment be brought to life? Get in groups of three and, taking turns being the director and the actors, stage the scene using each person’s vision.

**Anatomy:** The branch of science concerned with the bodily structure of humans, animals, and other living organisms, especially as revealed by dissection and the separation of parts.

**Barren:** A man or woman who is unable to have children.

**Bashert:** The Yiddish word for soulmate, one’s predestined partner.

**Biopsy:** An examination of tissue removed from a living body to discover the presence, cause, or extent of a disease.

**Blood count:** A measure of the number of red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets in the blood.

**Bone marrow:** A soft fatty substance in the cavities of bones, in which blood cells are produced. Bone marrow transplants can be used to treat some types of cancer.

**Bourgeois:** Belonging to or characteristic of the middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes.

**Breast cancer:** Cancer arising in the mammary gland (usually in a female mammal, but occasionally in the rudimentary tissue of a male).

**Bryn Mawr:** A women’s college located in PA.

**Chemotherapy:** A treatment of disease, frequently cancer, by the use of chemical substances.

**Fighting fish:** Also known as Betta fish. Fighting fish are known for their aggression; male fish will attack each other if they are housed in the same tank.

**Free agent:** A person who does not have any commitments that restrict their actions, generally referencing an athlete who is not bound by a contract to a specific team.

**General anesthetic:** An anesthetic that affects the whole body and usually causes a loss of consciousness.

**Genetic code:** Scientists define genetic code as the set of rules by which information encoded in genetic material (DNA or RNA sequences) is translated into proteins (amino acid sequences) by living cells. The genetic code is what programs our genes and appears to be uniform for nearly all forms of life. Charles uses his genetic code as the basis for his unavoidable attraction to Ana.

**Geologist:** A scientist who studies the earth’s physical structure, its history, and the processes that act upon it.

**William Stewart Halsted:** An American surgeon who lived from 1852 until 1922. Halsted is known for developing new anesthetic techniques and for developing novel operations for hernias, breast cancer, goiters, aneurysms, and intestinal and gallbladder diseases.

**Hot water bottle:** A flat, oblong container typically made of rubber, which is filled with hot water and is generally used to warm a bed or to relieve pain or discomfort.
Harry Houdini: An American illusionist who lived from 1874 until 1926. Houdini was well known for his thrilling escape acts, including freeing himself from handcuffs, locked containers (sometimes submerged under water), and straightjackets.

“I almost died laughing”: An idiom meaning one has laughed very hard for a long period of time. People rarely die laughing, but cases have been recorded from ancient Greece to present day.

Lumpectomy: A surgical operation in which a lump is removed from the breast, typically when cancer is present but has not spread.

Luxembourg: A country in western Europe situated between Belgium, Germany, and France with an estimated population of 613,012.

Machu Picchu: A fortified Inca town in the Andes in Peru, which the invading Spaniards never found. It is famous for its dramatic position, perched high on a steep ridge.

Mastectomy: A surgical operation to remove a breast as a way to treat or prevent breast cancer.

Midrash: An ancient commentary on part of the Hebrew Scriptures, attached to the biblical text.

Pager: A small radio device, activated from a central point, which emits a series of beeps or vibrates to inform the wearer that someone wishes to contact them or that it has received a short text message.

Public fountains: Fountains traditionally located in city plazas which provided water which citizens used for drinking, cooking, laundry, chores, etc.

Radiation: A type of cancer treatment that uses beams of intense energy to kill cancer cells.

Taxol: A type of drug that blocks cell growth and is used to treat cancer. Taxol is on the World Health Organization’s Model List of Essential Medicines and is used to treat many different types of cancer, including breast cancer, ovarian cancer, non-small cell lung cancer, and pancreatic cancer.

Telegram: A message sent by telegraph (transmitted long distances along a wire) and then delivered to the recipient in written or printed form.

Time signature: An indication of rhythm on sheet music, which is generally expressed as a fraction.

Unorthodox: Contrary to the normal or expected.

Yew tree: A coniferous tree that has red berrylike fruits, of which most parts are highly poisonous. Yews can live to a great age (some yews are 3,000 years old); the timber is used in cabinetmaking and (formerly) to make longbows. Linked with folklore and superstition, the yew tree was sacred to Hecate, the Greek goddess associated with witchcraft, death, and black magic. National Cancer Institute (NCI)-funded researchers have discovered that the Pacific yew tree has the potential to treat cancer.
Links to the following resources can be found on our site at portlandstage.org/playnotes.

**An NPR interview with Sarah Ruhl**
- **Description:** In this NPR video interview from 2005, Sarah Ruhl speaks about her inspiration for The Clean House, which was a Pulitzer Prize finalist that year. She also speaks about her future projects including the epic trilogy Passion Play. The video is accompanied by a short article.
- **Source:** NPR

**Video of Sarah Ruhl speaking on The Clean House**
- **Content Warning:** Ruhl stops speaking about The Clean House at 2:23 and moves on to In the Next Room, or the vibrator play which may not be appropriate.
- **Description:** Sarah Ruhl speaks about the production of The Clean House at The Lincoln Center Theater. This New York production was a precious opportunity for Ruhl, but also a challenge because it was set in the round. She also speaks on her father’s prevailing comedic spirit despite his battle with cancer, which inspired the themes of laughter and death in the play.
- **Source:** Lincoln Center

**“About” page of Sarah Ruhl’s website**
- **Description:** A short biography of Sarah Ruhl starting with a list of her works, their successes, and where they have been produced. It also includes information about her career, as well as additional links to articles about her.
- **Source:** Ruhl’s website

**A New Yorker article on Sarah Ruhl**
- **Description:** An in-depth article by The New Yorker writer John Lahr on Sarah Ruhl’s personal life, writing style and experience. Lahr includes many quotes from his interview with Ruhl, and describes his observations about everything from her home office to the connection between her poetry and her husband’s photography.
- **Source:** The New Yorker
What is a life well lived? When we think about that question, certain priorities may arise: our professional goals, our familial aspirations, maybe even our social and leisure activities. While these priorities vary from person to person, our cultural backgrounds have a strong influence on how we spend our time. In *The Clean House*, Lane and Virginia busy themselves to march toward progress. Ana and Matilde live for laughter and human connection. The ways in which an individual prioritizes or values certain aspects of their life can be a learned behavior—something that is shaped by our different cultural norms.

Dr. Ashley Fulmer and her colleagues at Georgia State University argue that people’s conceptualization of time exerts an impact on almost every aspect of our life. While first theorized in Edward T. Hall’s *The Silent Language* (a renowned anthropological publication), westernized cultures (predominantly western European countries, the United States, and Canada) follow a different definition and expectation of time than other cultures. Hall argues that westernized societies follow monochronic time and many other societies follow polychronic time. Put simply, monochronistic societies view time linearly and polychronistic societies can view time as fluid, malleable, or cyclical. Many social scientists, such as Fulmer and colleagues, have taken Hall’s thesis further, developing his definition and defining possible origins and outcomes of these different time orientations.

Monochronistic cultures’ orientation sets certain expectations. Time operates almost like an assembly line: constantly moving forward in a single, straight line, systematically moving from one event to another without interruption. Continuing with this metaphor, people expect time to operate mechanically, where change is predictable or comes in patterns. With this strict rigidity, it is not surprising that these societies operate more on clock-time, because time is easily divisible and allows for precise planning and scheduling. Consequently, people in these societies find unexpected change frustrating. As part of a monochronistic culture, we may feel frustrated or anxious when our friend shows up 30 minutes late to a dinner date.

This frustration that we feel with unexpected change is rooted in certain concepts found in westernized culture: capitalism and industrialism. Frustration comes from the predominant idea that monochronistic cultures monetize time (i.e., the popular phrase “time is money”). Time becomes a valuable commodity that can either be used to achieve a goal or wasted; leisure time brings us anxiety. In *The Clean House*, Virginia believes that dust has saved her life because, without dust to clean, “there would be so much leisure time and so much thinking time and I would have to do something besides thinking and that thing might be to slit my wrists.” Monochronism, combined with capitalism or industrialism, orients societies to focus on work to a point where we don’t know what to do with our time outside the office.
Through religious, economic, and philosophical thought, westernized culture believes that hard work is central to our existence. For example, Martin Luther founded Protestant Christianity on the principle that hard work and duty on earth brings heavenly salvation. This idea, coined “the Protestant work ethic,” affects how Western Europe and North America think about work since these societies have observed branches of this faith. In her study, Fulmer argues that the centrality of work motivates westernized societies to monetize time, which affects how we operate day to day. Robert Levine and Ara Norenzayan from the Department of Psychology at California State University at Fresno found that the pace of life (measured by walking pace in downtown areas, postal clerk work speed, and public clock accuracy) is quicker in these societies because of the rigid time expectations associated with monochronism. In the United States, workers are spending less time with leisurely activities and more time working. In a 2014 Gallup report, more than half of full-time workers worked more than 40 hours per week, and nearly 4 in 10 workers reported at least 50 hours per week. Like Lane says, “I go to work exhausted and I come home exhausted. This is how most of the people in this country function.” In a world where time is money, buckling down to finish the task overshadows stopping to smell the roses.

In contrast to monochronism’s monetized time and rigid expectations, polychronism allows certain cultures to follow a fluid flow of events. While monochronism focuses on a linear timeline where tasks are done one-by-one, polychronistic societies don’t see time as being wasted because multiple goals can be completed at the same time. Fulmer argues that the ability to acknowledge various tasks within a fluid time structure allows a polychronistic person to more easily adapt to the unexpected changes that life throws at them. When Ana hears that she has breast cancer, she immediately moves to action—something that puzzles Charles. Fulmer also cites Carol Felker Kaufman’s study, which found that polychronistic people tend to focus on relationships more than monochronistic people. Polychronistic people do not view time with family and friends as time wasted because they tend to think of building interpersonal bonds as useful. In The Clean House, Ana and Matilde focus more intently on human connection through romance or jokes, while Lane and Charles isolate themselves in their work. Polychronistic values allow people to work on interpersonal goals while continuing other tasks.

Fulmer states that if polychronism promotes interpersonal relationships, then it is unsurprising that polychronism is a featured characteristic in more collectivist societies like those found in Latin America. Since collectivist cultures prioritize the group or community more than the individual, polychronistic values help collectivist cultures meet their needs. With a larger emphasis on the importance of family and friends, it’s not so surprising to find that Brazil, Matilde’s home country, mandates thirty vacation days for any worker. The United States government does not guarantee any vacation days for their workers.

Our respective cultures shape how we, as individuals or as groups, interact with the world around us. They serve to teach us the “appropriate” or “normal” ways that we should work, how and who we can love, and even how we spend our time. While there isn’t a right or wrong way to live our lives, we have the ability to choose how we spend our time, whether that is by laughing with loved ones or by cleaning our houses.
The unique juxtaposition of the mythic and mundane has given Sarah Ruhl a strong reputation as a playwright with a truly original voice. Mundane objects, such as food or a piece of mail, often serve as metaphors for life’s great mysteries in Ruhl’s plays. She asks big questions about death, love, and how we treat each other with gorgeous, emotionally vivid language. Yet Ruhl’s plays are also potent with a simple, sparse vocabulary. Those who have the opportunity to read Ruhl’s plays will also note the poetry of her stage directions. Rather than only writing stage directions that handle practical matters, Ruhl shares notes, and even questions with her actors. On the nature of her stage directions, Ruhl muses, “I think part of it comes from my background in poetry, so that I wanted even the stage directions to feel part of the experience of reading the play. So that it wasn’t just, you read the dialogue and then you skip over the stage directions because they’re boring and the director will figure that out and ignore them. I wanted the stage directions to feel like part of the world of the play.”

Tonally, Ruhl walks a narrow tightrope between joy and sadness that critic Charles Isherwood warns can be “occasionally jarring” for audiences. She plays with the thin line between comedy and operatic tragedy. Her scripts dance between the two tones in the most graceful, strange, playful way. Ruhl likens these changes of emotion to those of a child: “I watch my daughter, who’s in the middle of crying, and then you do a little dance for her and she starts laughing….I don’t think our emotions are easily bendable to dramaturgical reason. Emotions can come out of thin air in my work and it can be difficult for actors, especially if their training doesn’t allow that.” She also argues that psychological realism often dilutes emotion into something rational, while she prefers giving her characters “a sense of irony,” and likes them to be “touched with a little brush of the irrational.” Ruhl has described the Aristotelian model as “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.” She continues, “I don’t find it helpful. It’s a strange way to look at experience. I like plays that have revelations in the moment, where emotions transform almost inexplicably.”

Before becoming the household name she is today, Sarah Ruhl was fortunate enough to receive the mentorship of several playwrights who help shaped her voice and style. When Ruhl returned to Brown for her junior year, she embarked on her first playwriting venture in a class taught by Paula Vogel, a monumental playwright in her own right. Touched by the maturity and depth of Ruhl’s work, Vogel urged her to consider a career in playwriting. “If Virginia Woolf became a playwright, she’d be someone like Sarah Ruhl,” Vogel said in an interview, praising the “epic intelligence” of her former student. Ruhl now contends that Vogel did more than teach her to write; she nurtured “the idea of living in the theater.”

After graduating from Brown, Ruhl traveled to Taxco, Mexico, to study with her other mentor, María Irene Fornés, at the Latin American Writers Workshop. Fornés’s work argues that character action can come spontaneously from emotion and feeling, and that characters need not be restricted to objective action. This “of the moment” method of constructing characters is reminiscent of Ruhl’s own philosophies and work. Like Fornés, Ruhl
believes that humankind is far too spontaneous to move on a predictable arc of objectives towards a single goal. Ruhl recalls, “I was so influenced by Fornés. She would say this hilarious thing when someone would ask her, ‘What am I supposed to take away from this play, Irene?’ She would say, ‘My play is not a doggy bag. You can’t take anything away.’ She was so fierce and so insistent about how irreducible plays are.” Ruhl also prioritizes the female voice and sends her female characters on epic journeys that were traditionally reserved for male characters; these characteristics are also intrinsic to the work of Vogel and Fornés.

Despite having the confidence and influence of such prolific mentors, Ruhl did not achieve acclaim overnight. Much of her early work opened to mixed critical reception and many did not eagerly accept Ruhl’s desire to move away from the Aristotelian arc. Her structure was seen as immature playwriting, rather than a conscious stylistic choice. One of her most beloved works, *Eurydice* (which was recently listed as 15th on the 2018 *New York Times* article *The Great Work Continues: The 25 Best American Plays Since Angels in America*), received thirteen readings before it was finally produced, and the production did not receive much critical praise.

It wasn’t until 2004, when *The Clean House* premiered at Yale Repertory Theatre and *Eurydice* was produced by Berkeley Rep, that Ruhl began to receive more positive attention for her unique voice and style. After those productions, Ruhl’s popularity rapidly increased, resulting in a major shift in the way her work was being reviewed and an increased appreciation for and acceptance of her style. Isherwood originally voiced major problems with Yale Repertory’s production of *The Clean House*. In his review of the production, he stated that “the whimsy quotient does, at times, reach dangerous levels, and the play does not comfortably accommodate a few of its more outlandish developments.” However, when Isherwood reviewed the off-Broadway production of *The Clean House* two years later, his hesitations about the play evaporated. By this point, the play had received several productions regionally and won several awards, and Ruhl’s acclaim had dramatically increased. Isherwood called the off-Broadway production “one of the finest and funniest new plays you’re likely to see in New York this season.” In contrast to his previous remarks about some of the play’s “outlandish developments,” Isherwood now remarked, “Thanks to the alchemical imagination of Sarah Ruhl...this strange grab bag of ideas and images, together with some more exotic ingredients, magically coheres.”

As *The Clean House* received its New York premiere, the Berkeley Repertory production of *Eurydice*, which had closed two years earlier, moved to the Yale Repertory Theatre. Isherwood sang its praises as well, calling the production “a love letter to the world that deserves to be remembered for a good long time” and warned that the play “requires some re-education for audiences used to the contemporary theater’s steady diet of naturalism and relatively straightforward demarcations between comedy and drama.” Overwhelming praise such as this motivated the move of the production to Second Stage Theater in New York City in June 2007. Isherwood again gave the play an overwhelmingly positive review. His praise was joined by that of John Lahr, famed critic for the *New York Times* who remarked, “Audiences are happy to pay top dollar to see what they already know; it’s the unknown that petrifies them. Sarah Ruhl’s *Eurydice*...is exhilarating because it frees the stage from the habitual.” Audiences flocked to the production at Second Stage, causing the show’s run to be extended three times—a full five weeks longer than originally intended.

Despite the critical turbulence she experienced with her work, Ruhl remained unfazed. She has always stood firm when her philosophies about life and playwriting are confronted with critique. She proudly embraces this strange mixture of the mythic and mundane as a style and has paved the way for others to do the same. She has opened a door for writers who are not interested in exploring the intimate fourth-wall realism that once dominated American stages. “I was talking about...this old dictum ‘write what you know,’” Ruhl reflects, “and how I would revise it and say ‘expand what you know.’ And then write. Because I think if you can find yourself to [only] write what you know you’re pretty limited as far as your own gender, your own race, your own geographical point of origin, and...”

**Eurydice at Second Stage, 2007.**
that, really, art is about connecting all strata of humanity. I don’t think you actually want to limit yourself to only what you know, that narrowly.” She continues, “I think every play is a big ‘I don’t know,’ a big ‘What if?’ Otherwise, why would you write it?”

In addition, Ruhl has also helped to revive old forms, such as the Greek chorus in *Eurydice*, and to reignite interest in the structural bones of different theatrical approaches, be it medieval, Noh drama, Jacobean, or impressionist. She says, “If you excavate people’s subjectivity and how they view the world emotionally, you don’t get realism. I think what characters learn is sometimes so unutterable, or else totally encased in the poetry of language, the answer is the play in a way. I think if the playwright can give a digestible answer to that question, ‘what did the character learn?’ then I think there’s a chance that the play is too easy.”

Ruhl is at the forefront of a generation of writers that choose to not conform to the existing producing landscape. Their diversity isn’t merely demographic, but stylistic and experiential as well. Ruhl believes, “New York theaters are so scared of the press that fewer risks are being taken. I come to the theater wanting to feel and think at the same time, to have the thought affect the emotion and the emotion affect the thought.” She is known for a bold declaration: “Take people’s money away and give them back their imagination.” This has served as both a rallying cry and inspiration for many artists who have followed in her footsteps, straying always from traditional modes and models of storytelling to attempt to create something new. Equally as important as her ability to serve as a champion for those who want to take risks stylistically, she has also become a beacon for female-identifying playwrights, particularly in the male-dominated Broadway landscape. The fact that Ruhl received a Broadway debut before her mentor (Vogel) and many other critically acclaimed female-identifying playwrights, particularly in the male-dominated Broadway landscape. The fact that Ruhl received a Broadway debut before her mentor (Vogel) and many other critically acclaimed female-identifying playwrights, such as Lynn Nottage, speaks to Ruhl’s own talents, but also raises questions for the theater industry, which, season after season, sees plays by men vastly outnumber plays by women in the all-important commercial spaces on Broadway, where money can be made, reputations burnished, and Tony Awards won. Even Ruhl, despite her acclaim and widespread influence on up-and-coming artists, has only had three plays of her ever-growing catalog produced on Broadway.

Statistically speaking, female-identifying playwrights are nowhere close to being produced as often their male-identifying counterparts. *American Theatre* magazine publishes a yearly study from data they collect from 387 American theaters. Their latest study looked at 2,085 productions scheduled between the dates of September 2018 and August 2019. They defined “production” as anything with at least a week’s run, and excluded improv shows, readings, cabarets, and festivals. They found that 57% of all productions were written by male-identifying playwrights and plays by female-identifying playwrights comprised 30%, up from last year’s 26%. (Plays co-written by men and women take up the slack at 13%.) Another study by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition released for the 2016–2017 season that specifically examined productions on and off Broadway, found that 89% of playwrights produced on Broadway were male-identifying and 11% female-identifying.

Ruhl is determined to be a force of change on this issue. Her success has proven time and time again the ability of female and female-identifying voices to sell tickets and receive critical acclaim, and has made a lasting impact on the next generation of female and female-identifying playwrights. She states, “Our view of the prototypical playwright is still a man. If you see how a playwright is represented [in media]...the playwright is a man....In fifty years, we will have no gender conception of a Broadway playwright being male. We just won’t. It’s changing.”

As a vocabulary word, Ruhl’s name carries weight. To have a play described as “Ruhlian” carries an overwhelmingly positive and hopeful connotation to artists across the country.
Recommended Resources

BY THE EDITORS

Books
A Thousand Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez
Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns) by Mindy Kaling
Milk and Honey by Rupi Kaur

Plays
The Baltimore Waltz by Paula Vogel
Fefu and her Friends by Maria Irene Fornés
God of Carnage by Yasmina Reza
How I Learned to Drive by Paula Vogel
Indecent by Paula Vogel

Works by Sarah Ruhl
100 Essays I Don’t Have Time to Write
A Cowboy Song
Dead Man’s Cellphone
Eurydice
For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday
How to Transcend a Happy Marriage
Letters from Max: A Book of Friendship
Orlando

TV/Film
The Good Place
Last Comic Standing
Tidying Up with Marie Kondo

TED DANSON AND KRISTEN BELL, THE GOOD PLACE.
Portland Stage Company
Education and Outreach

Join Portland Stage as we discuss, debate, and explore the plays on our stage and in the classroom! Portland Stage is dedicated to bringing exciting theater, inspiring conversation, interactive experiences, and thought-provoking literature to a wide audience of youth and adult learners. Whether you take part in a discussion, subscribe to PlayNotes, take a class in our Theater for Kids space, or bring a group of students to see a performance, there is something here for everyone. How would you like to participate?

Student Matinee Series
The Portland Stage Student Matinee Program annually provides more than 7,000 middle and high school students from Maine and New Hampshire with discounted tickets for student matinees. Following Student Matinee performances, students participate in discussions with members of the cast and crew, actively and energetically exploring all elements of the production and the issues raised in the play.

Play Me a Story
Experience the Fun & Magic of Theater on Saturday Mornings at 10:30am with Play Me a Story! Ages 4-10 are welcome to enjoy a performance of children’s stories, then participate in an acting workshop with professional theater artists. Build literacy, encourage creativity and spark dramatic dreams! Walk-ins are welcome, but pre-registration is encouraged!

After School Classes
After school classes at Portland Stage produce a safe environment for young people to find a higher sense of play, stretch their imaginations, and gain valuable social skills such as listening, risk taking, ensemble building, public speaking, and leadership through storytelling. These classes are wildly fun, creative, spontaneous, and begin to build skills for the young actor or non-actor’s voice, body, and imagination. Visit our website for this year’s offerings!

Vacation and Summer Camps
Our theater camps are fun, challenging and enriching. We use stories of all kinds to fuel these active, educational and lively, process-based week-long school vacation and summer programs for youth. Theater for Kids works with professional actors, directors, artisans and composers. Students are invited to think, speak, and act, and even sing imaginatively, critically, and creatively in an environment of inclusivity and safe play.

Classroom Workshop Program
The Classroom Workshop Program partners Portland Stage with regional middle and high schools to enhance the experience of students who participate in the Early Show Program by complementing their visits with pre- and post-show workshops in their own classrooms. Workshops are led by professional Teaching Artists who engage students in the creative process through writing, acting, directing and discussion.

The Intern Company
The Portland Stage Intern Program is committed to training future generations of theater professionals. Applicants should be highly motivated individuals who have acquired basic training in the theater arts and are looking to explore their field further through meaningful hands-on experience. Portland Stage interns can expect to be challenged by a creative process that relies on both ingenuity and collaboration. Interns at Portland Stage work with leading designers, directors, administrators, and our professional production team throughout the season. They leave with a greater knowledge of the theatrical process and the satisfaction of being part of a dedicated theater company where exceptional quality is the end goal.
Portland Stage Company
2019-2020 Staff

Executive & Artistic Director
Anita Stewart

Artistic & Production Staff
Meg Anderson Props Master
Todd Brian Backus Literary Manager
Daniel Brodhead Asst Production Manager, Lighting & Sound Supervisor
Hannah Cordes Education Director
Megan Doane General Manager & Production Manager
Ted Gallant Technical Director
Mary Hartley Scenic Carpenter
Myles C. Hatch Stage Manager
Julianne Shea Education Administrator
Susan Thomas Costume Shop Manager
Shane Van Vliet Stage Manager

Affiliate Artists
Ron Botting Daniel Noel
Peter Brown Ed Reichert
Daniel Burson Hans Indigo Spencer
Maureen Butler Dustin Tucker
Ian Carlsen Bess Welden
Moira Driscoll Monica Wood
Abigail Killeen Sally Wood
Callie Kimball

Administrative Staff
Paul Ainsworth Business Manager
Chris DeFilipp House Manager
Nolan Ellsworth Front of House Associate
Marjorie Gallant Graphic Design Associate
Beth Given Development Director
Mical Hutson Marketing Director
Lauren Kennedy Social Media & Marketing Associate
Jennifer London Company Manager
Martin Lodish Finance Director
Renee Myhaver Assistant Box Office Manager
Donald Smith Audience Services Manager
Lauren Stockless Development Assistant
Nathan Sylvester Front of House Associate
Adam Thibodeau House Manager
Shannon Wade Front of House Associate

Intern Company
Angela Armstrong Electrics
Isabella Brezenski Education
Jacob Coombs Sets & Carpentry
Emma Covert Stage Management
Savanna Genskow Costumes
Meredith G. Healy Directing & Dramaturgy
Zoë Lewis Company Management
Lizz Mangan Directing & Dramaturgy
Kaylee Pomelow Directing & Dramaturgy
Emma Scott Costumes
Olivia Tellier Stage Management
Madison Worthington Education