Grief and Whimsy in the Plays of Sarah Ruhl

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Dramatic Art

by

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August 2008
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VITA OF JAMES ZUHEIR AL-SHAMMA  
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Reader -- Dramatic Art 155, American Drama, 1940 to Present  
University of California, Santa Barbara, 2002

Instructor -- American Literature and Dramatic Art  
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Instructor -- Introduction to Multimedia Computers  
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Santa Barbara City College, California, 2001

DIRECTING

*The Bandit Queen* by Josef de Valdivielso, adapted by the director and cast utilizing Anne Bogart’s techniques of Sourcework, Viewpoints, and Composition, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2004.

*Spark* by Adrienne MacIain, New Plays Festival (Festival director: Naomi Iizuka), University of California, Santa Barbara, 2003.

*Metamorphoses* by Mary Zimmerman, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2003.

*Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare; winner of two “Best Actor” Indy Awards (annual theater awards presented by the *Santa Barbara Independent* newspaper); produced by Site Pacific at Center Stage Theater, Santa Barbara, California, 2002.

*Becky and Dog* by Nara Reitta Dahlbacka, Original Scripts, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2002.

*Talk to Me like the Rain And Let Me Listen* by Tennessee Williams, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2002.
Let Down Your Hair and This Is a Play, staged readings at the Young Playwrights Festival, Ensemble Theatre, Santa Barbara, California, 2001.


The Wind in the Willows, adapted from Kenneth Grahame's classic children's book, Goleta Open Alternative Classroom (Grades 1-6), Goleta, California, 1989.

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The House of Bernarda Alba by Federico Garcia Lorca, Site Pacific Theater Company, Center Stage Theater, Santa Barbara, California, 2003.

Site Pacific Festival, Site Pacific Theater Company. A festival of site-specific theater pieces at various locations on campus. University of California, Santa Barbara, 2003.

ACTING

Representative Roles

Much Ado about Nothing, Don Pedro, Nashville, Tennessee, 2007
Murder on the Menu, Various Roles, murder mysteries with audience participation, San Francisco Bay Area, California, 2004
Lumens in Love, Male Lead, a short film submitted to the HBO Comedy Festival, filmed in Santa Barbara, California, 2003
Henry V, Nym, Lit Moon, Santa Barbara, California, 2000
The Flood, Chus, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1990
An Untenable Position (One-Person Show), University of California, Santa Barbara, 1990
Mango (Movement Theatre Troupe, directed by James Donlon), Ensemble Member, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1989-1990
The Front Page, Louie, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1989
Bits and Pieces, Monk, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1989
Escurial, The King, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1988
Annie Get Your Gun, Frank Butler, University of the Pacific, Fallon House, Columbia, California, 1988
Kiss Me Kate, Lucentio/Bill Calhoun, University of the Pacific, Fallon House, Columbia, California, 1988
Don't Tell Mother, Gangster, University of the Pacific, Fallon House, Columbia, California, 1988
My Next Husband Will Be a Beauty, Husband, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1987
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Robert Woodruff, Modern Acting Methods
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The Wind in the Willows (Adaptation), 1989
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ABSTRACT

Grief and Whimsy in the Plays of Sarah Ruhl

by

James Zuheir Al-Shamma

American playwright Sarah Ruhl crafts non-realistic, highly theatrical works that position her as a successor to Thornton Wilder, John Guare, and Tony Kushner. She has worked through her grief over the loss of her father across a number of plays, and she accordingly often explores the liminal realm between the worlds of the living and the dead. Her aesthetic is one of grief and whimsy, of the application of lightness to heaviness and darkness, an endeavor to which she brings a strong poetic sensibility and an erudite intelligence. She gravitates toward myth and archetype and, accordingly, frequently writes in the modes of fantasy and magic realism. Jungian universalism interests her more than Freudian neurosis. She may be considered a postmodernist in reference to her playful quotation of outside texts and asynchronous handling of time. Plays discussed include Eurydice, The Clean House, Melancholy Play, Dead Man's Cell Phone, Late: A Cowboy Song, and Passion Play. They are examined both as literature and in performance, drawing upon first-hand experience and third-party accounts. Research in various areas is applied, including Greek mythology, the psychology of bereavement, the semiotics
of humor, shamanism, the plague, the myth of the cowboy, and early Christian symbolism. Although only in her 30s, Ruhl has already received widespread recognition and commendation, most notably as a Pulitzer finalist and a MacArthur Fellowship recipient.
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**Introduction**

**A. Bagging Medusa's Head**

In the first chapter of *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), Italo Calvino describes how Perseus conquers Medusa, with her heavy gaze, through lightness:

The only hero able to cut off Medusa's head is Perseus, who flies with winged sandals; Perseus, who does not turn his gaze upon the face of the Gorgon but only upon her image reflected in his bronze shield.... To cut off Medusa's head without being turned to stone, Perseus supports himself on the very lightest of things, the winds and the clouds, and fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught in a mirror. (4)

After detaching the head, he carries it with him in a bag, careful never to look at it, turning its ossifying stare against his enemies as needed. His strength "always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden" (5). Like Perseus, Sarah Ruhl carries a particular burden, that of the loss of her father to cancer when she was 20, and also like the Greek hero, she handles it with lightness, standing upon the winds and the clouds. Heavy issues of life, love, and death lie at the heart of her drama, but she treats them with a deft touch, keeping humor close at hand even when plumbing the depths of despair and bereavement. Ruhl admires Calvino's *Memos*, specifically this first chapter titled "Lightness." She explains, "Lightness isn't stupidity.... It's actually a philosophical and aesthetic viewpoint, deeply serious, and has a kind of wisdom -- stepping back to be able to laugh at horrible things even as you're experiencing them" (qtd. in Lahr, "Surreal").
Ruhl's voice is unique in the American theater. She writes in a non-realistic, highly theatrical style that carries on in the tradition of Thornton Wilder, John Guare, and Tony Kushner. She has worked through her grief over the loss of her father across a number of her plays, and a strong sense of the impermanence of life imbues all of her work. If one were forced to summarize her aesthetic in two words, grief and whimsy would serve as well as any others, reflecting as they do the application of lightness to heaviness and darkness. As will be demonstrated in the following pages, what is unique about Ruhl is her ability to handle heavy topics with a light touch, to do so with a strong poetic sensibility and an erudite intelligence, and to boldly venture into realms of the fantastic while at the same time remaining grounded in some version of reality. Her theatrical style argues for the importance of theater as an art form distinct from the cinema and television, strengthening the connection between actor and audience through direct address and frequently calling on the audience member to engage his or her imagination as her works challenge the conventions of realism. Although only 34 years old at the time of writing, Ruhl has already received widespread recognition and commendation; most noteworthy is her status as a Pulitzer finalist and a MacArthur Fellowship recipient. She is also, in all likelihood, the most-produced female playwright in the United States at this time. In spite of this, virtually no scholarly work has addressed her rapidly expanding oeuvre. It is hoped that this dissertation will fill that void.

Like Perseus, Ruhl observes the horrible indirectly, adhering to Emily Dickinson's dictum to, "tell all the truth, but tell it slant" (qtd. in Reid), an approach
that was encouraged by her teacher, Paula Vogel (Reid). The mirror that Ruhl holds up to nature distorts, as all mirrors do, and reflects a highly subjective version of reality; the playwright makes no attempt to adhere to the conventions of realism, or to depict experience in a fashion that presumes objectivity. Much of Ruhl's work may be categorized as magic realist, although she resists having it labeled as such: "It's like, Oh, real life is like this, and people who put weird stuff in their art are magical realists.... But I don't see the boundaries so much. For me, when I watch realism, I think, That's not how I experience my life personally" (qtd. in Crowley). She further qualifies her objection: "I think the only time I kind of object to the term 'magical realism' is when it relegates what happens onstage to some fantasy realm" (qtd. in D'souza). In these quotations, Ruhl is objecting to a dismissive use of the term. As defined by scholars of magic realism, the mode does not imply a devaluation of the fantastic; rather, the magical is presented as being just as real as the everyday. Occurrences in her plays such as a woman that turns into an almond out of sadness, a dog that talks, and a joke that kills, may be considered exemplary of magic realism. This aspect of her work will be discussed at length in the chapter on The Clean House.

Ruhl began to charm the snakes on Medusa's head as early as two months after her father's death, as an undergraduate in a playwriting class conducted by Paula Vogel at Brown University. Vogel's esteem for her student cannot be overstated. She claims that her "most significant contribution to the American theatre" has been to insist that Ruhl write a play, rather than a scholarly paper, as her
undergraduate thesis (qtd. in Wren 31). Vogel is, herself, an accomplished playwright, having won a Pulitzer Prize for *How I Learned to Drive*. During her tenure as director of the playwriting programs at Brown University, Vogel has mentored numerous playwrights including Nilo Cruz, who is also a Pulitzer Prize winner (Rizzo, "Allen Stars"; Robertson, "Paula Vogel"). She explains, "There has not been another Sarah. I've taught at Brown for 20 years and I've had many extraordinary writers. I'm lucky I got to experience one Sarah Ruhl in my life and I know that" (Reid).¹ She predicts that Ruhl is "going to become her own vocabulary word" (Wren 31) and describes the moment at which she first recognized her student's immense talent:

[Ruhl] came into my intensive advanced playwriting seminar some 15 years ago. A sophomore, but I thought at first she was a senior: she was quiet and serious, but so obviously possessed a mind that came at aesthetics from a unique angle. I assigned an exercise: to write a short play with a dog as protagonist. Sarah Ruhl wrote of her father's death from that unique angle: a dog is waiting by the door, waiting for the family to come home, unaware that the family is at his master's funeral, unaware of the concept of death. And, oh yes, the play was written with Kabuki stage techniques, in gorgeous, emotionally vivid language. I sat with this short play on my lap in my study, and sobbed. I interrupted my then partner, now wife, Anne Sterling, at her computer in her study, and read it to her, and the two of us shared that playworld, and the recognition of who this young woman could become: Sarah Ruhl. (Vogel, "Sarah Ruhl" 54)

In light of this experience, when Ruhl later approached Vogel with the idea of writing her thesis on "the representation of the actress in the nineteenth-century novel" (Ruhl qtd. in Svich 39), it is not surprising that Vogel insisted upon a play instead.

¹ Vogel left Brown University for a five-year appointment as chair of the playwriting department at Yale School of Drama beginning July 1, 2008 (Robertson, "Paula Vogel").
In addition to Vogel, Charles Isherwood of the New York Times has been a significant champion of Ruhl's work, particularly in his reviews of Furydice and The Clean House (Isherwood, "Comic Impudence"; Isherwood, "Always Ready").

The awards that she has received attest to her importance within the world of American theater. These include a $500,000 MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 2006 ("MacArthur Foundation") and Helen Merrill and Whiting Writers' awards ("Sarah Ruhl"). The Clean House was awarded the $10,000 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize in 2003-2004 (Boehm), was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2005 (Pulitzer Prize), and a 2005 PEN Award recipient (PEN America Center). Passion Play received the Kennedy Center Fourth Forum Freedom Award. Her work has been produced at numerous theaters, including the Goodman Theatre, Arena Stage, Lincoln Center Theater, Second Stage, Yale Repertory Theatre, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Berkeley Repertory Theater, the Wilma Theatre, Cornerstone Theater, Madison Repertory Theater, Clubbed Thumb, the Piven Theatre Workshop, and Steppenwolf Theater. Her plays have been translated into German, Polish, Korean, Russian, and Spanish, and have been produced, outside of the United States, in London, Canada, Germany, Latvia, and Poland ("Profiles" 14; C. Jones).

The writing exercise described by Vogel gives an early indication of Ruhl's style and thematic concerns. Composed only a few months after the death of her father, it introduces the themes of death and bereavement that would continue to absorb Ruhl for many years to come. It demonstrates her ability to elicit a strong emotional response and the element of the fantastic is introduced, first of all,
through the assignment itself, which situates a dog as the protagonist, and advanced through the incorporation of elements of Kabuki theater (Goodman). Ruhl's sense of the poetic is in evidence as well, alluded to in Vogel's description of her "emotionally vivid language." Indeed, Ruhl wrote poems before she wrote plays, publishing a collection of verse, "Death in Another Country," when she was 20 (Lahr, "Surreal"). The collection was bundled with the work of two other poets in a volume titled Troika VI, published by Thorntree Press in 1995 ("Troika VI"); it is now apparently out of print. Ruhl draws parallels between these two modes of writing:

Poetry and plays, in a very obvious way, have this in common: There is more white space in their margins than there is print. What's filling up all that space? Song, stillness, speculation -- all kinds of invisible things. Of course, a good fiction writer doesn't fill in the gaps, but you have to know when to keep your mouth shut to be a poet or to be a playwright. You have to know when to keep your mouth shut so that the lines are in fact lines rather than paragraphs, so that the line can sing. (qtd. in Svich 39)

Ruhl carefully crafts every line, deliberately selecting every word and delighting in surprising juxtapositions. Richard Corley, who directed Eurydice at Madison Repertory, observes that, "Sarah Ruhl has a reason (and a vision) for every line,... and my advice to directors is: Pay attention. Beneath that lovely, generous exterior is a fierce intelligence, which we ignore at our peril" (Wren 32). In "The Golden Ruhl," Celia Wren concisely summarizes Ruhl's style:

While diverse on the level of story, the plays share certain traits: a steely lyricism; a pronounced whimsy; a deceptive spareness, masking an almost metaphysical intensity; and a quirky, compassionate humor that often coexists with deep sadness. (31)
Les Waters, who has directed three productions of *Eurydice*, praises her ability to write lyrical dialogue that advances plot: "She's one of the few people I know who can write a form of dialogue that's poetic, where the poetry is welded to the action" (qtd. in Wren 32). In addition to Vogel, Ruhl has studied playwriting with Mac Wellman, Nilo Cruz, and Maria Irene Fornes (Weckworth 35; Vogel, "Sarah Ruhl" 58).

The influence of Fornes may be traced through Ruhl's essay, "Six Small Thoughts on Fornes, the Problem of Intention, and Willfulness," which appeared in the September 2001 issue of *Theatre Topics*. In it, Ruhl examines notions of intention and will in current theatrical practice, in the process laying out the framework for a dramaturgical philosophy. Fornes, whose workshop Ruhl attended in Mexico, questions the prevalent Stanislavskian insistence on character objectives. Ruhl supports Fornes's advocacy for emotional states of being in the absence of willfulness, protesting a psychological realism in which action and emotion may be traced through cause and effect. Ruhl practices the form of playwriting that she advocates in this essay, as her plays abound with the inexplicable. To give just a few examples, in *Melancholy Play*, Tilly finds herself unable to account for her sadness and Frances turns into an almond out of melancholy, and in *The Clean House*, a joke has the power to kill. Elsewhere, Ruhl has expressed a preference for a type of drama based on Ovid rather than Aristotle, one abounding in small transformations rather than one in which, "a person wants something, comes close to getting it but is smashed down, then finally gets it, or not, then learns something
This stated philosophy does not mean that Ruhl's plays are plotless; on the contrary, series of actions do occur, linked by cause and effect. Ruhl leaves space, however, for the small transformations and emotional states as well. As playwright Caridad Svich notes, Ruhl's characters "are in the 'real' world but also live in a more suspended state" (Svich 36).

**B. Biography**

Born on January 24, 1974 (Ruhl, "Re: A Request"), Ruhl grew up in the Chicago suburb of Wilmette (Wren 31) and spent considerable time on visits to Iowa, from whence her family originates (Gurewitsch). As Ruhl was growing up, her mother, Kathy Kehoe Ruhl, acted in and directed plays while teaching high school English; she now holds a Ph.D. in Language, Literacy, and Rhetoric from the University of Illinois. Ruhl's late father, Patrick, marketed toys for a number of years. He loved "puns, reading, language, and jazz," and, according to his daughter, "should have been a history professor" (qtd. in Lahr, "Surreal"). Her older sister, Kate, is a psychiatrist (Lahr, "Surreal"). Raised Catholic, Ruhl abandoned the faith as a teenager "after she’d decided it was unfair that priests, but not nuns, were the only ones allowed to communicate directly with God" (Goodman). She began telling stories at an early age, relating that, "my mother claims that before I could write, I would dictate stories to her and she would write them down" (qtd. in "A Conversation"). The first story she wrote was about "a wedding between two
vegetables who lived on different sides of the refrigerator" (Gianopulos). Ruhl

describes her early career ambitions and her first play:

In first grade, I thought that when I grew up I would write stories and be a
teacher.... In fourth grade, I briefly entertained the idea that I would own a
restaurant. I thought it would be the perfect use of all my skills: I could
write a description of the food on the menu, and I could also draw pictures
on the menu. I'm not sure when I realized that there was more to being a
restaurateur than making menus. I did write a courtroom drama involving
landmasses, in the fourth grade. There was a disagreement between an
isthmus and an island, and the sun had to come down and settle the matter in
the end. My teacher Mr. Spangenberger refused to put it on.... I didn't
suspect that I would be a playwright from a young age. (qtd. in Svich 39)

The topic of her first play demonstrates both her sense of whimsy and her love of
language: "I loved the words like ‘isthmus’ and ‘peninsula’" (Ruhl qtd. in
"Playwright Sarah Ruhl").

Ruhl spent time in the theater from an early age. When she was five years
old, her mother would take her to rehearsals at which Ruhl would take notes: "I
would think they hadn't gotten it quite right" (qtd. in D. Smith). She started taking
classes at the Piven Theatre Workshop while in the fourth grade. Located in
Evanston, Illinois, and founded over 35 years ago by Joyce Piven and her late
husband, Byrne Piven, the Workshop boasts alumni such as John and Joan Cusack,
Jeremy Piven, Aidan Quinn, Lili Taylor, Harry Lennix, Kate Walsh, and Hope
Davis. Polly Noonan, who has appeared in many of Ruhl's plays, attended the
Workshop as well (Piven Theatre Workshop). The Pivens founded the Workshop in
order to continue the improvisational work of Viola Spolin (Gianopulos). Joyce
Piven lists some of their source materials: "We acted stories, myths, fairy tales, folk
tales, and literary tales -- Chekhov, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Salinger" (qtd. in Lahr, "Surreal"). The emphasis was on language, not scenery, and on transformation: the theater "didn't use props, and didn't have sets. Language did everything. So, from an early age: no fourth wall, and things can transform in the moment" (Ruhl qtd. in Lahr, "Surreal"). Ruhl claims that this early training helped shape her playwriting aesthetic:

I think there's something specific about the training of the Piven workshop that comes into my work.... It's an emphasis on transformation and discovery over and above a dramaturgy of Aristotelian conflict. There's respect for language and the melody of a line that Joyce and Byrne [Piven] instill in actors, rather than having a mannered or shaggy subtext. The playfulness they encourage comes into my work. You just can't help but take in a respect for organic playfulness when you come through the workshop. (qtd. in Reid)

Jessica Thebus, who directed the Goodman production of The Clean House, and Melancholy Play at the Piven Workshop, agrees that the Pivens' training had an influence on Ruhl's work:

Melancholy Play was the first full-length play of [Ruhl's] that I read. I thought I saw the structures of improvisation and theatre games and long-form within the play in a way that is hard to explain. I feel like the people in her plays are improvising together in a dynamic that is very familiar to me. (qtd. in Reid)

The Workshop was also involved in the development of The Clean House, staging its first sit-down reading and three performances as a workshop presentation (Reid), and commissioned and premiered Orlando, Ruhl's adaptation of the Virginia Woolf novel ("Sarah Ruhl"), as well as her adaptations of Chekhov (Ruhl, "The Lady” 1).
When Ruhl was 20, in August of 1994, her father died of bone cancer after fighting the disease for two years, an event that would have a profound impact on her and her playwriting (Goodman). She graduated from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island with a B.A. in English in 1997 (Pressley; Goodman); her undergraduate work included a year spent studying English literature at Pembroke College in Oxford (Lahr, "Surreal"). She worked a variety of jobs for the next two years, including teaching arts education in public schools (Pressley), before returning to Brown, completing an M.F.A. in Playwriting in 2001. After graduating, she lived in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, eventually returning to New York, where she now resides in Manhattan. With Paula Vogel and Anne Fausto-Sterling officiating, she and Anthony Charuvastra, who is now a child psychiatrist (Crowley 110), were married on a mountaintop outside of Los Angeles in 2005 after a seven-year courtship (Goodman; Lahr, "Surreal"). Ruhl gave birth to their daughter Anna in the spring of 2006.

C. Methodology

This study consists of a literary analysis of Ruhl's plays supplemented by an awareness of her work in performance and by Ruhl's own thoughts as culled from various interviews and articles. I have attended three productions of her work: the New York premiere of Eurydice at Second Stage Theatre on June 16, 2007, directed by Les Waters; the world premiere of Dead Man's Cell Phone at Woolly Mammoth Theatre in Washington, D.C., on June 20, 2007, directed by Rebecca Bayla Taichman; and the premiere of the revised version of Passion Play: A Cycle in
Three Parts at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, directed by Mark Wing-Davey, on October 11, 2007. Secondary sources include production reviews, interviews with Ruhl and others associated with her work, and articles on Ruhl. These sources were drawn from print media, Internet sources, and radio, particularly National Public Radio features. The playwright declined to be interviewed for this study due to a hectic schedule and an already heavy demand for interviews; indeed, her published conversations have proven to be a rich source of information. I have had limited e-mail contact with Ruhl, who has generously provided me with unpublished scripts. I have attempted to meet each play on its own terms, drawing on literary theory and research in other fields as deemed appropriate. The research has encompassed such varied topics as Greek mythology, the psychology of bereavement, the semiotics of humor, the popular image of the cowboy, and magic realism, as will be discussed in conjunction with specific plays.

**D. Overview**

A chapter each is devoted to six of Ruhl's plays: *Eurydice*, *The Clean House*, *Late: A Cowboy Song*, *Melancholy Play*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, and *Passion Play*. The choice of which plays to include and which to omit was simple. The first four have been published in *The Clean House and Other Plays* (2006) and will therefore be readily available to the reader. *Dead Man's Cell Phone* premiered in Washington, D.C. during the writing of this work, generating considerable interest in the theater press due to the recent successes of *Eurydice* and *The Clean House*. The New York premiere in March 2008 caused even greater excitement featuring,
as it did, Mary Louise Parker in the lead role and Anne Bogart as director. The play has also since been published. Ruhl had been working on Passion Play for 12 years prior to its premiere in revised form at the Goodman Theatre in October 2007, and it is her most ambitious work to date, consisting of three parts with a total running time of some 3-1/2 hours. Of Ruhl's full-length plays, Orlando was omitted as it is an adaptation that hews fairly close to Virginia Woolf's novel, and Demeter in the City because the playwright considers it to be still a work-in-progress. These, along with Ruhl's one-acts, will be discussed briefly in an appendix.

The first chapter contains an analysis of Eurydice. Production reviews chronicle the powerful emotional impact of this play. The Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is reviewed, and Charles Segal's schema of the triangular relationship between art, death, and love is found inadequate to fully account for the elements in Ruhl's version, which rather sets up a sequence of dualities such as life/death, music/language, romantic love/paternal love, and overworld/underworld. A history of theatrical adaptations of the myth is given, demonstrating that prior to Ruhl's adaptation and Rinde Eckert's recent, operatic Orpheus X, Eurydice has been confined to a minor role. Both Ruhl and Eckert's efforts are groundbreaking in that they grant Eurydice the power to distract Orpheus from his task of leading her out of the underworld. Ruhl cites the influence of Rilke's poem, "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes."; its impact on the play is examined, and elements borrowed from Ovid and Virgil's versions of the myth are identified. The dualities mentioned above are analyzed at some length. The dialectic of the play is such that the final synthesis of
most dualities equals death. Ruhl claims to have written the play in order to have one more conversation with her deceased father. In large measure, the play is a study of the process of bereavement. The psychology of bereavement is brought to bear on this work; in particular, Bowlby's four-stage schema and the analytic model are utilized. Both models describe emotional states through which the bereaved individual passes. The nostalgic elements in the work enhance the sense of longing for what has passed.

The second chapter focuses on The Clean House, which deals with death and bereavement as well, although its tone is significantly lighter than that of Eurydice. Inspiration for the play came from an overheard anecdote told by a doctor who medicated her depressed maid in an attempt to enliven her to clean the house more effectively. Ruhl's father's humor in the face of cancer inspired the tone. The Clean House is compared to Paula Vogel's The Baltimore Waltz; among the numerous parallels between the two, the most significant is that both were inspired by the death of a close relative. Themes of The Clean House include humor in the face of death, the physical and spiritual aspects of cleaning, rationality versus emotion, and the importance of community. Ruhl employs techniques of magic realism in order to develop these themes, such as a matter-of-fact acceptance of fantastic occurrences on the part of the characters, the inclusion of an innocent observer in the character of Matilde, the mirroring and metamorphosis of Matilde's parents in and into Charles and Anna, the functionality of Matilde's parents as ghosts, the literalization of metaphor, and the metaphorical use of overlapping space. As frequently occurs
in magic realist works, the use of these techniques sets up a tension between mythos and logos. The play culminates in the formation of a community of women; the favoring of community over individual achievement is a value that magic realist narrative often reinforces.

Humor theory is applied to the jokes in The Clean House. The three jokes told in Portuguese by Matilde reinforce female solidarity at the expense of men, reversing a traditional type of joke that strengthen bonds between men by belittling women. Matilde's theory of humor fails to synchronize with those put forth by psychologists and linguists; she posits that a good joke cleanses the psyche. In this respect, a joke functions as an incantation uttered by a shaman might. Matilde's final joke, whispered in Ana's ear, facilitates Anna's transition from the world of the living to that of the dead, with Matilde presiding over her final rites. In shamanic cosmology, a great tree or mountain connects all levels of existence. The yew tree retrieved from Alaska by Charles, and delivered to Lane's living room moments after Ana's passing, stands as a bridge between the living and the dead.

In Melancholy Play, discussed next, Ruhl valorizes the emotion named in the title, associating it with a cinematic Europe of the past and elevating it above the contemporary American concept of depression. She draws inspiration from Richard Burton's Jacobean tome, The Anatomy of Melancholy. Subtitled "a contemporary farce," the play follows Tilly as she pursues a series of relationships with people who find her melancholic state irresistible. Tilly alludes to words in foreign languages that are roughly synonymous with melancholy; these words are identified
and their shades of meaning, and the ways in which those connotations are incorporated into the play, are discussed. The contagious nature of melancholy in the play suggests the plague, and the almond state, to which first Frances and eventually the entire cast succumbs, represents death. Julian, who plays the cello throughout, functions as a death figure who claims all of the characters at the conclusion, accompanying them in a final dance of death. Ruhl employs magic realism, as she has in *The Clean House*, in this case by transforming her characters into almonds.

Although *Dead Man's Cell Phone* incorporates a character that is deceased, as suggested by the title, it takes a lighter approach to the afterlife than either *Eurydice* or *The Clean House*. Examined in the fourth chapter, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is lighter and more farcical, and it does not focus on either the process of bereavement or that of dying. When Jean appropriates Gordon's cell phone, she assumes some of his power as well by obtaining access to his list of contacts. In this work, Ruhl questions the possibility of truly knowing the other. Ruhl's status as a postmodern playwright is assessed. Although her employment of plot, character, and conflict is fairly traditional, her playful use of time and the intertextual nature of some of her works are consistent with postmodernism. The multiple genres that may be identified in *Dead Man's Cell Phone* are indicative of this intertextuality.

In the fifth chapter, *Late: A Cowboy Song* is used to illustrate Ruhl's play-building techniques. Mary's preparation of a consommé from *The Joy of Cooking* stands in as a metaphor for Ruhl's own creative process. A major source for this
play is the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. Ruhl bases Mary and Crick on the film's Mary and George, singling out and amplifying the abusive aspect of the movie couple's relationship. Whereas in the film the marriage is threatened by the coquettish Violet's interest in George, in the play the couple separates through the intervention of Red, the female cowboy who is in love with Mary. Ruhl draws inspiration from another film from the 1940s, *Holiday Inn*, for a sequence in which Mary experiences life as an unrelenting series of holidays. Short plays written by Thornton Wilder and John Guare around holiday themes, namely "The Long Christmas Dinner" and "In Fireworks Lie Secret Codes," are compared to *Late*. Ruhl also deals with issues of gender, through the character of Red, and sexual identity, through Mary and Crick's baby Blue, who is born with both male and female features. Incorporated into the set design, the Marlboro Man looms over the play as the archetypal cowboy and a symbol of masculinity, one ironically enough created originally in order to market cigarettes. Also mentioned in the description of the set, the paintings of Mark Rothko color the play's landscape, and Crick expresses a fascination with modern art. Ruhl presents both the cowboy lifestyle and modern art as a means of calming the mind and slowing down time. Again, a postmodern intertextuality is in evidence. The use of food in Ruhl's plays is discussed.

The sixth chapter begins by tracing the development of *Passion Play*, which originated as Ruhl's undergraduate thesis. Each of the three parts of the cycle focuses upon a production of the Biblical Passion at a different point in history.
Analyses of millennial rhetoric and apocalyptic movements are introduced in order to produce a framework for analyzing the cycle; Northrop Frye's schema of the archetypical symbols of the apocalypse is employed as well. Even as her characters perform the Passion, Ruhl undermines the biblical story through various devices. One is that of the wise fool, personified by the village idiot in Part One and Violet in Part Two. In the first part, Ruhl establishes a rich set of images pertaining to the second coming that she re-incorporates in the second and third. However, the apocalypse fails to occur. The second coming is a false one in the first part, as Mary 1 fakes an immaculate conception that fails to come to term as she commits suicide by drowning. Ruhl challenges the position of Christ as the One Man, to use Frye's terminology, by introducing giant fish puppets that carry off the body of another suicide victim, Mary 1's lover Pontius.

In the second part, the image of a bird, associated with the Rapture, is reintroduced when a giant bird appears to Violet in the forest. However, it is too large to fly and therefore unable to transport the Jewish girl, Violet, away from the horror of Nazi Germany. In the last part, another character named Violet appears, a little girl that retains some memories of her namesake from the second part. Fascinated with birds, she becomes adept at drawing and eventually painting them, achieving a personal rapture through art. Her mother's husband, who may or may not be her father, returns from Vietnam a broken man. He rejects the Passion Play and Christianity, and although he ascends into the sky in a giant ship at the conclusion, it is not in a rapture but rather to navigate the currents of the air. He
rejects Christian salvation and the concept of heaven in order to navigate life of his own volition. Queen Elizabeth, Adolf Hitler, and Ronald Reagan appear in each of the three parts, Elizabeth to forbid the presentation of the Passion, with its Catholic associations, Hitler to praise the anti-Semitic message of the Oberammergau Passion, and Reagan to campaign for reelection at the Passion Play in South Dakota. Through these leaders, Ruhl highlights the theatrical nature of politicians' public personae.

Like Passion Play, the French Canadian film Jesus of Montreal depicts a group of actors mounting the Passion and chronicles the effect that playing the biblical roles has on the actors. The focus is on the actor playing Jesus, who becomes more and more Christlike as the film progresses; in contrast, Ruhl's play is more episodic, with the focus more evenly distributed among multiple characters, and her characters frequently diverge from, rather than merge with, the roles that they are playing. Finally, Passion Play is compared to Tony Kushner's Angels in America, particularly in the representation of millennium in each. Both demonstrate a postmodern concept of millennium, one in which apocalypse is deferred. They differ in their valuation of the community/individuality dichotomy, with Kushner ultimately favoring community, and Ruhl, individuality.

The thematic material of the six plays each accorded a full chapter includes death, bereavement, spousal abuse, and apocalypse. However, like Perseus, Ruhl never lets the weight of her burden pull her down; rather, she stands on the winds and the clouds and levitates the Medusa's head of her subject matter. Her reflective
shield is her sense of whimsy, which enables her to refract horrible truths in a
lighthearted, playful manner. In her world, elevators rain, the dead dance and laugh,
a female cowboy sings horse lullabies for a living, melancholy people turn into
almonds, and giant fish share the stage with Elizabethan-era sailing ships. Her
imaginative creations defy the finality of death as if to take revenge on the gods for
stealing away her father. The living speak to the dead in Eurydice, The Clean
House, Dead Man's Cell Phone, and, arguably, Melancholy Play, and characters
assume various incarnations in Passion Play. Like Perseus, who uses his burden as
a tool, Ruhl utilizes her heavy feelings in the creation of her art.

In writing Eurydice, Ruhl shouldered the terrible burden of her father's
passing. Ruhl relates that the task failed to have a cathartic effect: "It was hard to
write in the sense that when I finished writing it, it made me sad.... It's not like
writing it made me feel better. I still felt terrible. And I often felt terrible watching
it, until at least 10 productions in" (qtd. in D'souza). Nevertheless, the heavy subject
matter is leavened with her sense of lightness. The result is a play that entertains
through its whimsical reimagining of the myth even as it plunges the viewer into
depths of grief through its precise and compassionate depiction of the process of
bereavement.
I. Navigating Sorrow in *Eurydice*

A. Even the Stones Wept

Numerous critics have attested to the emotional power of *Eurydice* in performance, particularly in the three productions directed by Les Waters, at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 2004, Yale Repertory Theater in 2006, and Second Stage Theater in 2007. In the *San Francisco Chronicle*, critiquing the Berkeley Repertory Theatre production, Robert Hurwitt observes about the separated lovers that, "pangs of longing strike heartbreaking chords," and that the scenes between father and daughter are "rich in beautifully observed tenderness." He notes that the conclusion is "as poignantly rewarding as it is luminously ambiguous" (Hurwitt). Writing of the same production in the *East Bay Express*, Lisa Drostova calls it "beautifully sad," notes that the Father's "wistful dancing provoked sniffling from the audience," and that the actor playing Orpheus "does his share of tear-jerking too." Overall, she rates the production as "assured, powerful, heart-wrenching" (Drostova). Michael Scott Moore states, in the *SF Weekly*, that, at the conclusion of this production, "half the audience was crying" (Moore). The *East Bay Express* goes even further when, in declaring Eurydice the Most Memorable Theatrical Production, it claims that, "there wasn't a dry eye in the house at the end of each show" ("Most Memorable").

The Yale Repertory Theatre production evoked similar responses. Although Frank Rizzo of *Daily Variety* found the production "not a fully satisfying experience," he nevertheless discerned "individual scenes of exquisite beauty" and
“moments of aching beauty” (Rizzo, "Eurydice"). In The Stamford Advocate, Jonathan Rougeot observes that, "I've never laughed so much at a production that I left feeling so devastated," and that, "'Eurydice' offers a heartbreaking exploration of the theme of loss" (Rougeot). Anita Gates of the New York Times explains her emotional response in greater detail:

I cry at the theater, sometimes even when the play isn't very good. But normally I know when it's coming; it starts with a little mistiness, allowing me time to dig out the Kleenex. But on Tuesday night, as I watched the final minutes of the Yale Rep's knockout production of Sarah Ruhl's "Eurydice," the tears came with the suddenness of grief. (Gates)

She praises the universality of its appeal, asserting that, "it is about every death, every loss, every paralyzing pang of grief" (Gates). Her colleague at the New York Times, Charles Isherwood, goes even further with his praise, calling the play, "devastatingly lovely -- and just plain devastating." He hypothesizes that it might "just be the most moving exploration of the theme of loss that the American theater has produced since the events of September 11, 2001," and that he "fought off tears for half the play, not always successfully" (Isherwood, "A Comic Impudence").

Perhaps the most detailed personal response to the play comes from Louise Kennedy writing in The Boston Globe in a piece titled, "A Season of Grief." She described what happened after she left the theater at the end of the Yale Repertory production:

It's a fascinating night in the theater, and I scribble excited notes for the review I plan to write the next day. There's a lot to think about, a lot to write about, and that fills me with energy and delight.

Then it's over, and I walk to my car. I get in, put the key in the ignition, and break down into heaving, wracking sobs. All I can think about
is the image of Eurydice’s father....

I saw this play on Oct. 3; my father had died Sept. 7. Ours was a complicated relationship -- whose isn't? -- and though I had gone through the rituals of mourning I have been troubled by finding myself unable to cry more than about five tears at a time.

But now, picturing this imaginary father spinning a web of love around his imaginary child, I feel all the sorrow and guilt and confusion and anger and loss that I have been refusing to let in. I cry for a long time. And then, feeling just as cleansed and purified and exhausted as we were promised by all those theories of catharsis in freshman English, I drive the two hours back home. (Kennedy)

The next day she experiences another loss as her mother, her struggle with cancer suddenly taking a turn for the worse, dies that evening. This precludes the critic from writing a review of *Eurydice*, but she claims that, "this play, more than most I have seen this year, continues to haunt me." She hypothesizes that its impact can be partially credited to the fall of the World Trade Center and the public mourning for strangers that followed, and the struggle between "remembering and forgetting, between turning back and moving on" (Kennedy). However, this explanation fails to detail why this particular play achieves such a strong emotional impact. As argued below, this impact derives from Ruhl's accurate depiction of the components of grieving and her skillful balancing of opposites such as remembering and forgetting, to form an artful picture of the process of bereavement and the finality of death.

**B. Orpheus Ascending**

In *Descent and Return: The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature* (1971), Walter A. Strauss chronicles the origins of the myth of Orpheus. Scholars generally agree that the poet-god first appears in the sixth century B.C. as a shaman-musician
capable of subduing all of nature. He is at this time associated with the cult of Dionysus and founds his own so-called Orphic cult. In the written record, the myth first receives a brief mention in Euripides' *Alcestis* (438 B.C.). Fuller renditions appear in Virgil's *Fourth Georgic* (29 B.C.) and in Books 10 and 11 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (c. 2-8 A.D.). As the Roman poets recount, Orpheus's wife, Eurydice, dies of a snake bite on their wedding day. Grief-stricken, the groom descends to the underworld to retrieve his bride, and convinces Hades and his wife Persephone, through the power of his lamentation, to consent to allow him to lead Eurydice out of the underworld. Orpheus agrees to the condition that if he looks back at her on the way up, he will lose her again, this time forever. He is, of course, unable to resist glancing back, and so she returns to the underworld. After this failure, in some versions, he is torn apart by the Maenads (Bacchantes), female followers of Dionysus, as soon as he emerges from the underworld; in others, he eschews the company of women and introduces homosexuality to Greece. In either case, after his dismemberment his head floats down the river Hebros, singing and prophesying, accompanied by his lyre, until both wash ashore on the Isle of Lesbos, at what would subsequently become the location of an Orphic oracle. Strauss delineates three parts to the myth as just described: "(1) Orpheus as a singer-prophet (shaman) capable of establishing harmony in the cosmos...; (2) The descent into Hades...; (3) The dismemberment theme..." (5-6). As with the vast majority of artists who have drawn upon the myth, Ruhl focuses on the second part.

Charles Segal delineates, in *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet* (1989), a
triangular relationship between the basic elements of the myth, consisting of art, death, and love. The meaning of any particular telling of the myth depends upon which theme or themes predominate. For example, in Orpheus's failed attempt to recover Eurydice, art and love prove unable to overcome death. In Ovid's telling of the story of the Maenad's attack on Orpheus, the women's spears and stones halt in mid-flight, charmed by the poet's music. In this instant, art triumphs over death, if only momentarily (2). In an earlier version dating to the middle of the fifth century B.C., this victory of art, coupled with love, occurs more convincingly, in that Orpheus actually succeeds in retrieving Eurydice from the underworld (8). Indeed, the mention in Euripides implies success as well, as is pointed out by Emmet Robbins in "Famous Orpheus" (1982). In Alcestis, the title character's husband, Admetus, wishes that he possessed the musical ability of Orpheus so that he might bring his wife back from the dead. Robbins asserts that Admetus must be referring to a version in which Orpheus succeeds in his quest, else the reference would be inappropriate (Robbins 16).

In other retellings, art allies itself with the natural cycles of death and rebirth as in the ending of the day in nightfall followed by the dawning of the new morning (Segal 4). Although this triangular relationship of concepts may prove useful in beginning to understand Ruhl's version, in actuality, her balancing of ideas is more complex. To begin with, the concepts of love and art must each be split in two, love into that for a husband and that for a father, and art into music and language. In the myth as traditionally depicted, Orpheus's skill encompasses, not solely music, but
music, poetry, and rhetoric as "composite, virtually indistinguishable parts of the
time of art" (Segal 2). Ruhl has in a sense crippled her Orpheus's artistic
sensibility by denying him the art of poetry and, by extension, rhetoric, bestowing a
love of literature on his wife and father-in-law as a counterbalance to his own
appreciation of, and aptitude for, music. In light of the fracturing of Segal's
triangular elements, a more useful thematic framework for understanding Ruhl's
restructuring of the myth would be a series of dualities, with the caveat that death
trumps all.

In Ruhl's play appear not only the dualities of life/death, music/language,
romantic love/paternal love, but many others as well: lightness/heaviness,
overworld/underworld, farmer/artist, memory/forgetfulness, child/adult,
father/husband, high/low, internal/external, and perhaps most importantly,
art/nature. The notion of art in the last pair is not intended here in the modern
understanding of the fine arts, but rather in the classical Greek concept of art as the
totality of human endeavor. Robert E. Wood draws upon Aristotle, in Placing
Aesthetics: Reflections on the Philosophic Tradition (1999), in distinguishing
between nature as the "fundamental framework of our existence" (14), and art as
that which arises out of human choice: "The whole of culture is thus arti-ficial [sic]
in the literal sense; that is, it is made by art" (15). In Segal's thematic triad, art
encompasses the Orphic combination of poetry, rhetoric, and music. In the
art/nature dyad which will be applied to Ruhl's play, the notion of art encompasses
much more, adopting Aristotle's sense as conveyed by Wood.
The story has been retold numerous times throughout the centuries in literature, poetry, opera, and theater. Due to the centrality of music to the myth, it has proved an attractive subject for opera; indeed, the first three operas ever written were based on it. Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini both composed their 1600 versions on Ottavio Rinuccini's libretto; Claudio Monteverdi adopted Alessandro Striggio's libretto in 1607. In "Orfeo and Eurydice, the First Two Operas" (1982), Timothy J. McGee dismisses Caccini's as an inferior work, and focuses his discussion on the other two. The version of the legend with which the two librettists would have been familiar was that presented in Angelo Poliziano's 1480 stage play. As the operas were written for happy occasions, the librettists altered Poliziano's ending, concluding as it does with the Bacchantes slaying Orpheus. Rinuccini omits the condition that Orpheus must not look back at Eurydice as he leads her from the underworld, and thus Orpheus easily succeeds in completing his mission. Striggio's solution is a bit more complicated: Orpheus loses Eurydice as he leads her out of the underworld, but then Apollo intervenes and reunites the couple in heaven (McGee 163-5).

One particularly noteworthy operatic version is that of Christoph Willibald Glück. Glück began his reformation of opera with Orfeo ed Euridice in 1762. He broke from the serious Italian opera of his time, introducing such innovations as integrating the overture into the dramatic structure of the work and abandoning the conventional use of unaccompanied recitative (Howard). Glück's librettist, Calzabigi, follows the precedent set by Striggio, having Orpheus look back at
Eurydice and lose her, only to be reunited with her through the intervention of a
*deus ex machina*, in this case in the person of Love (*Amor*) rather than Apollo. On
the journey from the underworld, in this version, Orpheus and Eurydice are allowed
to speak to one another, on the condition that Orpheus must not tell his bride why he
is not looking at her. Feeling neglected, she does her best to get him to turn around
and eventually succeeds (Krieger 295). Thus blame for the failure is shifted onto
her, but this blame is somewhat obviated by her ignorance of the conditions; a
parallel may be drawn with Eve's temptation of Adam (297).

Notable retellings of the myth in modern stage drama include Jean Anouilh's
*Eurydice (Legend of Lovers)* (1952) and Tennessee William's *Orpheus Descending*
(1957). Like Ruhl, Anouilh has added a parental figure, this time Orpheus's father,
an itinerant musician who has brought up his son to play music with him in cafés for
loose change. Allowed to visit Eurydice in the afterlife, Orpheus finds himself
unable to resist looking into her eyes in order to determine if she is lying about a
past sexual liaison, and thereby loses her. A mysterious stranger gives him another
chance to be reunited with his love in the afterlife, an opportunity that he pursues,
presumably by committing suicide. In Williams's version, a young man wrapped in
a snakeskin jacket and toting a guitar temporarily alights in a moribund southern
town, bringing sexual rebirth to the proprietress of a dry-goods store. The
proprietress’ husband shoots and kills her and their unborn child upon learning that
the young man has impregnated her; in the meantime, the local authorities attack the
Orpheus figure with a blowtorch. Metaphorically, the poet-musician has
temporarily enlivened his Eurydice in the underworld, but once again failed to remove her from its environs. More recently, Mary Zimmerman includes the story in her *Metamorphoses* (1998), retelling the moment of the backward glance in two different ways, first as found in Ovid, then as in Rilke's poem, "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes" (1904). Robert Woodruff directed the premiere of an even newer version of the myth, Rinde Eckert's operatic *Orpheus X*, at American Repertory Theatre in 2006. In this version Orpheus is a rock star whose cab runs over Eurydice, a poet herself, who is a stranger to him. As in Ruhl, Eurydice acts as the agent that foils Orpheus's plan, in Eckert's version by ripping off his blindfold as he is leading her back to life.

Although Eurydice appears as a fully-developed character in the mid-twentieth century dramas by Anouilh and Williams, both Eckert and Ruhl assign her greater responsibility as the spoiler of Orpheus's rescue attempt. For her part, Zimmerman retells the story through direct quotation of her sources, Ovid and Rilke, and therefore mirrors their handling of Eurydice: in Ovid, she serves merely as Orpheus's love interest, cryptic and without personality. In Rilke, she assumes greater importance; the poet describes her inner state as one of fullness and completeness. She no longer needs or even desires Orpheus, having forgotten who he is by the time he turns around. As reviewed by Terry Byrne in the *Boston Herald*, the Eurydice of *Orpheus X* actually becomes more powerful in the underworld, capable of making the choice not to return with Orpheus. Furthermore, Orpheus must share the power of art with her, as she herself is a poet. Nevertheless,
Orpheus remains the central figure. Ruhl, however, plants Eurydice stage center, constructing a plot around her journey to, and decision to stay in, the underworld.

**C. Rilke and the Fullness of Death**

Ruhl finds inspiration in Rilke's poem, not drawing on him by direct quotation, as does Zimmerman, but through the adoption of his perspective on the myth and certain elements in his telling of it. In an interview with Caridad Svich published in *The Dramatist* in 2002, Ruhl explains the influence of the poem:

> Thinking about what was inside Eurydice's head, rather than thinking of her as a cipher, I didn't feel obliged to hurdle any great literary traditions, because there is no tradition of Eurydice having anything inside her head. One exception is the beautiful poem by Rilke -- "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes" -- lesser known than the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. The poem has stayed with me for a long time; it gives a moving account of how death has already altered Eurydice's perception by the time Orpheus comes to rescue her. (qtd. in Svich 36)

Additionally, Ruhl has adopted the pastoral feel of the poem by sprinkling throughout her dialogue words having to do with nature and agriculture, as well as borrowing other elements such as the characterization of Orpheus's physique, a contrast of senses of perception, and the use of somewhat peculiar imagery having to do with hair.

Rilke's poem is set in a pastoral landscape through which Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes travel on their way out of the underworld. The German poet describes woods, a lake, a rain-filled sky, and soft meadows through which passes a path. Furthermore, he describes a world of grief that arises out of Orpheus's song of lamentation:
She, so belov'd, that from a single lyre
more mourning rose than from all women-mourners, --
that a whole world of mourning rose, wherein
all things were once more present: wood and vale
and road and hamlet, field and stream and beast, --
and that around this world of mourning turned,
even as around the other earth, a sun
and a whole silent heaven full of stars,
a heaven of mourning with disfigured stars: --
she, so beloved. (stanza 5)

This ability to create a world with his music harks back to the first stage of the myth
as outlined by Strauss, that of the "singer-prophet capable of establishing harmony
in the cosmos." Indeed, early sources associate Orpheus with, not just harmony in,
but the origin of, the cosmos. As examples, a parody of a religious, Orphic
cosmogonic poem occurs in Aristophanes' Birds, and Apollonius of Rhodes places
Orpheus on the Argos where he quiets the drunken sailors with a song describing
the origin of the world (Segal 8). In Rilke, however, the musician generates, not the
original cosmos, but a copy, one distorted by grief. This is a pastoral world of
"wood and vale/ and road and hamlet, field and stream and beast." This pastoral
dimension in the poem influences the creation of a pastoral world in the play, not so
much in its setting, but in the language of the dialogue. In Ruhl's play, the imagery
consists of sky, clouds, and stars, farming and hunting, dirt, fruit and vegetables,
duckhunting, and all manner of animals: birds, dogs, fish, bulls, bees, elephants,
reindeer, worms, horses, and gazelles. In Ruhl, the pastoral landscape has been
fragmented and dispersed, hinted at rather than openly displayed. The language
carries a promise of nature, or a nostalgia for it. Eurydice dwells in the shade of her
father, who is imagined as a tree only briefly, before the dripping emptiness of the underworld reasserts itself. One can trace nature through the dialogue, but its existence is not substantial enough to inhabit. It is as if the cosmos has been dispersed, rather than distorted, by grief; or as if nature, rather than Orpheus, has been torn apart and scattered in an act of *sparagmos*.

Orpheus's use of language in Rilke also seems to have influenced Ruhl's depiction of the mythic musician. At the top of the poem, Rilke describes him as "gazing in dumb impatience" as he leads Hermes and Eurydice out of the underworld, a muteness also seen during the opening lines of Ruhl's play as Orpheus offers to Eurydice the sky and the stars. And when Orpheus does speak, in Rilke, to reassure himself that the two are following, he "[says] it aloud and [hears] it die away," an image that conjures up the impermanence of language, an idea developed by Ruhl to extend to the impermanence of memory, as it is built on language. As language and memory "die away" so does life.

Rilke's description of Orpheus as a "slender man" (stanza 4) also makes its way into the play. As the Nasty Interesting Man attempts to seduce Eurydice, he contrasts his own robustness with Orpheus's slender physique:

> You need to get yourself a real man. A man with broad shoulders like me. Orpheus has long fingers that would tremble to pet a bull or pluck a bee from a hive.... a man who can put his big arm around your little shoulders as he leads you through a crowd... a man with big hands, with big stupid hands like potatoes, a man who can carry a cow in labor. (355)

The Nasty Interesting Man describes himself as a farmer or herder to Orpheus's artist. Here Ruhl has gone outside of Rilke to Virgil for her characterization,
drawing upon the Roman poet's depiction of the god Aristaeus. Aristaeus is the would-be rapist of Eurydice who chases her along the river where she stumbles upon the snake that delivers the fatal bite. An apiarist whose bees all die after the incident, Aristaeus forces Proteus to prescribe a remedy for his bad fortune, and is told to sacrifice four bulls and four heifers. Out of the rotting cattle burst an abundance of bees that fill the sky like clouds. One finds references to a bull, a cow, and bees in the above quotation from the Nasty Interesting Man, which all refer back to Virgil's telling of the myth. Ruhl here synthesizes Rilke's depiction of the slim poet with Virgil's portrait of the beekeeper to create a contrast between the farmer and the artist.

Ruhl's creative use of Eurydice's hair may also be traced back to Rilke. He refers to Eurydice as "that blonde woman,/ who'd sometimes echoed in the poet's poems" (stanza 8), and then uses similes of hair and rain to describe her condition after death:

She was already loosened like long hair,  
and given far and wide like fallen rain,  
and dealt out like a manifold supply.  (stanza 9)

In Ruhl's opening scene, Orpheus imagines Eurydice's hair as an orchestra that flies her into the sky. Later, after her death, he dreams of her hair becoming water:

Last night I dreamed that we climbed Mount Olympus and we started to make love and all the strands of your hair were little faucets and water was streaming out of your head and I said, why is water coming out of your hair? And you said, gravity is very compelling.  (371-2)

What Rilke employs as two separate similes, those of Eurydice being "loosened like
long hair" and "given far and wide like fallen rain," Ruhl combines into a single image of hair as faucets streaming water. Hair, first imagined to serve as an orchestra, later becomes the channeling of water (nature) through the art of plumbing.

In Rilke, Eurydice's "deadness" fills her "like fullness." In Ruhl, this fullness comes from her association with her father in the underworld. Rilke also comments that she "could take nothing in" (stanza 6), which is also seen in the ending of Ruhl in which she has difficulty recognizing Orpheus, becomes fearful of following him, and finally sabotages his attempt by calling out his name, guaranteeing her immediate return to the underworld. It can be said of Ruhl's Eurydice, as Rilke says of his, "her pale hands had grown so disaccustomed/ to being a wife." What Ruhl has added is a separating force in the personage of the Father, to whom Eurydice deliberately returns as indicated in the stage direction that motivates the calling out of Orpheus's name, "She makes a decision" (Ruhl, Eurydice 396). In Rilke, Eurydice returns to her abundance-filled death, unconcerned with Orpheus's grief. Similarly, in Ruhl, Eurydice shrugs off Orpheus's panicked entreaties by twice repeating the trite aphorism, "If ifs and ands were pots and pans/ there'd be no need for tinkers" (398).

Apart from Rilke's influence, Ruhl has altered the classical myth in other essential ways. In addition to adding the character of Eurydice's father, she has removed Persephone, who, in Ovid at least, is the one who grants Orpheus's request, rather than her husband, Hades. Ruhl limits the denizens of the underworld to its
Lord and the three Stones, omitting the numerous mythical figures, such as Sisyphus and Tantalus. In this way, Ruhl discovers a particularly personal twist to the story, as her own father died from cancer when he was 55 and she was 20 years old. She explains that part of her motivation for writing the play was to "have one more conversation with him" ("Turning the World"). She has, of course, done much more than that, building an artful study of grief based upon the ancient myth. She has inserted her father/daughter conversations into a structure that is built upon, to a great extent, a number of interrelated dualities.

D. Dualities

By her own account, Ruhl began building the play around a duality:

I began to work on Eurydice with one image in mind: Eurydice follows Orpheus, then she calls his name, which startles him, and he turns around. This image -- of language taking over music -- continued to circulate, and around that image, the play sprang up. (qtd. in Svich 36)

One can see this dichotomy incorporated into the characters of Orpheus, representing music, and the Father, representing language. A love for language in its written form is expressed by both Eurydice and her father, and the Father teaches Eurydice language once again, after she has lost her grasp of it in her journey to the underworld. Orpheus of course possesses the capacity for language, but expresses a preference for what he considers to be a less ambiguous medium of expression. He feels that ideas should either be right or wrong, rather than interesting. Eurydice finds stories and language interesting, and her use of the word connotes a degree of complexity with which Orpheus feels uncomfortable. Eurydice reports to her
father that Orpheus noted that "words can mean anything," preferring a concrete thing, such as the human body, which "only means one thing.... Or maybe two or three things. But only one thing at a time" (385). He also prefers music in that it is heard, even mentally, rather than thought, as language is. However, the dichotomy between music and language is not only expressed, among character relationships, between Orpheus and the Father, but also between Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus displays little interest in the books that Eurydice is reading, and she, in her turn, proves incapable of reproducing even one of the twelve melodies that Orpheus has running through his head, or of clapping out a rhythm. Furthermore, both Eurydice and her father invite the horror and disgust of the Stones when they sing out the melody to "I've Got Rhythm:"

Loud Stone: STOP SINGING!
Big Stone: Neither of you can carry a tune.
Little Stone: It's awful.
The Stones: DEAD PEOPLE CAN'T SING!
Eurydice: I'm not a very good singer.
Father: Neither am I.
The Stones: (To the Father) Stop singing and go to work! (379-80)

Even the two of them must admit that they possess no aptitude for music.

Language, on the other hand, is passed down from father to daughter, and music is the introduced, foreign element in the person of the groom. Since language serves as the basis of memory in the underworld, it proves much more useful than music for those who are attempting to remember, and to thereby stay alive for a little bit longer. The father and daughter in the underworld are only alive to the extent that they are able to associate with the overworld. They must first recapture the
language of the overworld and then recapture their memories of that world. The Underworld has little to offer by way of experience and memory, consisting of a great flatness where all blends together. Orpheus's music brings even the Stones to tears, but it does not restore them to life, to whatever past connection they might have had with the overworld. And it has little effect on the Lord of the Underworld, who dismisses Orpheus's lament with the comment that he prefers "happy music with a nice beat" (390). Unlike language, music does not serve as the foundation of memory within the logic of the play.

Ruhl visually represents the notion of the individual being built upon a foundation of language during three moments at which characters stand upon written materials. The first two involve Eurydice, the last, Orpheus. Newly arrived in the underworld, Eurydice has not yet reacquired either spoken or written language. When her father delivers her a letter from Orpheus, she stands on it in an attempt to absorb its meaning, thinking to herself, according to the stage directions, the melody: "There's no place like home." She relates the object to her home with Orpheus, but lacks the language necessary to articulate the thought. Her father reads the letter to her, teaching her language in the process; by the time he reaches the closing, she remembers her husband (368-71). The next literary object upon which Eurydice stands is the Collected Works of Shakespeare. In addition to standing on it, she rages at it and throws it out of frustration, not sure what it is good for. Her father intervenes and "teaches Eurydice how to read" (377). He starts with a passage out of Lear, expressive of the love between a father and a daughter. These
first two instances encapsulate the process by which a child might acquire language from a parent, mastering first the spoken form, and then the written. In Eurydice's case, the first event reconnects her with her husband, the second with her father. The individual develops personality as she acquires language and formulates relationships through this new, to her, medium. Ruhl metaphorizes this concept in visual terms by having a character actually stand on a book or a letter.

Paradoxically, however, her characters only stand on these materials when they are unable to read them. In Eurydice's case, she symbolizes the child eager to learn, to begin (again) to speak and read. Having established this visual trope, Ruhl applies it to powerful effect during the closing moment of the play when Orpheus, his memory erased in the elevator, encounters Eurydice's letter to him. He stands on the letter, closes his eyes, and is met only by the sound of water followed by silence (411). Eurydice's father had revived, or rather reconstituted, her by teaching her language. Orpheus lacks a teacher and therefore his loss of both memory and self is irredeemable, his death complete. Water as an agent of oblivion erases individuality by blurring and dissolving the letters on the piece of paper upon which Orpheus stands.

At the end of the first movement, language in the form of the Father's letter builds the bridge over which Eurydice crosses to the underworld. At the end of the second movement, music carries Orpheus down after his bride. Orpheus's music isolates him, keeps him in his head moving away from his bride. As she explains to her father:
This is what it is to love an artist: The moon is always rising above your house. The houses of your neighbors look dull and lacking in moonlight. But he is always going away from you. Inside his head there's always something more beautiful. (385)

Music draws Orpheus away from Eurydice, whereas language draws Eurydice together with her father. As Orpheus attempts to lead Eurydice out of the underworld, he is going away from her, which is the metaphor of their relationship. This tendency occurs as early as the opening scene in which, on two occasions, when asked what he is thinking about, he replies, "music," to Eurydice's dismay.

Ruhl carefully keeps music and words separate, except at the scene in the wedding, in which the newlyweds sing "Don't Sit under the Apple Tree (With Anyone Else but Me)." Here we find the marriage of word and song, a brief moment of union. However, the lyrics convey an exclusive companionship:

Don't sit under the apple tree
With anyone else but me
Anyone else but me
Anyone else but me
No no no.
...
Don't go walking down lover's lane
With anyone else but me.... [etc.] (347-8)

The figure excluded from this union is, of course, the Father. Significantly, he appears on stage during this scene, dancing the jitterbug with an invisible partner. Midway through the song, he checks his watch, and rushes off stage. Perhaps the most harmonious point in Orpheus and Eurydice's relationship, it highlights the missing presence of the Father, the Father who calls his daughter to join him in the underworld through his letters.
Ruhl injects an element of camp into the play with this song. Popularized by the Andrews Sisters, it was one of the biggest hits of World War II (Sforza 66). It plays on the anxieties of soldiers over the faithfulness of their wives and girlfriends back home while at the same time providing great dance music, no matter who the partner. In "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), Susan Sontag defines camp as a sensibility, one that values style over substance. The camp sensibility is alert to a double meaning of things, "between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice" (281). The lyrics of "Don't Sit under the Apple Tree" certainly would have meant something to soldiers abroad, if they had given them some thought, and yet it was the style and delivery of the Andrews Sisters' rendition, with its high energy and close harmony, that made the song so appealing. Sontag contends that the passing of time is likely to render an object more susceptible to being regarded as camp, as "[t]ime liberates the work of art from moral relevance" (285). Divorced from its wartime context, the song is drained of its social significance and its style becomes even more prominent.

Sontag offers camp as a means of "going beyond straight seriousness," as an alternative to irony and satire, which, to her, "seem feeble today" (288). Although it is highly debatable that irony and satire are played out at this time, certainly camp does offer a method of countering seriousness. Ruhl uses it, in this instance, to create a moment of lightness. As discussed in the opening chapter of this study, Ruhl admires Calvino's thoughts on lightness. He introduces his essay by pointing to his own methodology when it comes to writing:
[M]y working method has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight. I've tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language. (Calvino 3)

Ruhl removes weight from the heavy topics of death and bereavement in numerous ways, for example, through her characterization of the Lord of the Underworld and the Three Stones as comic figures and through touches of humor and whimsy throughout. At the wedding party, she removes weight by introducing camp, through a fun, happy song that was popular many decades ago. Yet even though the song removes weight through its style, the content contained in its lyrics, divorced from its original wartime context, hints at the separation soon to be imposed upon the newlyweds. The element of camp lightens, but it does not nullify the force of gravity. In noting that "all camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice," Sontag claims that, "nothing in nature can be campy" (279). Following this line of reasoning, it is possible to align camp with art in the duality art/nature, as offering a respite from nature's final, inescapable act, that of the death of the individual organism. When one is enjoying camp, one forgets the seriousness of life and death. When Orpheus and Eurydice sing and dance together at their wedding, they kick up their heels at the trouble to come.

In all other instances in Eurydice, music plays without lyrics. For starters, when Orpheus teaches Eurydice one of the twelve melodies he is holding in his head, he teaches a tune without words. Later, in the underworld, Eurydice and her father sing "I've Got Rhythm," but as neither can remember the words, they sing it
on meaningless syllables. Finally, when Orpheus descends to the underworld and sings his lament, Ruhl does not allow him to vocalize:

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Orpheus stands at the gates of hell.
He opens his mouth.
He looks like he's singing, but he's silent.
Music surrounds him. (389)
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Later, after he has lost Eurydice a second time, he confides to her that, "I was singing your name over and over and over again. Eurydice" (399). He loses her because, unlike her father, he is unable to name her because music, his native idiom, cannot name; only language can. The first thing the Father says upon Eurydice's arrival in the underworld is her name. He makes a point of explaining to her that, although her mother named all of their other children, he named her. And it is the letters of her name, falling in the rain, that first bring back his memories of being alive: "I heard your name inside the rain -- somewhere between the drops -- I saw falling letters. Each letter of your name -- I began to translate..." (365). In the triangulation between Eurydice, her father, and her lover, the Father stakes the original claim as the one who named her and the one who taught her language in the first place.¹

The duality of high/low may be more precisely delineated by applying the classical Greek cosmological model of the four elements. According to Greek thought, the cosmos consists of the four elements: fire, air, water, and earth. They are arranged in a hierarchy in alignment with their general physical layering, with

¹ Ruhl utilizes string as one indicator of the shift in Eurydice's allegiance from husband to father. In the overworld, Orpheus lays claim to her in proposing by tying a string around her finger; in the underworld, the father takes care of her by building her a room out of string.
fire at the top, inclusive of the sun, moon, and stars, followed by the air, then water, and then earth. The elements continually transform from one to the other, with transformations between adjacent elements occurring most easily. Within Eurydice, the elements may be loosely mapped to corresponding concepts:

- **fire**: art or the artistic temperament,
- **air**: life,
- **water**: grieving/forgetting,
- **earth**: death.

The overall movement of the play follows a downward arc from the highest to the lowest of these, coming to rest in the lowest element, earth, at the final moment of death.

Fire is most often associated with Orpheus. He offers to Eurydice "the sky and the stars" (334), among other things, at the top of the play, and Eurydice associates him with a celestial body later when she describes to her father what it is like to be married to an artist: "The moon is always rising above your house. The houses of your neighbors look dull and lacking in moonlight" (385). Another musician, Eurydice's grandmother, is also associated with fire. She could, according to Eurydice's father, "really play the piano." He describes her as having been full of life when younger, even "extremely animated" (375), suggesting a somewhat fiery temperament. Her nickname, "Flaming Sally," implies that she had "flaming" red hair, in contrast to Eurydice's hair as it appears in Orpheus's dream, at which point it serves as a conduit for water.
Air occupies the stratum below fire in the hierarchy of elements. Within the play it represents life through association with the breath. Although the dead converse in their own language in the underworld, it is a practically silent one as described by the Stones, one without breath:

Little Stone: It's a very quiet language.
Loud Stone: Like if the pores in your face opened up and talked.
Big Stone: Like potatoes sleeping in the dirt. (359-60)

Both singing and spoken language are expressed by using the voice, which is powered by the breath, and both of these are activities associated with life in the overworld and with the prolongation of life in the underworld. Orpheus attempts to bring Eurydice back to life through his music, and the Father restores her to the life of her memories, at least, through the spoken word. Eurydice's fall to the underworld culminates with "sounds of breathing" (356) in the darkness, an indication that even though she has fallen from life, she is not yet completely dead.

In the passage from King Lear that the Father reads to his daughter, Lear compares himself and Cordelia, imprisoned, to birds in a cage. Eurydice and her father find themselves in a similar situation: like birds, they are creatures of the air, of life, who find themselves confined within the earth, trapped in the underworld.

Next down from air is water, clearly the most prevalent, in this work, of the four elements. Ruhl has saturated the dialogue with water imagery, and this imagery, combined with set pieces such as "rusty exposed pipes," a water pump, and "an abstracted River of Forgetfulness" (331), along with the designated aqueous
sound effects, practically invites designers to flood the set. Scott Bradley, designer for all three Les Waters productions, has literally done so by pumping the elevator full of 100 gallons of water so than when it opens, the water rushes across the stage ("Production Notebook" 36). Bradley based his design on "turn-of-the-century baths and swimming pools" ("Turning the World Upside Down" 5), giving the set the appearance of the bottom of a Victorian-era swimming pool, with water dripping down the walls (Hurwitt). Such a setting complements and amplifies the play's imagery.

This imagery frequently equates water with grieving. In Orpheus's dream, the water coming out of Eurydice's hair brings to mind a torrential outpouring of sorrow, and the salty lake into which they fall suggests a pool of tears (372). Eurydice is drawn to water: she leaves her wedding twice to go to the water pump, she asks the Nasty Interesting Man for a glass of water, and she requests a bath when she arrives in the underworld. Eurydice craves water because, through its association with tears, it represents grieving, and she must attend to the unfinished business of mourning for her father.

In one of the most fascinating moments of the play, the Father recounts how he remembered Eurydice's name by seeing it inside the rain. Besides its association with grieving, water acts as the agent of forgetting. Paradoxically, in this instance it restores memory. The Father introduces his story by stating that, "One day it would not stop raining" (364). He has been struggling to remember his daughter's name. It is as if he is suffering from melancholy, which, according to Freud, is similar to
mourning except that the lost object remains in the unconscious. Through
discovering Eurydice's name in the rain, the Father's lost love object passes from the
unconscious to the conscious mind, and the Father passes from a state of
melancholy to one of mourning.

For all of the imagery of water associated with sorrow, little actual crying
occurs. The Stones weep at the sound of Orpheus's music, although this would
seem to be with a generic sadness rather than in grieving for a specific loss. Only
Eurydice actually breaks down and cries in an act of grieving, after she returns to
find that her father has dipped himself in the river. This breakdown actualizes an
impulse that she has been trying to realize since her arrival in the underworld. As
she recounts of her journey over the River Styx:

I looked at the oars
and I wanted to cry.
I tried to cry but I just drooled a little.
I'll try now.

She tries to cry but finds that she can't. (361)

Sometime later, she is on the "verge of tears" (366), but the Stones beg her not to
cry and her father leads her off to her room. Her father's intervention delays her
crying. It is only after her father has dipped himself in the river, and lies still upon
the floor, that she finally cries (406). Like the clouds heavy with water, she finally
releases her watery load. Through the intervention of the underworld, the place of
grieving, Eurydice and her alter-ego, the playwright, have delayed the final, but
inevitable, grieving over the father.

Ruhl associates water, not only with grieving, but also with forgetfulness.
Two rivers serve important functions in the classical Greek underworld: the boatman Charon ferries the deceased into Hades across the River Styx, a journey from which there is no return, and the new arrivals have their memories erased through immersion in the River Lethe. Ruhl refers to the crossing of the River Styx in the passage quoted in the preceding paragraph. The stage directions call for the inclusion of the River Lethe as "an abstracted River of Forgetfulness" (331). The raining elevator combines the functionality of both rivers, erasing memory as it transports its occupant to the underworld. Eurydice and the Father both dip themselves in the Lethe, or River of Forgetfulness, as they seek out the comfort of oblivion; the hand-operated water pump from the First Movement doubled as this river in the Les Waters productions. Through its association with both the River Styx and grief, water links the transition from life into death with the process of bereavement.

The act of grieving focuses, to a large extent, on remembering the deceased, through the act of "obsessive review." The bereaved one repeatedly reviews memories of the deceased until, during the normal course of grieving, the emotional charge associated with those memories decreases. In a sense, the grieving individual remembers in order to forget: it is necessary to obsessively review memories, as an expression of yearning for the deceased, in order to be able to let go of those memories, or at least revisit them with less urgency. Eurydice follows this pattern in her visit to the underworld, with the difference that she starts there with a blank slate. She must remember her father and his family mythology in order to
properly grieve for him, after which she releases herself from attachment to him by revisiting the River of Forgetfulness. Whether symbolizing the expression of sorrow or acting as an agent of forgetfulness, water plays an essential role in the act of grieving. The moment at which the Father remembers Eurydice's name by seeing it in the rain, then, signifies a moment of obsessive review by combining the expression of sorrow with the act of remembering. Later, water will wash away the memory of Eurydice and her name, signifying the completion of the act of grieving for the Father.

Beneath water lies earth in the elemental schema, here associated with death. If the overworld is the realm of breath and life, then clearly the underworld is that of, if not suffocation, at least silence, and death. As the Lord of the Underworld's presence or agent in the overworld, the Nasty Interesting Man claims to be, "a man with big hands, with big stupid hands like potatoes, a man who can carry a cow in labor" (355). As a farmer, he is associated with the earth. In the underworld, the Big Stone links potatoes to dirt and sleep in the quote above, and the Lord/Child strengthens the link between root vegetables, earth, and death when he brags that he grows downward, "like a turnip" (381). The other permanent figures of the underworld, the Stones are, by definition, of the earth.

In general, the movement of the play follows a downward arc from one elemental stratum to another. The image of Eurydice falling from life, associated with air, into grief, associated with water, or into death, associated with earth, occurs three times. In the opening scene, Orpheus fantastically describes using
Eurydice's hair as an orchestra that will raise her into the sky. Eurydice expresses the fear of falling, which Orpheus assuages by comforting her with the notion that the clouds will become heavy with water and cushion her fall. In this instance Eurydice passes from air, through the strata of water by association with the clouds, and back down to earth. The actual moment of death occurs after Eurydice ascends the 600 steps to the Nasty Interesting Man's loft, high in the air, only to fall a much farther distance to the underworld beneath the earth. Then, Orpheus's dream in which he and his lover topple from the summit of Mount Olympus, again high in the air, into a salty lake, mirrors his fantasy from the first scene except that now the scenario is more waterlogged than playful, as Orpheus experiences the pangs of grief. Instead of emitting levitating strains of music, associated with fire, Eurydice's hair pours forth streams of water, and the clouds cut rather than cushion. A plunge into a salty lake replaces the gentle landing on earth. Orpheus is drowning in his grief; he can only dream of softening Eurydice's fall to death in a pool of tears. In terms of the duality lightness/heaviness, these incidents demonstrate the triumph of the second term.

In the underworld, the Child promises to snuff out air with earth when he takes Eurydice as his bride. He envisions a silent wedding:

The wedding songs are already being written. They're very quiet. Inaudible, you might say. A dirt-filled orchestra for my bride. Don't trouble the songs with your music, I say. A song is two dead bodies rubbing under the covers to keep warm. (409)

Death, through the medium of the earth, extinguishes music, associated with fire,
and displaces air, linked to life and necessary for the transmission of music.

Another significant duality is that of adult/child. The act of marriage functions as a highly significant ritual in the passage from childhood to adulthood. Eurydice longs for her father to give her away at her wedding, defining it as the moment at which a father and daughter "stop being married to each other" (345). The absence of her father prevents the successful completion of the ritual and, along with it, Eurydice's passage into adulthood. The stage directions describe the lovers as both, "a little too young and a little too in love" (332). Eurydice seems not quite ready to move into adulthood, especially without her father present to guide her. Her death and passage to the underworld function as a regression, for her, to an earlier stage in life, that of childhood during which her father looked after her. Her father assumes the role of the parent of a young child, looking after her, building shelter for her, teaching her how to speak and write. She becomes comfortable playing the young daughter again, and balks at being walked down the aisle to wed her husband once more, to once more attempt to take on the responsibilities of adulthood.

The duality of child/adult dovetails into that of life/death. The Lord of the Underworld, representing death, has had designs on Eurydice since the beginning movement. Stage directions indicate that the Nasty Interesting Man is to be played by the same actor as the Lord of the Underworld. And there are some indications that the Nasty Interesting Man is, indeed, the Lord of the Underworld himself in the sense that he knows more than a mere, mortal stranger should. For example, he
picks up on Eurydice's use of the word "interesting" which is uttered before he makes his entrance, and drums on the word incessantly throughout their conversation in an inept and ridiculous attempt to seduce her. He demonstrates knowledge of Orpheus beyond that of a stranger, attempting to discredit him to Eurydice by stating that, "Orpheus is too busy listening to his own thoughts. There's music in his head. Try to pluck the music out and it bites you" (354). When the Lord of the Underworld appears near the end of the play, now "at least 10 feet tall," to claim Eurydice as his bride, stage directions indicate that, "His voice sounds suspiciously like the Nasty Interesting Man's" (408). If not the Lord of the Underworld himself, then certainly the Nasty Interesting Man functions as his agent, for he is the means by which Eurydice meets her death.

As the Nasty Interesting Man, he seduces her, or at least attempts to. Death woos Eurydice as he does Everyman and Everywoman. She resists him for a time in the overworld, but makes a big move towards being his when she tumbles down the stairs. As the Child-Lord on his tricycle, he expresses a prurient interest in her, seductively asking Eurydice to whisper in his ear, and blowing in her face. He explains to her that, "Husbands are for children. You need a lover. I'll be back" (383). When he returns, he has grown to ten feet tall, still a child but approaching adulthood. He asserts that he is "ready to be a man now" (408) and insists that she be his bride. This will be a wedding without music. Death thus triumphs over music and language, as first the father, then Eurydice, and finally even Orpheus have their memories washed clean in the ever-downward flow of water. The Lord's
maturation signals the approach of Eurydice's ultimate end in stillness and quiet; the 
consummation of their relationship marks the completion of her life. The 
maturation process eventually and inevitably culminates in death.

The Stones also figure significantly in the dichotomy of life and death. They 
have been presented in a variety of ways in production, as reported by Ruhl:

In one production, they were lifeguards. In another, they were bratty 
English school children. Once, they were actually played by children. I've 
seen them played like teenage slackers, couch potatoes. I'm still waiting for 
the production that actually has them dressed like stones. (qtd. in “Turning 
the World Upside Down” 3)

In a workshop production in Minneapolis, ”The stones became a kabuki-style 
chorus orchestrating everything that happened in the underworld. The stones made 
it rain in the elevator by pouring water on people" (Ruhl qtd. in Weckwerth 29).
The Stones represent rules and restrictions, closing Eurydice into a tiny 
psychological space. They alienate new arrivals to the underworld, attempting to 
limit movement. Yet the Stones do not function merely as the rule keepers of the 
underworld. They also represent the thoroughly dead. Les Waters directed, and 
Meg Neville costumed, the Berkeley Repertory, Yale Repertory, and Second Stage 
productions. San Francisco Chronicle critic Robert Hurwitt describes the Stones in 
the Berkeley production as "zombie-pale" and clothed in "ghostly Edwardian 
costumes." Writing in the New York Times, Charles Isherwood describes the Yale 
Stones as "Victorian ghouls."2 The Victorian costuming would seem to fit these 
characters who are much concerned with appropriate behavior. Their pale, ghoulish

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2 See the cover of the Yale Rep Newsletter dated October 2006 for a production photograph of the 
Stones.
appearance suggests that they are ghosts of those once-living. A line within the play suggests this interpretation. When Eurydice threatens to dip the Stones in the river, an act that would wipe out their memories, the Big Stone deflects her with, "Too late, too late" (410), the implication being that they have already been dipped and had a lifetime of memories erased.

If one reads the Stones as the long-dead, then they take their place in the continuum of the living and the dead. After Eurydice's descent, Orpheus solely represents the living, Eurydice the newly-dead, and her father the recently dead. Eurydice and her father occupy the strange space of trying to reclaim life by reclaiming memory. Her father has largely succeeded, and teaches Eurydice how to succeed in this quest. The Stones, as the long-dead, are also the contented dead, the quiet ones. They counsel quietness and stillness, and advocate speaking in the language of the dead, one that is so quiet that it sounds as if "the pores in your face opened up and talked" (359). They describe their work as that of being quiet and still:

   We're busy busy busy stones
   Watch us work
   Keeping still
   Keeping quiet
   It's hard work
   To be a stone... (407)

A parallel may be drawn here to another otherworldly being, that of the Angel in Tony Kushner's Angels in America. In Part Two: Perestroika, she commands Prior, the chosen prophet, to "stop moving" (Kushner 44). She opposes the forward
avalanche of human progress. Prior, ill with advanced AIDS, resists her command, explaining to the Permanent Emergency Council in Heaven:

We can't just stop. We're not rocks -- progress, migration, motion is... modernity. It's _animate_, it's what living things do. (130)

... I want more life. I can't help myself. I do. (133)

Eurydice and her father, as well, "want more life." A person is not a rock or, once a person becomes a rock they are no longer a person. One sees in the characters of the Stones the last stage of human existence before complete and total stillness.

Orpheus progresses from the internal to the external, in terms of expressing his music, and conversely from external to internal consciousness, in his efforts to reach the underworld. In the first scene, he explains to Eurydice that he is hearing his music in his head (335), and when she asks him to sing his piece for her, he declines because, "it has too many parts" (337). He promises to play her the song when he acquires twelve instruments, and when she asks him when that will be, he dodges the question by responding with a fantastical story of turning her hair into an orchestra (338-9). He does sing with Eurydice at their wedding, but they share in a popular song, "Don't Sit under the Apple Tree," rather than expressing his music (347-8). Even in trying to send his music by post to the underworld, he hears it in his head rather than playing or vocalizing it (367). He explains his reticence in a monologue immediately before he breaches the underworld, stating that, "The music sounds better in my head than it does in the world" (386). He apparently feels more at home in his internal world of music than in the external world.
The first part of the Orpheus myth, that of the singer-prophet in harmony with nature, may be discerned in Ruhl's play. Her Orpheus seems to be initially somewhat out of touch with nature, and literally brings himself in tune with it when he sets his guitar to capture the pitch of a falling drop of rain (384-5). Later on, he expresses his philosophy of practicing his art in terms of nature:

> Before I go down there, I won't practice my music. Some say practice. But practice is a word invented by cowards. The animals don't have a word for practice. A gazelle does not run for practice. He runs because he is scared or he is hungry. A bird doesn't sing for practice. She sings because she's happy or sad. So I say: Store it up.... When songs are pressing against my throat, then, only then, I will go down and sing for the devils and they will cry through their parched throats. (386)

He equates music with instinct. He does not manipulate the music, rather it flows through him, and the most that he can do is "store it up" until it breaks out of his control like water breaching a dam. When he does finally sing his song in the underworld, nature overflows with abundance as, "Raspberries, peaches and plums drop from the ceiling into the River," and even the Stones, which are typically, even though not in the context of this work, inanimate nature, overflow with water in the form of tears (389). Only the Lord of the Underworld seems immune from this outpouring of melody, dismissing Orpheus's music with a preference for "happy music with a nice beat" (390). The Lord of the Underworld, as the representative of death, remains unmoved by the splendors of both art and nature.

Even as the expression of music by Orpheus moves from the internal to the external, his state of consciousness moves in the opposite direction, specifically in his attempts to make his way to the underworld. He begins his search in the outer
world, calling the phone operator for information and scanning the glow-in-the-dark globe (377-8). He moves further inward with his next step, attempting to follow the "pitch of a drop of rain, as it enters the soil" (385). Finally, he determines that only in sleep, through the medium of his breath, can he reunite with his bride. He himself must symbolically die in order to voyage to the underworld, as sleep is associated with absolute death in the play. According to the father, nobody sleeps in the underworld (365), and yet, in the end, he and Eurydice lie prone "as though asleep" (411). One attends to the unfinished business of grieving in the underworld, and does not sleep until that business is completed. Ruhl has refashioned the Greek underworld into a place of bereavement, a place to remember, and have conversations with, loved ones before they sink into the silence of oblivion.

Another crucial duality is that of art and nature. In the images of water, and the ways in which it is dammed or channeled, Ruhl portrays the temporary domination of nature by art, and finally the overcoming of that art by nature. The most frequently recurring images are those having to do with water. Although certainly the underworld, even in its classical sense, seems to be the primary domain of water, with its representations of the River Styx, over which travelers had to cross to reach Hades, and the River Lethe in which the dead were dipped to give them the gift of forgetting, the water imagery dominates the dialogue in the overworld as well. While the watery sound effects are most often associated with the underworld, the language of the characters frequently dwells on the liquid. As with all major themes, this is first introduced in the beginning scene. Indeed by the second line
Orpheus is offering Eurydice the sea, and by scene's end they are running into it. Water images fall into two categories: channeled and natural. The natural includes the sea, clouds, lakes, and rivers; channeled encompasses the water pump, the sound of a whistling tea kettle in the underworld, the various sound effects of water through rusty pipes, and Orpheus's shower at his wedding. Natural water represents nature; channeled water, in the form of plumbing, the triumph of art over nature.

When the father traces his steps back to the River of Forgetfulness, the directions that he recounts follow a progression from art, in the sense of human culture in general, to nature, and also from language to forgetfulness. He leads with the abstract mathematics of numbered highways, far from the rhythms of nature:

Take Tri-State South 294 --
   to Route 88 West.
Take Route 88 West to Route 80. (402)

Next, he transitions through the ambiguously geometric Middle Road on his way to the definitely pastoral Duck Creek Park, harkening back to his father's hunting exploits and demise in a duck pond, as if in a final nod to his childhood memories of his parents. After the bucolic Fernwood Avenue and Forest Road, the streets no longer have names, as the father's capacity for naming diminishes as he approaches the water. He passes through a red brick house, presumably his childhood home, and out to the Mississippi River. ³ He notices things from a child's perspective, such as a "tree good for climbing," and he rolls up the jeans that he would have worn as a

³ In a radio interview, Paula Vogel supports the idea that the father is returning to his childhood home, noting that this is the point in the play during which audience members begin to weep ("Paula Vogel").
boy, noticing the catfish "sleeping in the mud," before stepping in and forgetting language and with that, all memory. He lies now curled up on the ground, asleep like the catfish, unresponsive to Eurydice's attempts to revive him. Man has become child, nature has overcome art, oblivion has washed away memory, and death has taken life.

The elevator in which it rains represents the inseparability of art and nature. The mechanical device carries the deceased to the underworld, which serves as a waystation on the way to ultimate death. Inside of this device, nature flows as rain, and this nature possesses the capability of erasing the structure of memory, of bringing the individual closer to death. The elevator follows the general direction of the entire work, which is downwards. It represents the movement from the first to the second term of many of the dualities in the works: life/death, high/low, lightness/heaviness, and memory/forgetfulness.

Many of the dualities align with life/death: high/low, lightness/heaviness, artist (fire)/farmer (dirt), memory/forgetfulness, child/adult, husband/father, art/nature. Gravity pulls Eurydice down towards death, away from her artist husband and towards the Lord of the Underworld/Nasty Interesting Man, who is associated with dirt and farming, and towards her father who is, after all, already dead. A loss of memory accompanies her fall, and the maturation of the Lord of the Underworld associates aging with death. Water, as a force of nature, overcomes the art of plumbing, just as death overcomes the individual personality that has been built up through the art of language. A few of the dualities do not match up with
life/death. Death silences music and language, for instance, which both belong on the art side of the art/nature split. The internal/external pair also fails to match up, because they are used here to designate different means by which Orpheus contends with the world and life, and when he falls silent at the conclusion it is as if the division between the two simply collapses.

A triangular relationship between Eurydice, Orpheus, and his future wife, disappears almost as soon as it arises, and that signifies the collapse of time that occurs at the very end of the play. After Eurydice writes the letter she dips herself in the river and lies down alongside her father. Almost immediately, Orpheus appears in the elevator. The whole of his life from his leaving of the underworld without Eurydice until the time of his death and return has taken place in a matter of minutes. Death is a timeless state, and the father only reclaims a sense of time when he reacquires the language of the living by remembering the spelling of Eurydice’s name in the rain. At that time, he claims, "Time poured into my head. The days of the week. Hours, months...." (365). In the world of the play, not only memory, but time as well depends upon language. The layering of memories structures past time. Here an architecture of time is built upon memory and therefore language. Once the characters lose language and memory, they also lose the dimension of time. The remainder of Orpheus's life compresses into a matter of minutes until he is left standing in the underworld, uncomprehending before the bodies of Eurydice and her father.

Another important theme is that of rhythm. Clearly, rhythm is essential to
music, and it is an integral part of language as well. When Orpheus asks Eurydice to clap out the rhythm of his melody, she proves unable to do so. Clearly, she does not possess a good sense of rhythm in the musical sense. When asked by Orpheus if books have rhythm as well, she answers, "Kind of" (338), and changes the subject. Of course Ruhl, as a playwright, understands full well the importance of rhythm to language, even if she does not have her character articulate the significance of it.

The notion of rhythm, introduced in the opening scene, is returned to in the closing scene as Orpheus and Eurydice say their goodbyes. The playwright specifies that their lines overlap in a syncopated rhythm, and as Orpheus complains about his bride's inability to clap the beat, she tries to spell the word "rhythm." She struggles with the spelling, but remembers that there is an "h" in it, "a breath" (397).

Orpheus warns about the risks entailed in lacking a good sense of rhythm:

It's dangerous not
to have a sense of rhythm.
You lose things when you can't
keep a simple beat.... (398)

In the immediate sense he is complaining about Eurydice's inability to clap a rhythm. More generally, her calling out of his name before they have reached the overworld also demonstrates a lack of timing, from Orpheus's perspective at least, since it sabotages his rescue mission. From a broader perspective, their lives are out of rhythm in the sense that she has died at a young age and therefore they are disallowed a long life together. One can also speak of a rhythm of life and death, of the inevitability of life passing into death sooner or later, and of the rhythm in the
world of the play of a passing from the overworld into the underworld, and from there into a final stillness. Eurydice's difficulty with both clapping a rhythm, and spelling the word, demonstrates her being out of sync with the "normal" rhythm of a life lived long. Her own rhythm, in this sense, has been interrupted by the passing of her father, so needed by her to give her away at the wedding ceremony. She is prevented from switching her primary allegiance from her father to her husband by her father's absence, by his own poor sense of rhythm in dying prematurely.

E. Searching the World over: The Psychology of Loss

Through her own first-hand experience of grief, Ruhl has captured many of the psychological aspects of bereavement in her play. It would be helpful to distinguish between the terms "grief," "mourning," and "bereavement" at this point.

In Bereavement and Health: The Psychological and Physical Consequences of Partner Loss (1987), Wolfgang Stroebe and Margaret S. Stroebe define grief as "the emotional (and affective) response to loss," mourning as "acts expressive of grief," and bereavement as "the objective situation of an individual who has recently experienced a loss of someone significant through that person's death" (7). To put it simply, mourning is the outward expression of grief.

Sigmund Freud pioneered the study of grieving. In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), he describes the process of mourning (which would be referred to as the process of grieving in contemporary psychology) as that by which the "libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object" (244), "that object" here referring to the lost love object. John Archer explications Freud's essay

Archer reads "libido" as "emotional attachment," and thus interprets the work of mourning as the painful withdrawal of this attachment:

> The pain may become so intense that the bereaved person turns away from reality and clings to the object by refusing to believe it is no longer there. However, reality is gradually accepted and the withdrawal of libido gradually carried out, at the expense of time and 'cath[et]ic' energy. ('Cathexis' is the concentration of mental energy in one channel.) (16)

Archer asserts that the psychoanalytic framework first established by Freud continues to be influential in the study of grief to this day (17).

> Since Freud, many advances have been made in the psychology of grief, and numerous models developed. Archer identifies John Bowlby's model, which partitions the process of bereavement into a series of four phases, as a widely accepted one. Archer presents these phases, set forth in Bowlby's *Attachment and Loss, Volume III* (1980), in slightly modified form as:

1. Numbness and Disbelief: A phase of numbness that may be interrupted by outbursts of distress and/or anger;
2. Yearning and Searching: Accompanied by anxiety and intermittent periods of anger;
3. Disorganization and Despair: Feelings of depression and apathy when old patterns have been discarded.
4. Reorganization: Recovery from bereavement. (Archer 24)

It should be stressed that, as even Bowlby recognized, the phases "are not clear-cut, and any one individual may oscillate for a time back and forth between any two of them" (Bowlby 85). In addition to this phase-based model, Archer also reports on the analytic model, involving aspects of grief arranged nonsequentially. These aspects include numbness and disbelief; anger and aggression; guilt, self-blame and
self-injury; distress and anxiety, yearning and preoccupation; delusions, hallucinations and ghosts; the urge to search; identification with the deceased; changes in self-concept; and hopelessness and depression (see Archer Chapter 5).

Certainly these two models overlap to a great extent. Traditionally, both have held as their aim the recovery of the bereaved individual through the removal of the emotional attachment to the deceased, the goal as first set forth by Freud. More recently, researchers are coming to the conclusion that it is normal for this attachment to persist, and that the fourth and final stage should be viewed as one of adjustment rather than recovery, inclusive of an ongoing processing of the loss, as reported by Wortman and Silver in "The Myths of Coping with Loss Revisited" (418), published in 2001. Nevertheless, some sort of reorganization within the bereaved's psyche appears to remain as the desired aim of the process of grieving. The three main characters in Eurydice touch upon and pass through some of the first three of the four phases, and also exhibit various symptoms from the analytic model. In this work of art, however, death forecloses the possibility of working through to the fourth phase of grieving. The process of bereavement, termed "grief work" (Archer 16), fails to result in any sort of recovery or adjustment.

Besides serving as a waystation on the road to ultimate death, the underworld also functions as a mirror image of the overworld. In the stage directions, Ruhl asserts that her underworld "should resemble the world of Alice in Wonderland more than it resembles Hades" (332). The notion that Ruhl's underworld is an upside down version of the overworld was explored in the design
for the Yale Repertory Theatre production, as described by Scenic Designer Scott Bradley in the text accompanying production photos in *American Theater*:

What you can't see in these photos are the chandeliers that come out of the floor to illustrate the concept that the underworld is an upside-down, topsy-turvy version of the world of the living. This is based on a dream I had after reading the play. I was meeting up in the afterlife with Marvin, my partner, who recently passed away, and the setting was the upside-down lobby of a fancy hotel. This gave me the chandelier idea. I drew that dream, and it turned into the set! (qtd. in "Production Notebook" 36)

The director of this production, Les Waters, concurs that, "when Eurydice goes to the underworld, she's going down the rabbit hole like Alice to a place where everything's upside down" (qtd. in “Turning the World Upside Down” 3). In terms of grieving, the underworld mirrors the overworld in the sense that the father, who is dead, mourns the absence of his daughter, who is alive. At the same time, she mourns him. Only once they come together does the actual work of grieving begin.

The grieving process for both Eurydice and her father is triggered by her wedding. Archer notes that, "events such as birthdays and anniversaries, and reminders, such as people, places and things associated with the deceased,... rekindle thoughts of the deceased, together with the feelings of distress and sadness which accompany them" (81). Eurydice notes the importance of her father to the wedding ceremony, asserting that, "A wedding is for daughters and fathers.... They stop being married to each other on that day" (345). The groom proves unequal even to the task of greeting the guests, a role that traditionally might fall to the father of the bride, hiding in the shower to avoid them. The wedding party does not

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4 Although inspired by the spirit of Alice in Wonderland, Scott Bradley's design does not specifically resemble the world of Lewis Carroll's story.
feel right for Eurydice without her father's presence, and she escapes twice to the water pump. Like the space reached through the rabbit hole, the space of grieving in Ruhl's underworld is one in which the normal rules of living do not apply. The bereaved must, in a sense, reorganize his or her view of the world, as may be seen by step three, disorganization and despair, followed by step four, reorganization.

Eurydice finds herself in the first phase of grieving, "numbness and disbelief," upon her arrival in the underworld. She fails to comprehend where she is, believing she has arrived at a train station in France. She also exhibits the outbursts of distress and anger that characterize this phase. For example, upon discovering that she is unable to speak to the audience, "She has a tantrum of despair" (359). These tantrums recur throughout the remainder of the play, frequently directed towards the Stones, and take place even after she has passed beyond the first stage. During the grieving process, anger is frequently directed at someone seen as being responsible for the loss or, as seems to be the case with Eurydice, "people who bring home its reality" (Archer 71), such as the Stones. Indeed, the first scene of the second movement ends with another outburst: "I don't know where I am and there are all these stones and I hate them! They're horrible! I want a bath! I thought someone would meet me at the station" (366)! Her third tantrum occurs when she becomes frustrated at being unable to read the Collected Works of Shakespeare, and hurls the volume, unprovoked, at the Stones. Her fourth and final outburst takes place when she returns to the underworld after her partial ascent with Orpheus, upon discovering that her father has dipped himself into the
river. She screams at the Stones, "I HATE YOU! I'VE ALWAYS HATED YOU" (407)! She tries to hit them, but they are impervious.

The time spent together by Eurydice and her father falls under the second stage, "yearning and searching." Preoccupation with the deceased plays a large part in this phase, and includes a process termed "obsessive review" in which the bereaved, in addition to going over the circumstances of death, revisits happy memories of the deceased. Additionally, the grieving individual may feel the need to repeatedly talk about past events (Archer 76-7). The obsessive review shared by father and daughter focuses on memories from the father's youth. The memories do not actually include Eurydice, since they come from long before the time of her birth. They do, however, serve the purpose of reinforcing family history for both of them. Although leavened with a comic tone, these nostalgic stories are filled with foreboding. The father, as a child, gets shot at with a BB gun, and is spanked by his mother and a stranger. His father dies in the location of his choice, a duck pond; his mother is never the same afterwards. During a piano recital, the father forgets how to play "I've Got Rhythm," hides in the bathroom, and is dragged out by his mother to apologize to "everyone in the auditorium." He gives up playing the piano as a consequence (378).

Although she shares in obsessive review with her father, Eurydice fails to do so with her husband. When Eurydice finally remembers Orpheus to her father, it is in a wistful and ambiguous way. She complains that he always had "something more beautiful" going on inside his head (385). She does not relive her happy times
together with him. She does not mourn Orpheus, from whom she has been separated not by his death, but by her own. For his part, Orpheus most certainly mourns his bride. As a survivor in the overworld who has lost his wife to death, Orpheus occupies what could be considered the normal place of grieving. Most of his action takes place in the second phase, that of yearning and searching. He engages in an activity that is common during this phase, as reported by Archer (76-7), that of writing letters to the deceased. He exhibits two other characteristic behaviors, those of the recovery of the lost person in dreams and the urge to search.

Archer writes about the first of these:

Recovery of the lost person may also occur in dreams.... The widows interviewed by Hobson (1964) reported vivid dreams of their husbands. In Parkes' London study he most often found that such dreams were happy ones, although there was usually something present to indicate that all was not well. (86)

Archer also quotes from the Tennyson poem "In Memoriam A.H.H." to illustrate the empty feeling the dreamer experiences upon awakening:

Tears of the widower, when he sees
A late-lost form that sleep reveals,
And moves his doubtful arms, and feels
Her place is empty, fall like these. (qtd. in Archer 87)

Shuchter and Zisook report, in "The Course of Normal Grief" (1993):

Among the more "mundane" and transparent dreams one sees in clinical practice are those of the bereaved, most frequently taking the form of matter-of-fact scenes in which the deceased is alive, fulfilling their ultimate wish. Survivors' dreams... may occur in a series of leave-takings or separations. Regardless of the particular forms of such dreams, they are inevitably disturbing when, upon waking, the dreamer's reality reappears. (36)

Orpheus's dream of Eurydice follows the patterns described above. It begins
happily enough with the deceased quite possibly fulfilling the survivor's ultimate wish, as they begin to make love on Mount Olympus. However, Orpheus quickly notices that something is awry when water begins pouring out of Eurydice's hair which has become little faucets. In a reference to Orpheus's early imagining of flying Eurydice up in the air by a hair orchestra, in his dream they fly through the clouds off of Mount Olympus, but unlike in his earlier fantasy in which the clouds cushion Eurydice, in the dream she scrapes her knee on a sharp cloud and they fall into a lake, as the dream takes a turn for the worse. Then he awakens like Tennyson's widower, or Shuchter and Zisook's survivors, disoriented and sorrowful and, in addition, frightened.

In his awakened state, Orpheus experiences the numbness and sense of unreality characteristic of the first stage of grieving:

Then I woke up and the window frightened me and I thought: Eurydice is dead. Then I thought -- who is Eurydice? Then the whole room started to float and I thought: What are people? Then my bedclothes smiled at me with a crooked green mouth and I thought: Who am I? It scares me, Eurydice. (372)

In this moment, Orpheus struggles to come to terms with the very notion that Eurydice is no longer living.

However, the main component of Orpheus's grieving occurs in a particular activity of the second phase, that which serves as the topic of "'Seeking' and 'Finding' a Lost Object: Evidence from Recent Studies of the Reaction to Bereavement" (1970) by C. Murray Parkes. Parkes chronicles a strong urge to find the deceased, even as the grieving subject intellectually may comprehend that the
search is futile. This behavior sequence consists of the following components:

(1) Restless movement about and scanning of the environment.
(2) Preoccupation with thoughts of the lost person.
(3) Developing a perceptual "set" for the person, namely a disposition to perceive and to pay attention to stimuli which suggest the presence of the person and to ignore those that are not relevant to this aim.
(4) Directing attention towards those parts of the environment in which the person is likely to be.
(5) Calling for the lost person. (189)

The second component certainly dictates most of Orpheus's behavior that occurs after Eurydice's death. He exhibits the other behaviors as well. He moves about and scans the environment for Eurydice, or for a way to reach her. He makes his intention clear in his second letter to her, the first non-musical one: "I'm going to find you" (368). His next scene consists of the dream in which, during his sleep, he conjures an image of his lover. He exhibits the fifth component, "calling for the lost person," by literally attempting to call Eurydice on the telephone. When he finds, to his dismay, that the operator cannot provide a phone number without a city, or for someone who is dead, he immediately turns towards the globe in a quite literal "scanning of the environment" in an attempt to narrow down her location.

As an artistic and mythical creation, Orpheus takes "seeking and finding" farther than any actual person can in following his beloved into the underworld in order to reclaim her. However, his actual reunion with her, as manifested in Ruhl's version of the story, does not differ in essence from the experience of the bereaved individuals included in Parkes's study. Component three, as listed above, involves "developing a perceptual set for the person" which may predispose the bereaved to
experience hallucinations of the deceased person's presence. In a particular study cited by Parkes, "9/22 widows described actual illusions of the lost person at some time during the first month of bereavement" (191). More commonly, "A comforting sense of the presence of the lost person was experienced by 15/22 widows." A few of the widows in the study were even convinced that they perceived the deceased in a state of what Parkes's terms "hypnagogic hallucinations" (194). Archer lists other studies that chronicle the commonality of experiences of sensing the presence of the deceased, and of having visions of them (79). In these cases, in Parkes's words, "It almost seems that for these people the search has been successful" (194). One may say the same about Orpheus.

Of course, although Orpheus is successful in finding Eurydice, he is unable to reclaim her. In both most early tellings of the myth and Ruhl's version of it, Eurydice slips away from him on the return voyage. Orpheus's experience parallels that of a grieving individual who feels the presence of the lost one, but upon making a reality test, feels the pain of rediscovering that person's absence. Thus, the phase of the process of grieving of "seeking and finding" may consist of seeking, and then in some sense finding the lost object, only to realize that one is mistaken and therefore losing the object again, over and over.\(^5\) One widow's experience matches Orpheus's final moment with Eurydice, at least as it occurs in the original myth.

This woman repeatedly aimed her gaze to a specific location, over her right

\(^5\) In *Metamorphoses*, Zimmerman physicalizes this action in her staging of Ovid. As Orpheus turns, Hermes pulls Eurydice away from him while the lovers reach for each other. They repeat this action five times as the narrator muses over the meaning of the story (43-4).
shoulder, because, as she said, "he was always on my right" (qtd. in Parkes 190). Parkes does not report that she actually saw her husband standing there, but the implication is that she did not, that when she looked, he "disappeared."

The process of grieving is abruptly cut off at the conclusion of the play. Both the father and Eurydice have returned to their childhood home, but in the end they lie silently on the ground, "as though asleep" (411). The mourning process outlined above has failed to reach the fourth stage, that of Reorganization, which represents recovery from bereavement. Although Eurydice writes a tender letter to Orpheus's future wife, no detachment from the original love-object seems to have occurred for any of the characters. The disorganization of phase three has simply lead to disintegration. Orpheus is left alone, without a guide to the underworld, as Eurydice had in her father. But he is left without the pain of memory.

F. Nostalgia

New York Times Critic Charles Isherwood opines that Eurydice is perhaps, "the most moving exploration of the theme of loss that the American theater has produced since the events of September 11, 2001, although Ms. Ruhl began work on the play before that terrible day." This may seem like a grandiose claim to make against such an intimately personal play, and yet the Western tone to the father's memories hints at a nostalgia not just for him and his daughter, but for the country as a whole. His recounting of visiting a dude ranch, being shot at with a BB gun, his mother nicknamed Flaming Sally, and duckhunting come across as incongruous with the setting and tone of the rest of the play. Seen against a wider canvas, that of
post-9/11 America, the hearkening back to the West, a favorite time of nostalgia for this country as may be seen in the genre of the film Western, makes sense.

However, nonetheless, the duck hunting and western stories derive from Ruhl's family history. In "Surreal Life: The Plays of Sarah Ruhl" (2008), John Lahr reveals the source of the words that the Father teaches Eurydice in the play: every Saturday, from the time that Ruhl was five years old, her father took her and her sister to breakfast at the Walker Bros. Original Pancake House and "taught them a new word, along with its etymology" (Lahr, "Surreal"). Ruhl confirms that all of the stories told by the Father, even the one in which he swallows a nail, come from her own father's experience. One of the duck hunting stories he tells is taken from a transcript that Ruhl recorded before he passed away (Ruhl, "Re: Eurydice"). Ruhl has surpassed her original intention of having one more conversation with her father; she has written a loving profile of, and tribute to, him. Her play is a love letter written to her father across the River Styx.

The play commemorates not only Ruhl's father, but her grandparents as well, through both the stories told about them and asynchronous elements dating as far back as the 1930s. Orpheus and Eurydice first appear in swimming outfits from the 1950s. Orpheus consults "an old-fashioned glow-in-the-dark globe" (321). Eurydice arrives in the underworld "dressed in the kind of 1930s suit that women wore when they eloped" (359). She also experiences a train station on her arrival in the underworld, which evokes a mode of transport more emblematic of the past than present. Later, when Eurydice departs from her father to reunite with Orpheus, the
stage directions suggest another old-fashioned mode of travel:

The Father waves.
She waves back,
as though on an old steamer ship.
...
She takes a big step forward toward the audience,
on an unseen gangplank. (394)

The setting thus hints at three generations of family history, from the 1930s up until
the present moment. An earlier version included the character of Eurydice's
grandmother who silently crossed the stage from time to time, her memory erased.
Although her presence had the potential to deepen the sense of family history, Ruhl
dropped her when director Les Waters complained that he did not understand the
character (A Conversation).

Eurydice and her father's revisiting of memories falls under the definition of
nostalgia:

A wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time in one's life,
to one's home or homeland, or to one's family and friends; a sentimental
yearning for the happiness of a former place or time. ("Nostalgia")

This definition overlaps with Archer's description of obsessive review, a component
of the grieving process, as quoted above and repeated here:

Preoccupation is often associated with the need to mentally relive times
which were shared, and to go over the circumstances of the loss, particularly
if it was sudden or traumatic. Parkes has actually referred to this as the
'obsessive review', and Hobson (1964) described widows dwelling on happy
times, poring over wedding photos and other mementos. (Archer 76-7)

Nostalgia, or something very like it, thus seems to serve as part of the grieving
process. On a personal level, Eurydice and her father review memories of the
father's childhood. On a less personal level, the anachronistic references in the play refer back to earlier times in Western European and United States history.

_Eurydice_ belongs to a group of Ruhl's plays that deal directly with death and bereavement. Although each of them adheres to a philosophy of lightness to a certain degree, the earlier works feel heavier than the later ones. They are, from heaviest to lightest, _Dog Play_, _Eurydice_, and _The Clean House_. The first depicts the aftermath immediately following the death of the father and questions the existence of an afterlife, the second works out a whole process of bereavement in an imaginary afterlife, and the third exorcises the ghosts of the deceased parents and presents a positive vision of the afterlife. The dominant tone of the first is one of loss and despair, that of the second, loving sorrow, and of the third, hopefulness in the face of death. _Melancholy Play_ also falls inside of this grouping, although it deals with sorrow in a generalized sense rather than focusing on a specific loss. _Dead Man's Cell Phone_ escapes this category since, although it includes a dead man and an afterlife, the farcical tone, in addition to the unsavory personality of the deceased, obviates any deep sense of loss. Whereas Eurydice faces the loss of her father alone, as does Orpheus the loss of Eurydice, Ruhl provides, in _The Clean House_, a community of women to share the burden of caring for, and seeing off, the terminally ill Ana.
II. Joke As Incantation in *The Clean House*

A. The Fourth Stage of Grieving

Whereas in *Eurydice* the playwright plunges her characters downward through death and the grieving process, abruptly halting in silence and, at best, uncertainty, in *The Clean House* she offers a more buoyant, hopeful view of the loss of life and adjustment for the survivors of that loss. The former work leaves Eurydice and her father lying prone, as though asleep, with the forgetful Orpheus standing on a letter he cannot read surrounded by the waterlogged setting; the latter follows the collapse of Ana, mercifully put to rest by a joke that evokes deadly laughter, with Matilde’s account of her own birth and her vision of heaven as a place where "everyone is laughing" (109). Thus birth follows death, and even the deceased may find a happy ending. Whereas Ruhl has written *Eurydice* from the depth of her despair over the death of her father, drenching the play in the tears of her grief, *The Clean House* evidences a shift in her attitude towards mortality. She has, as a playwright, moved from the third phase of bereavement to the fourth, from disorganization and despair into adjustment and even acceptance.

In *Eurydice*, death pushes characters apart; in *The Clean House*, it pulls them together. Even though death delivers Eurydice to her father, it tears her away from Orpheus and ultimately isolates each of the characters. Ana's illness and decline, by contrast, exert a predominantly centripetal force; although Charles ventures off to the wilds of Alaska, a small community of women gathers around Ana, overcoming the seemingly insurmountable hatred of the jilted wife for the other woman. In spite
of the large dose of humor contained in *Eurydice*, gravity ultimately triumphs.

Conversely, even though *The Clean House* mixes tears in with its laughter, the final effect is one of lightness and release.

In *The Clean House*, a young woman, Matilde, has left her home in Brazil to come to the United States following the death of her parents and is working as a live-in housekeeper to a married couple, Lane and Charles, both of whom are doctors. Unfortunately, Matilde hates to clean. Unbeknownst to Lane, her sister, Virginia, comes to Matilde's aid and cleans the doctors' house. In the meantime, Charles has fallen in love with a patient, Ana, on whom he has performed a mastectomy. Charles and Ana come to Lane's house, asking for forgiveness while claiming that they are faultless since they have discovered each other as soul mates. At approximately the same time, Lane discovers that her sister has been cleaning her house, and threatens to fire Matilde. When Ana hears about this, she offers Matilde a job; Lane resists, and as a result, Matilde ends up splitting her time between the two households. When Ana's cancer recurs, she refuses further medical treatment. Charles flies off to Alaska in search of a natural, plant-based remedy, leaving the women to nurse Ana.

Matilde's parents were, she claims, "the funniest people in Brazil" (13), who kept each other in a constant state of mirth. Indeed, the last joke her father told her mother was so funny that it killed her; he committed suicide soon after. Her parents appear in flashbacks. Ruhl stipulates that the actors playing Charles and Ana should play Matilde's parents as well. Matilde spends much of her time attempting to think
up the perfect joke, and when she succeeds, Ana begs her to use it to perform
euthanasia on her, which she does. In the stage directions, Ruhl describes Matilde's
journey as one "from the dead to the living and back again" (8). Matilde wears
black to signify that she is in mourning (11), and her ultimately successful search
for, and implementation of, the perfect joke that has the power to end life, as her
father inadvertently ended her mother's life, represents a process of bereavement and
also of succession. As the same actor playing her mother plays Ana, Matilde
symbolically reenacts her father's murder of her mother when she tells the fatal joke
to Ana, with the difference that hers is an act of mercy rather than an accident.
Matilde acquires and puts to proper use the power that her father possessed but was
unable to control. The perfect joke thus functions as an incantation might in a
shamanic ritual, as a means of gathering and focusing otherworldly power.

This leap to the shamanic in analyzing a play that contains prominent
elements of realism, such as may be seen in the construction of the dialogue and in
generally realistic characterization, is facilitated by the playwright's employment of
techniques from magic realism. These include the literalization of metaphor, as
Matilde's mother actually "dies laughing"; the double-casting of Matilde's parents
with Charles and Ana, which demonstrates the magic realist technique of mirroring
in terms of character; the overlapping of space in Ana's balcony with Lane's living
room, and the intrusion of Alaskan snow into these spaces, both of which
demonstrate the metaphorization of space; Matilde's ability to see Lane's thoughts as
she imagines her husband making love to Ana; the taking of all of these fantastic
events as completely normal by the characters; and finally, by the presence of a narrator-figure in the person of Matilde who stands somewhat outside of, and comments on, the events of the plot.

As a literary genre, the term magic realism was first applied in the middle of the twentieth century to South American authors who wrote, as was theorized, from a continent in which the magical was commonplace. When viewed as a postcolonial strategy, the magical in magic realism serves as a challenge to European rationalism, an offering up of an alternative, and equally legitimate, worldview. Like the magic realist, the shaman travels from the ordinary to the fantastic and back again, experiencing both the everyday and a magical realm of spirits. Common to virtually all preindustrial societies, shamanism connects the visible to the invisible, the real to the magical, logos to mythos. The shaman lives in a world similar to those created by magic realist authors, and therefore the shamanistic fits comfortably into those fictional landscapes.

Joke theory finds its way into this analysis as well. Philosophers have been contemplating humor at least as far back as Plato. Freud addressed the subject in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905), in which he draws parallels between the production of jokes and that of dreams. Since Freud, analysts from various disciplines have developed numerous theories of jokes and humor. Of particular interest is the work of semioticians, who posit that the necessary and sufficient condition for verbal humor is the coexistence of two semiotic frames arising out of a single statement. The juxtaposition of these frames creates the
humorous effect. Not just any two frames will do; they must possess a particular relationship. In *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (1985), Victor Raskin characterizes this relationship as real versus unreal, further breaking this down into actual versus non-actual, normal versus abnormal, and possible versus impossible (111). The witness to a joke must undergo a conceptual shift in order to appreciate its humor. This shift between the real and the unreal resembles that imposed on the reader by magic realism. In *The Clean House*, the joke may thus be seen to function on multiple levels, both in the normal sense in that it generates a shift in semantic frames, and in the shamanistic, metaphysical sense, in that it initiates an ontological shift, causing the recipient to pass, even, from life into death.

Similarities between Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* and *The Clean House* will be tracked as well. Before meeting her future mentor, Ruhl was moved by a production of her play and, based upon the numerous congruences between the two works, it appears likely that the former influenced the latter. Both approach death through laughter, indeed were inspired by the passing of close relatives, and include common elements such as references to cinema and dance, overlapping scenic spaces, foreign language, a distrust of Western medicine, and fantasy sequences. Nevertheless, in spite of the similarities, Ruhl handles the material in her own distinct way, applying her unique voice to create a work startlingly different from that of her mentor.

**B. Doctors and Housekeepers**

The idea for *The Clean House* came to Ruhl from an overheard
conversation. Attending a party for doctors with her husband, who is himself a psychiatrist, she overheard a woman complaining that her Brazilian maid refused to clean, even after she had had her medicated. Ruhl's telling of this encounter reveals her approach to the material:

I didn't start out with a big theme that I wanted to write about. That would paralyze me. Oddly enough, it started with a true story. I was at a party full of doctors. One of them came into the room, and someone asked her how she was doing. She said that she'd had such a hard month because her cleaning lady from Brazil was depressed and wouldn't clean the house. So she had her medicated, but the woman still wouldn't clean. She said, "I'm sorry, but I didn't go to medical school so I could clean my own house." It was all laid out right there, ready for the page. That statement is an amazingly efficient, clear description of the woman's psychology, but it also contains all kinds of other cultural information. Here's this woman who thinks she's transcended cleaning because of her education. It's as though liberal-minded career women are too good to clean their own house. That fascinates me on a political level, but also on spiritual and psychological levels. What does it mean to be alienated from your own dirt? What does it mean for the upper classes to be alienated from the exigencies of everyday living, so that they're not noticing what accumulates over time? When I first started the play I was mostly interested in the pure politics of it -- this woman I met at the cocktail party made me so angry. Then I realized she had to become more human to me if I was going to write about her. (qtd. in Weckwerth 31-2)

The overheard statement became the opening monologue of the play (Simonson), placed immediately after Matilde's recounting of a joke in Portuguese. The shift in Ruhl's concern from the political to the personal is evident in the course followed by play, which begins with the provocative monologue but then quickly moves into an examination primarily of the personal relationships between four women. Although they come from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, ultimately their similarities overcome their differences.
Ruhl's family history figures large in *The Clean House* as it does in *Eurydice*. As discussed above, Ruhl dedicated the latter to her deceased father, and wrote it out of a desire to have one last conversation with him. In the former, Ana dies of cancer after a prolonged period of illness, as did Ruhl's father, who battled the disease for two years ("Playwright Sarah Ruhl"). Ana's affliction begins as breast cancer, which also proved fatal to both of the playwright's grandmothers (Pressley). Ruhl credits the sense of humor in the play to her father: "It's very much about my dad, in a way.... His sense of humor as he went through it. And humor being a kind of a saving grace" (qtd. in Pressley). She elaborates in an interview with Pamela Renner:

> I remember when my father had bone cancer, humor was an incredibly important release for everyone. The humor allowed us to be one step removed from the suffering. My father had a gift for that -- he made jokes up until the last minute. (qtd. in Renner 50)

As described by Ana, her former husband was a flamboyant alcoholic who "peed on lawns and did everything bad," eventually sobering up only to die of cancer as well at the age of 31 (60). The irresistible force of cancer as an agent of death, against which the two doctors in the play are helpless, along with the application of humor as a mechanism for coping with the inevitable, mirrors Ruhl's father's approach to dealing with his illness through joke-making and laughter. The sibling rivalry depicted between Lane and Virginia in the play, often humorously, may also be traced to Ruhl's family, as she has an older sister named Kate. Additionally, her immediate family includes a number of doctors, including her husband Tony and
her sister, to the both of whom she has dedicated the play, as well as uncles and a
grandfather (Snyder).

The acclaim garnered by The Clean House has exceeded that of Ruhl's
previous works. She was awarded the 2003-2004 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize
($10,000) for The Clean House before it was ever produced (Boehm). According to
the Blackburn Prize website, the award "is given annually to a woman who deserves
recognition for having written a work of outstanding quality for the English-
speaking theatre" (Susan Smith Blackburn Prize). Blair Brown, who played the role
of Lane in the Lincoln Center production, happened to be one of the Blackburn
judges that year. She recounts her unique experience of appraising the play:

It was one of the first plays I read. I sat down and I was laughing and then I
was crying and then I was really crying and then I laughed and I really cried.
And I put the play down and thought, well, I probably shouldn't read
anything else right now because clearly you are in a sort of fragile mood.
And I waited and I read all the other plays and then I read Sarah's play again
at the end, and it was the same experience. And so it went for everyone I
knew who picked up The Clean House, it is so deceptively simple. It's like
water running over your hand, and then you find you are feeling some quite
big, personal things and you think, "Well, this is just me, it's not anybody
else." And interestingly enough, all the readers that year had the same
experience, "Well, it must be just me." And when we realized what we
shared, we thought, "Aha, this play is remarkable and this writer is
remarkable" and she won the prize. (qtd. in A Conversation)

In a preperformance conversation among Brown, arbiter Anne Cattaneo, and the
playwright, she continues by detailing her experience of rehearsing and performing
the play:

I wrote a note to our director to say, "You know, this is the most curious
play to play that I think I've ever done." And I've talked to the other actors
in our company and they feel similarly. There are very few places where
you say, okay, this moment lands like this every night. It varies widely because audiences are not told by the playwright, "Here comes the sad part, here comes the happy part." It’s more, "Take it as you may." And, at the very same moment, we will hear somebody crying and we will hear somebody laughing. Initially it was very disturbing. [Laughs] Are we being mocked? And you realize, no, actually, it's all true. I don't know anything else that's like that except maybe, you know, some magic realist novelist. But I've never had the experience in the theater before. (qtd. in "A Conversation")

Her observation that the playwright does not cue an expected audience response indicates that surprising shifts take place, changes consistent with magic realism, to which she refers, and to frame shifting as activated by jokes, as will be explored below.

The play was also a 2005 Pulitzer Prize finalist (Pulitzer Prize). The first act was commissioned by the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, New Jersey in 2000. In its full-length form, it premiered in September 2004 at Yale Repertory Theatre (Ruhl, "Clean House" 4). It has been a regional theater favorite, during the 2005-2006 season alone appearing in at least ten venues, including seven productions in the United States, four in Canada, and one in England (Hartman). It finally landed in the Mitzi Newhouse Theatre at the Lincoln Center for its New York premiere in October 2006 (Simonson; Ruhl, "Clean House" 6). According to Ruhl, its relatively late appearance in New York was not due to lack of interest, but rather to the playwright's waiting for the appropriate venue: of the theaters that approached her, only Lincoln Center had a ceiling high enough to accommodate the balcony so crucial to the play's second act. That the stage was booked two years in advance further delayed the New York premiere (Cox).
C. Waltzing and Cleaning

The Clean House appears to have been at least partly influenced by Paula Vogel's The Baltimore Waltz, judging by the elements that the two plays have in common. Ruhl attended, and was moved by, a performance of Vogel's play before she ever met her future mentor: "I remember the first time I saw The Baltimore Waltz was before I knew Paula [Vogel] and I was weeping. My father was sick at the time. Paula made the internal external. It wasn't like peering through a living room seeing how people experience grief" (qtd. in Reid). As Ruhl only began writing plays as an adult after she met Vogel and at Vogel's urging, The Baltimore Waltz, which premiered in 1992 (Vogel, "Baltimore Waltz" 2), predates all of Ruhl's dramatic efforts, disregarding an attempt in the fourth grade. As interviewer Kerry Reid surmises, this experience may have opened Ruhl to the possibility of expressing her own grief through playwriting. In The Baltimore Waltz, Vogel imagines a trip she might have taken to Europe at her brother Carl's invitation, but which, in real life, she declined, unaware at the time that he was HIV-positive. The invitation came in 1986; Carl passed away in 1988 (Vogel, "Baltimore Waltz" 4). As with The Clean House, the experience of personal loss informs and perhaps even serves as a primary motivation for writing the play.

Other details in Vogel's play appear to also have influenced Ruhl's construction of The Clean House. Although the stage directions specify that the action takes place in a hospital in Baltimore, Vogel's note indicates a journey to a "Europe that exists only in the imagination" (Vogel, "Baltimore Waltz" 4). Ruhl's
"metaphysical Connecticut" (Ruhl, "Clean House" 7) suggests a location equally removed from the ordinary. Vogel has christened her alter ego Anna, presumably after the lead female character in the film The Third Man, which Vogel spoofs in the play, and the movie upon which she has partially fashioned the plot. Ruhl utilizes the same name, with a Latinized spelling, for her Argentinian Ana.¹ Vogel's two main characters are siblings, as are Ruhl's Lane and Virginia, and moments of intense sibling rivalry occur in both works. In both instances, the age difference between siblings is two years as is revealed in references to childhood times (Vogel, "Baltimore Waltz" 17; Ruhl, "Clean House" 30). Both playwrights employ a technique of overlapping space, in Ruhl in the cases of Ana's balcony overlooking Lane's living room, and the intrusion of Alaskan snow into both; in Vogel, in the instance of Carl's scholarly commentary on the painter Corot, whose work is on display in the Louvre, complementing the cries and urgings emanating from his sister's lovemaking with a French waiter back in their hotel room (Vogel, "Baltimore Waltz" 22-3).

Languages other than English figure prominently in both plays. Ruhl's features jokes told in Portuguese, indeed her work opens with one, and the scene in which Matilde and Ana sort through apples on the balcony is to be performed in a mixture of Portuguese, Spanish, and English, as the actors' linguistic abilities allow. In Vogel, Anna struggles with European languages in contrast to Carl, who speaks six fluently (7). Her efforts with these other languages symbolize her struggle with

¹ Ruhl's child also bears the name of Anna (Crowley 110).
coming to terms with her brother's illness and death, with learning to refer to him in the past tense. Language also serves as a barrier in some respects in *The Clean House*, in that the characters whose primary language is English fail to understand Matilde's jokes in Portuguese. Their ignorance of her language extends to their lack of understanding of Brazilian culture as a whole, relating to their desire for their servants to be largely invisible. Conversely, language brings characters together as well in *The Clean House*, as Matilde and Ana form an instant bond facilitated by their understanding of each other's native tongues. The incomprehensibility of foreign languages also serves as a metaphor for the mysteries of life, in that Matilde's description of heaven is a place where nobody understands the jokes but everyone is laughing anyway. In this vision, laughter functions as a shield against the unknowable. Whereas in Vogel, Anna struggles to master new modes of expression in order to come to terms with the abrupt change in her life, in Ruhl foreign language remains foreign, symbolic of what remains opaque.

Films figure in both works as well. Vogel relies heavily upon the 1949 film *The Third Man*, building her imaginary Europe based on "every cliché of the European experience as imagined by Hollywood" (6) and signaling Carl's homosexuality through a furtive exchange of stuffed rabbits between himself and the mysterious Third Man. Film plays a more contained role in *The Clean House*. When her husband invites her to go apple picking with him and his lover, a distraught Lane lambastes him (italics are Ruhl’s):

"You must be insane! Apple picking! My God! I'M SORRY! But -- apple
picking? This is not a foreign film! We don't have an arrangement! You don't even like foreign films! Maybe you'll pretend to like foreign films, for Ana, but I can tell you now, Ana, he doesn't like them! He doesn't like reading the subtitles! It gives him a headache! (68)

She alludes to the West German film *The Perfect Arrangement*, released in 1971 with the tagline, "The Triangle That Worked out... Almost" ("The Perfect Arrangement")! The next scene in the play takes place between Ana and Matilde as they sort through apples on the balcony, tossing the rejects down upon Lane in her living room. Ironically, it plays like a scene from a foreign film spoken in Portuguese and Spanish with subtitles in English. When Charles appears, rather than suffering from a headache, he whisks Ana into the bedroom for lovemaking. Clearly, to Lane's chagrin, Ana and Charles are living as if in a foreign film, one in which a guilt-free extramarital affair occurs.²

Although not essential for the creation of a sense of alternative realities in *The Clean House*, cinema informs the dream world that takes up most of *The Baltimore Waltz*. Anna and Carl travel through Europe "as imagined by Hollywood," only emerging in the last scene to confront the reality of Carl's death. Even though both plays depict a realistic world in contrast to a non-realistic one, they do so in different ways. The dream-world remains separate from the clinical, realistic world of the last scene in Vogel. The fantastic elements do not intrude into this last scene, and therefore the worlds do not actually mix. In this regard, the play

² The concepts of Europe and European culture as they occur in Ruhl's plays will be explored more fully in the chapter on *Melancholy Play*. Briefly, Europe appears both as a place to be honored for its deep sense of history and respect for civility, and to be playfully ridiculed for its cultural pretensions.
cannot be categorized as magic realist. In contrast, Ruhl relies on techniques directly from magic realism to blend alternative realities in The Clean House, as will be discussed below.

As with film, the theme of dancing plays a larger role in Vogel's play than in Ruhl's. It serves as the prime metaphor in The Baltimore Waltz, as the siblings' trip is framed as an imaginary waltz through Europe that is actually taking place within a hospital in Baltimore. The grotesque dance between Anna and a stiff Carl is followed, after his passing, by an elegant and graceful reprise symbolic of Anna coming to terms with her brother's death. In The Clean House, dancing is something that Matilde's parents do poorly. Their ineptness highlights the degree to which they are inebriated through laughter. Although both central to The Baltimore Waltz, film and dance assume a peripheral role in The Clean House; nevertheless, their presence in the latter play may well owe something to the influence of the former.

Both works do, however, exhibit a distrust of modern medicine. At the time of writing, doctors could not offer more than palliative measures against Vogel's brother's AIDS. Vogel parodies this failure by infecting Anna with ATD, or Acquired Toilet Disease, a fictional ailment contracted by sharing the toilet with elementary school students (11). Her doctor's admission that there is no cure and his ridiculous suggestions to avoid spreading the disease, express the hopelessness of the medical profession against AIDS at the time. Out of desperation Anna visits Dr. Todesrocheln for an alternative treatment that proves as useless as mainstream
care. The inability of modern medicine to cure cancer, as presented in Ruhl, parallels its difficulties with AIDS in Vogel. Ruhl's Ana rejects further medical treatment when her cancer comes out of remission, apparently acting out of a generic distrust of doctors and hospitals. Frustrated but undeterred in his efforts to save her, Charles seeks an alternative, venturing to Alaska to bring her back a yew tree. However, even the alternative fails as she has passed away by the time he returns. In regard to the failure of science in both cases, laughter does turn out to be the best medicine, although in a palliative rather than curative sense.

In this regard, the greatest similarity between the two plays rests in their application of humor as a means of coping with the inevitability of death. Ruhl credits her father with inspiring her in this regard, and in Vogel's case it is evident that her brother Carl maintained his sense of the comical well into his illness, based upon a letter he wrote detailing instructions for his funeral. As reproduced in the “Playwright's Note” to The Baltimore Waltz, the letter opens with:

Dear Paula:
I thought I would jot down some of my thoughts about the (shall we say) production values of my ceremony. Oh God -- I can hear you groaning -- everybody wants to direct. (4)

He sustains his wit from start to finish, closing with, "Should I be lain with Grandma and Poppa Ben, do stop by for a visit from year to year. And feel free to chat. You'll find me a good listener" (5). Vogel endows The Baltimore Waltz with a similar sense of hilarity played out against the pathos of a terminal illness and even the grotesque, as in the quack doctor eager to guzzle Anna's urine (51-4) and
Anna's waltz with a stiff, corpse-like Carl (55-6). As in The Clean House, with its sea of untranslatable jokes at which everyone is laughing, Vogel's play concludes with a positive, if bittersweet, vision of death's aftermath:

The lighting begins to change back to the dreamy atmosphere of the first scene. Softly, a Strauss waltz begins. Carl, perfectly well, waits for Anna. He is dressed in Austrian military regalia. They waltz off as the lights dim. (57)

Both works conclude with a death followed by a redeeming thought or image. In Ruhl, Matilde relates the circumstances of her birth and gives her vision of heaven; in Vogel, the grotesque waltz of the previous scene is reprised in dreamlike serenity.

These positive thoughts and images have more to do with the survivors than with the fate of the deceased -- after all, the dramatists do not follow these characters into the afterlife, as Ruhl has done in Eurydice. Both works celebrate the courage of the playwrights' deceased relatives in their facing of death through the medium of humor. In the case of her father, Ruhl emphasizes that his jokes benefited everyone concerned:

His heroism was so much about his wit. I mean it was about... his spirituality too, but it was also about his wit.... The three days when he was actually dying he was... making jokes up until the last minute, and I think to be able to do that requires a kind of total lack of self-absorption,... this desire to put other people at ease, the desire to make other people laugh while you're dying. (qtd. in "Playwright Sarah Ruhl")

His cracking of jokes displays not only bravery in facing his own demise, but also a selflessness in easing the suffering of his family. Rebecca Taichman, director of the 2005 Woolly Mammoth production, casts Ana's approach to death in a similar light as a means of helping the other characters understand it as a release or
transformation rather than an end ("Playwright Sarah Ruhl"). The ending of The Baltimore Waltz suggests that Anna has attained some level of acceptance of or adaptation to her brother's death, perhaps through a bittersweet remembrance of him or through a sense of his continued presence after death, a sensation not uncommon to those who have lost a loved one. The most important influence that Vogel's play, then, appears to have exerted on the creation of The Clean House, is the demonstration that a work of drama may be written in response to a personal loss. Like Vogel, Ruhl sees fit to handle the prospect of loss through death with a large dose of humor.

D. "Like Water Running over Your Hand"

Thematically, The Clean House is somewhat transparent, as certain of its major ideas are easy to discern. The valuation of approaching death with humor has been discussed above. Cleaning operates on several levels, including the physical and spiritual. Ruhl intends the meaning of cleaning to expand as the play progresses: "I wanted cleaning to be just plain cleaning in the first act, and in the second act, to make it feel more like a cleansing -- the spiritual, ritual parts of cleaning" (qtd. in Wren 146). Ruhl explains what she means by the spiritual aspect of cleaning in an interview with Pamela Renner:

[Ruhl:] When I was at Brown, I met a woman named Dijana Milosevic from the theatre collective "DAH" in Belgrade. Before we started our workshop, we would clean the floors with mops. We'd have bare feet. And there was something about wiping the floor before getting on stage that felt very important. I think it's no accident that different religious practices have certain ritual cleanings. From washing your hands before Sabbath to cleaning

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the space of the theater, there's something about our relationship to sacred and secular spaces that has to do with washing.

[Renner:] That makes me think of the Noh theatre I once visited in Kyoto. It was so clean it felt like a sacred space.

[Ruhl:] Yeah, and you can't get that when you hire someone to clean your house. Because they don't really care -- and why should they? -- if your house glows with a spiritual cleanliness. (Renner 50)

Ruhl attributes the act of cleaning with the power of imbuing both sacred and secular spaces with a spiritual quality. She includes theatrical space, which combines elements of the sacred and secular, in this discussion. As noted above, Ruhl also became interested in the implications for the upper classes being able to hire someone else to do their cleaning, and what it means "to be alienated from your own dirt" (qtd. in Weckwerth 32).

In the first act, cleaning provides employment for Matilde away from her home country, although she hates the work that she is required to perform. Her distaste for housework presents a problem to Lane, who wants her house simply to be clean with minimal intervention from herself. She has never hired a live-in housekeeper before Matilde, and balks at giving her orders. For her part, Matilde does not even pretend to be motivated:

*Lane enters.*

*Matilde is looking out the window.*

Lane: Are you all right?
Matilde: Yes.
Lane: Would you please clean the bathroom when you get a chance?
Matilde: Yes.
Lane: Soon?
Matilde: Yes.

*Matilde looks at Lane.*

Blaine: The house is very dirty.
*Matilde is silent.*
Lane: This is difficult for me. I don't like to order people around. I've never had a live-in maid. (12)

Eventually, seeing that Lane is on the verge of tears, Matilde coaches her to give her orders as if commanding a nurse. When Lane finally does, Matilde starts polishing silver, a task that she abandons the instant Lane leaves the room (14). Later, when Lane comes home from work late in the evening, she finds Matilde sitting in the dark. Matilde makes it clear that Lane has disturbed her concentration:

Lane: What are you doing in the dark?
Matilde: I was trying to think up a joke.
        Almost had one.
        Now it's gone.
Lane: Oh -- well -- can you get it back again?
Matilde: I doubt it.
Lane: Oh. (32)

After they converse for a while, Matilde brings their discussion to a close with a blatant lie:

Lane: Are you going to -- just -- sit here in the dark?
Matilde: I might stay up a little longer to -- what's the word? -- tidy up.
Lane: Oh. Great. Just shut the light off when you --
        Matilde turns the light off.
        Oh. Good night.
Matilde: Good night. (33)

Matilde also throws away the antidepressants that Lane supposes her to be taking (23). She refuses to play the good domestic, bordering on acting the comic stereotype of the high-status servant. What pulls her back from the stereotype is the genuine compassion she shows for her employer, both when Lane expresses her discomfort with giving her direct orders, and in regard to Lane's loss of her husband to Ana.
Lane expresses desire for a servant whom she does not need to know on an intimate, personal level. As she tells Matilde, "I don't want an interesting person to clean my house. I just want my house -- cleaned" (13). She reiterates to Virginia, "I don't want my sister to clean my house. I want a stranger to clean my house" (45). Lane resists knowing Matilde outside of her role as housekeeper, just as Matilde refuses to play that role, even though she is being paid to do so. Even as Matilde fails in the servant role, Lane fails in that of the master, as a strict master would not tolerate Matilde's insubordination. In a democratic society that holds up the ideal that every individual is equal, the master/server relationship presents difficulties to a liberally minded citizen such as Lane. The discomfort that she experiences is particularly relevant in the United States, a country that depends heavily upon immigrant labor from Latin America. The intimacy of the relationship between housekeeper and employer, in which the maid has access to the employer's personal effects and literally handles her dirty laundry, intensifies this discomfort. Lane attempts to keep Matilde at arm's length even while she grants her access to her underwear drawer.

A sentiment expressed by Lane to Ana in the second act could also be applied to her own relationship with Matilde: "We do as we please, and then we say we're sorry. But we're not sorry. We're just -- uncomfortable -- watching other people in pain" (92). Lane resists recognizing that Matilde dislikes cleaning and is only doing so out of necessity, and in doing so fails to take into account her emotional life. When Matilde reveals to her that she is mourning her parents, Lane
explains that within the context of their relationship what is of primary importance is that her house be cleaned, a task that supersedes the details of Matilde's personal life (13). Lane expresses surprise when Virginia explains to her that Matilde, rather than being depressed as Lane suspected, simply does not like to clean (42).

As much as Matilde hates to clean, Virginia loves to. She enjoys cleaning her own home because, she claims, it both clears her head and makes her feel clean (18-9). She offers to clean her sister's house because it would give her purpose. Another theme of the play is the attainment of a sense of purpose through appropriate employment. Cleaning makes Matilde feel sad because it is inappropriate employment for her, as opposed to creating jokes which brings her a sense of fulfillment. Virginia, on the other hand, derives great pleasure and a sense of accomplishment from cleaning: "Let's start in the bathroom. I love cleaning the toilet. It's so dirty, and then it's so clean" (23)!

Virginia's obsession with cleanliness stems from neurotic rather than spiritual impulses. Cleaning is her way of imposing order on the world, of resisting that which she cannot control. Although her husband's impotence has precluded them from having children, her rationalization for not wanting them anyway bespeaks a great fear of losing control. She imagines beautiful children growing "into the dirt and mess of the world" to end up raped and dying, left naked in the road while indifferent strangers pass by (21-2). In her tightly controlled world, her housewares function as surrogate children, ones that rest safely in their place:

The house is quiet. The gold draperies are singing a little lullaby to the ottoman.
The silverware is gently sleeping in its box. I tuck in the forks, the spoons, the knives. I do not have children. (21)

She finishes cleaning her own house "by approximately 3:12 every afternoon," and this ritual gives meaning to her life. She half-jokingly appraises the importance of cleaning:

If it were not for dust I think I would die. If there were no dust to clean then 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. (10)

Cleaning grants her a shred of meaning in a life that has "gone downhill" since she reached the age of twenty-two (22). Unlike Matilde, for whom cleaning is a necessary burden that robs her of the time she would rather spend inventing jokes, Virginia escapes from the curse of abundant leisure time through the act of cleaning. Although there may be an obsessive, neurotic component to Matilde's quest for the perfect joke, her success in finding it must be termed, ultimately, a healing experience, as will be explored below. For her part, Virginia finds release only when she acts in opposition to her cleaning impulse and makes a gigantic mess in her sister's living room.

Cleaning takes on new meanings in the second act. However, whatever spiritual cleansing takes place is not reflected on the physical plane; on the contrary, the pristine, white living room that represents Lane's ordered, controlled life in the first act becomes increasingly sullied as the second act progresses. Her husband's affair impinges on her physical space as apple cores rain down on her, yellow spice explodes into her white room, her sister, in a fit of pique, scatters dirt from a potted
plant across her carpet, and finally Ana's body, wasted with cancer, comes to rest in her house. Lane must give in to filth in order to reach a place of compassion for Ana. She also undergoes a purgative process. As she loudly explains to her sister:

I DON'T WANT ANYTHING IN MY HOUSE TO BE CLEAN EVER AGAIN! I WANT THERE TO BE DIRT AND PIGS IN THE CORNER. MAYBE SOME COW MANURE SOME BIG DIRTY SHITTY COWS AND SOME SHITTY COW SHIT LOTS OF IT AND LOTS OF DIRTY FUCKING SOCKS -- AND NONE OF THEM MATCH -- NONE OF THEM -- BECAUSE YOU KNOW WHAT -- THAT IS HOW I FEEL.  (82)

Before being able to bring herself to pay a house call on Ana, Lane must allow her environment to reflect her inner turmoil. Through externalizing her pain, she is eventually able to release it and come to a state of compassion.

As much as chaos and mess represent life spinning out of control, they also signify the exuberance of letting go as demonstrated by Virginia. After fighting with her sister, who prohibits her from cleaning anymore, she "makes a giant operatic mess in the living room," accompanied by a "most likely Italian" aria playing on Ana's phonograph. When asked if she is okay, she responds with, "Actually. I feel fabulous" (84). In this case, making a mess serves as an emotional purgative, releasing pent-up emotion and freeing her from her tightly controlled obsession about imposing order on the household environment. Ultimately, the acceptance of chaos and disorder leads to the acceptance of Ana's death. Early in the play, Virginia characterizes hospitals as "places for human waste. Places to put dead bodies" (10). When Ana's body comes to rest in Lane's living room, the environment takes on the character more of a temple than of a hospital as envisioned
by Virginia. The attending women close Ana’s eyes, wash her body, and say a 
prayer before Charles arrives and collapses over her body (106-9). Virginia herself 
weeps in saying goodbye to Ana (105). Clearly, a dead human body has become 
more than waste to her, and certainly her acceptance of her own lack of control has 
facilitated this change in attitude.

The characters gather around Ana's body as a community, and indeed the 
notion of community is another important thematic element in the play. In the first 
act, Ruhl establishes the isolation of each of the characters. Lane rarely sees her 
husband, as both of them are busy surgeons. She imagines him tied up in surgery all 
day, and explains to Matilde the system that they used to have for communicating 
through their beepers as a substitution for actual physical contact:

When we were younger -- Charles and I -- we would page each other, we 
had this signal -- two for good night -- and three for -- well, I don't know 
why I'm thinking about this right now. The point is -- when you get older, 
you just know that a person is thinking of you, and working hard, and 
thinking of you, and you don't need them to call anymore. Since Charles and 
I are both doctors we both -- understand -- how it is. (32-3)

She is disconnected enough from her husband to have no notion that he is having an 
affair, which is part of the price she pays for not doing her own laundry -- she has 
not seen the brightly colored underwear that belong to Ana, underwear that Virginia 
and Matilde have come across in Lane and Charles's laundry.

Matilde finds herself isolated in a foreign country, both of her parents 
recently deceased. When Virginia asks her if she misses her home, she replies, "Of 
course I do. Doesn't everyone" (18)? More than Matilde, however, Virginia
expresses the loneliness and isolation of modern existence. Her lack of employment only contributes to her sense of depression, as she seems to have nowhere to go and no one to visit during the day. She jokes that she would commit suicide if she did not have any cleaning to do (10). She expresses a marked lack of any sort of passion for her husband or even regard for him as a companion:

My husband is like a well-placed couch. He takes up the right amount of space. A man should not be too beautiful. Or too good in bed. A man should be -- functional. And well chosen. Otherwise you're in trouble. (25)

Although Virginia does get together with her sister to have coffee, Lane forestalls an attempt to expand their socializing by getting together with their husbands as a foursome:

Lane: I keep meaning to have you two over for dinner. It's ridiculous -- living so close and never seeing each other.
Virginia: You're right. Maybe next week?
Lane: Next week is crazy. But soon.
Virginia nods. (31)

Virginia finds herself unable to establish a social relationship with her sister which will provide the level of contact she is seeking.

Only with Matilde is Virginia able to create some sort of meaningful, consistent bond. They spend time together in Lane's home as Virginia cleans. Desperate for anyone to talk to, Virginia reveals personal details of her life on their first meeting, such as her husband's impotence and her dismay at the course that her life has taken. They chat about the structure of jokes and imagine together the details of Charles's suspected affair. Faced with having Matilde hired away from Lane in the second act, Virginia expresses the value in which she holds their
relationship:

Matilde is like a sister to me.... we clean together. We talk, and fold laundry, as women used to do. They would gather at the public fountains and wash their clothes and tell stories. Now we are all alone in our separate houses and it is terrible. (65)

What she wishes Lane would be to her as a sister she finds in Matilde, framing what she shares with her in a vision of pre-industrial society as an antidote to her modern isolation.

Virginia's problem is at least partially a cultural one, as in the United States families tend to live apart as opposed to other countries, such as Brazil, in which extended families tend to live close together and relatives provide support for one another.³ Ana's illness and death draw the women together into the sort of community for which Virginia longs. It takes the intrusion of the affair into Lane and Virginia's orderly lives, and the emotional and physical mess that it creates, to draw the characters together into a community.

Another theme is that of head versus heart, or rationality versus emotion and intuition. This theme plays out in the love triangle between Charles, Lane, and Ana. Charles and Lane describe their marriage as one of rationality rather than emotion. Lane relates that they first met as anatomy partners in medical school: "We fell in love over a dead body" (93). They come together as they are learning the science of

³ According to a recent encyclopedic entry on Brazil, family ties are weakening in that country due to increased mobility and urbanization: "Family members customarily live in relatively close proximity to one another, holding frequent reunions or gathering at a family farm or ranch on weekends and holidays. However, this traditional system of kinship ties depends on a certain degree of wealth and stability for its preservation, and it is no longer as strong as it once was, given the increased mobility and urbanization of the Brazilian people" (Schneider).
medicine under distinctly unromantic circumstances. Although Charles and Ana also come together under clinical conditions in the relationship of doctor and patient, the discussion of Ana's diagnosis and surgical options quickly takes an emotional, even irrational turn:

Charles: Then we'll do it tomorrow.

Ana: Then I'll see you tomorrow, at the surgery.

Charles: Good-bye, Ana.

Ana: Good-bye.

Charles: No. You're not going to die.

Ana: I won't let you die.

Charles: They fall in love completely.

(55)

According to Charles and Ana, their relationship transcends not only the rational, but also the emotional and takes on spiritual or religious significance in that they are convinced that they are basherts, or soulmates. Curiously, Charles insists on expressing this dimension of their attraction employing the terminology of scientific impartiality (italics are Ruhl's):

There's something -- metaphysically -- objective about it. (61)

Something very objective happened to me. It's as though I suddenly tested positive for a genetic disease that I've had all along. Ana has been in my genetic code. (62)

Charles ascribes the certainty of something that may be empirically determined to that which is intangible. The objective nature of their attraction justifies, in their eyes, the disruption of Charles and Lane's marriage.
Charles delineates a particular kind of logical justice that brought him and Lane together, a justice that is lacking in his liaison with Ana:

I've been faithful to my wife. We fell in love when we were twenty-two. We had plans. There was justice in the world. There was justice in love. If a person was good enough, an equally good person would fall in love with that person. And then I met -- Ana. Justice had nothing to do with it. (53)

For her part, Lane is able to quantify the reasons that Charles should be in love with her:

I've never thought any other woman was my equal. I'm the best doctor. I'm the smartest, most well-loved by my patients. I'm athletic. I have poise. I've aged well. I can talk to anyone and be on equal footing. How, I thought, could he even look at anyone else. It would be absurd. (40)

She lists her qualifications as though on a resume. Theirs is a marriage based on intellect and respect; in contrast, Charles's affair with Ana stems from a passion rooted in the metaphysical. The whirlwind affair of the heart destroys the respectable marriage of minds. Ultimately, however, with Ana's passing, it is implied that Lane will reclaim her husband. Ana predicts that she will take care of him because she still loves him (104-5), and Lane tenderly kisses Charles on the forehead when he returns with the tree (108). Rather than a reuniting of minds, however, this plays as an act of compassion and forgiveness. Not only humor, then, but compassion as well tempers the impact of Ana's death, one that the cold logic of medical science is unable to prevent.

The title of the play evokes medical science by suggesting the term "clean room," which is an environment in which dust and other airborne contaminants are reduced to a minimum to facilitate the production of delicate equipment or the
"manipulation of biological materials" ("Clean Room"). A synonym for "clean room" is "white room," and this term no doubt provides the inspiration for the color scheme of Lane's living room: "A white living room. White couch, white vase, white lamp, white rug" (8). Of course, such sterility is not conducive to a comfortable or relaxed lifestyle, and the setting represents an extreme attempt to maintain control over both the physical and emotional environment. The title also connotes the notion that a house is not necessarily a home, and the isolation of the characters during the first act demonstrates that Lane and Charles's house indeed lacks the requisite warmth to qualify as a home. Only after the living room has been demolished and the whiteness sullied does it stand a chance of becoming one.

**E. Magic Realism**

German art critic and historian Franz Roh introduced the term magic realism in 1925 to characterize a Post-Expressionistic style of painting (Zamora and Faris 15). In 1949, Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier referred to Roh as he formulated his concept of *lo real maravilloso americano* or "marvelous American reality" (75). Carpentier argues that America, and in particular Latin America, is a land of the marvelous, in which the incredible and miraculous occur on a regular basis, as manifested both in a dramatic terrain of jungles and mountains, and through people's faith in supernatural powers capable of evoking miracles. He accuses the European surrealists of tiredly arranging objects in unexpected configurations in an attempt to manufacture the marvelous, claiming that the American artist need not resort to such artificial means but may draw inspiration directly from his environment (Carpentier
The term magic realism first achieved common usage during the 1960s boom in Latin American literature, but has since received a wider geographic application to works of fiction from across the globe, particularly, but not exclusively, writing set in postcolonial contexts.

Within a colonial or postcolonial context, the "realism" in magic realism refers to the world as perceived through a European, rationalist perspective; the "magic" refers to the local, indigenous way of seeing things, inclusive of the miraculous. The magic intrudes upon or intermingles with the European rationalism, in the process subverting it and demonstrating alternative modes of perception. Various scholars including Anne C. Hegerfeldt argue that the designation of magic realism should not be limited to postcolonial contexts and Hegerfeldt specifically urges that the term be understood as a mode rather than genre (Hegerfeldt 1-6). Superstition and magical thinking exist in virtually every culture and can be set against rationalistic, mainstream perspectives (31-2).

Regarding magic realism as a mode rather than genre opens it up to a wider application not limited by geographic or temporal constraints. Both Hegerfeldt and Wendy B. Faris, in Lies That Tell the Truth: Magic Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction from Britain and "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism

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4 The essay I am citing initially served as the preface to Carpentier's novel, El reino de este mundo (The Kingdom of This World, 1949), and was later published in expanded form in 1967. I reference the later version as translated by Zamora and Faris.

5 The terms "magic realism" and "magical realism" may be used interchangeably. I agree with Anne C. Hegerfeldt's favoring of the former, "as it can be read as a double noun phrase and thus better reflects the relationship of equality between magic and realism that is a fundamental aspect of the mode" (1).
and Postmodern Fiction," respectively, provide lists of common attributes of magic realist literature which will be referred to in the following discussion.

The application of the critical concept of magic realism has been limited primarily to literature, although some work has been done in the area of film and not infrequently, in the theater, plays are referred to as belonging to this mode. For example, numerous reviewers refer to the The Clean House as magic realist (Blanchard; Rizzo, "The Clean House"; Robertson, "The Virtues"; Rooney). However, it remains to be delineated how magic realism in the theater differs from that in written fiction. The phenomenology of theater differs significantly from that of literature. To begin with, the reader of fiction creates the world of the book inside his or her mind, whereas the theater audience member must suspend his or her disbelief in order to invest in the fictional world created by the actors and other "stage magic" produced before his or her eyes. This difference will be taken into account in the analysis of the magic realist elements in The Clean House.

New York Times Critic Campbell Robertson identifies a new aesthetic that he calls "whimsical realism," placing The Clean House within this category without specifying any other dramatic works that may also qualify. Certainly, the magic realism in Ruhl's play is more subtle than that in works by, for example, José Rivera, such as Cloud Tectonics, in which one character experiences time moving at a different rate from the other characters, or The Winged Man, in which the title character indeed sports wings. Ruhl's employment of the mode is one particularly suited to the theater, in which characters' thoughts and imaginings manifest in
scenes not only visible to the audience, but also to other characters, and separate locations impinge upon one another. Robertson's category applies particularly well to Ruhl, since her plays abound with whimsy apart from any considerations of magic realism. However, as the following analysis will show, the difference between whimsical and magical realism is one of degree rather than kind.

1. Matter-Of-Factness

Magic realism differs from fantasy in that the work is grounded in realism, or to put it more precisely, based in the style of realism. The fantastic elements coexist with the realistic ones and are portrayed in a matter-of-fact way (Hegerfeldt 53). In the case of literature, the narrator relates both realistic and magical events with the same tone without marking the latter as extraordinary. Within the theater, the same effect is achieved by the acceptance of both types of events by the characters, by a lack of incredulity at the fantastic elements. Certainly The Clean House conforms to this model, as it is based in a realistic style with the intrusion of the fantastic, which is calmly accepted by all of the characters. For example, Matilde expresses no surprise when she is able to witness Lane's fantasy of her husband with his lover (47), and the notion that Matilde's mother laughed to death, and that Matilde will be able to euthanize Ana by telling her the perfect joke, is accepted by the other characters without question. The showering of objects from Ana's balcony into Lane's living room similarly fails to evoke surprise from Lane. She acknowledges and interacts with the objects, but does not question their sudden appearance in her home.
In magic realist literature, the narrator relates incidents in this matter-of-fact fashion, and typically does so from a fresh, childlike perspective. A childlike point of view is more apt to encompass wonders and facilitates passing along these wonders as real occurrences. Although *The Clean House* lacks a narrator per se, Matilde stands as an observer somewhat removed from the action. On two separate occasions she distances herself from the action by comparing the proceedings to a soap opera, once during the initial encounter between Charles, Lane, and Ana (68), and also in describing the fights between Charles and Ana over Ana's returning to the hospital for further treatments (76). Although the playwright has written opening monologues for each of the characters, she has awarded Matilde both the first of the opening monologues, as well as the only closing one, bookending the play between her opening joke in Portuguese and the story of her birth. Matilde also establishes a special relationship with the audience by narrating the fantasy flashbacks of her parents.

Matilde exhibits a childlike directness and guilelessness, and indeed plays the role of surrogate child to the two households. Although duplicitous with Lane about the sincerity of her housekeeping attempts, she deals with her directly and compassionately over emotional issues. When Lane is "on the verge of tears" in her frustration over getting Matilde to clean, Matilde asks her what is wrong and offers a solution, albeit an ultimately ineffective one (13-4). When Virginia comes to the door and asks Matilde if she is the maid, Matilde unabashedly responds by asking if she is "the sister" (15). She openly reveals her feelings about cleaning when it is
safe to do so, as when she is speaking to Virginia rather than Lane (19). She displays candor and openness throughout. She also becomes a surrogate child to two childless couples, Lane and Charles, and Charles and Ana. At their initial meeting, the women fight over her as if in a child custody battle. Later, when Matilde is splitting her time between the two households, Lane interrogates her about the status of Charles and Ana's relationship as a mother might question her child about an estranged husband and his new partner. Therefore not only does Matilde operate within the role of childlike narrator as is typically found in magic realism, she actually inhabits the position of surrogate child.

2. Double-Casting, Mirroring, Metamorphosis

That Matilde's surrogate parents Charles and Ana are played by the same actors who are portraying her actual parents, demonstrates a particularly theatrical form of the magic realist technique of mirroring. According to Faris, "Repetition as a narrative principle, in conjunction with mirrors or their analogues used symbolically or structurally, creates a magic of shifting references" (177). Matilde herself recognizes the similarity, telling Ana at their first meeting, "You look like my mother" (57). This moment functions metatheatrically as well, acknowledging to the audience that their suspicion of double-casting is correct. Matilde's instantaneous rapport with Ana, ostensibly attributable to a shared understanding of their native tongues, also represents the connection that Matilde might have had with her mother as she is, in a sense, welcoming her back from the dead. Ana likewise embraces Matilde as a daughter, inviting her to come live in her home even
though she has just met her.

Matilde's parents possessed a special bond through their mutual appreciation of humor, a connection that takes on almost mythic significance through their appearances in flashbacks in which they laugh relentlessly, even superhumanly. Charles and Ana also find themselves drawn together by an invisible force, in their case an overwhelming sense of love and destiny. Another similarity between the couples is that both Matilde's father and Charles demonstrate the gap between intention and result. The father labored for a year concocting a joke to surprise his wife on their anniversary; the joke succeeded too well, proving to be fatally hilarious (11). Charles ventures to the wilds of Alaska in order to retrieve a cure for Ana's cancer, but his journey only serves to separate him from his beloved during her last days, as by the time he returns from his quest she has already passed on. Both men intend well, but are unable to fulfill their intention, bungling the final result. It is left to the women, ultimately, to take care of each other. In each of these examples, the mirroring produced by double casting highlights the similarities between the two couples.

Another magic realist technique utilized in regard to the couples is that of metamorphosis. Faris cites examples from various works of literature such as those of a pair of characters transformed into a "sinister twin fetus," a hellish location converted into "a kind of paradise of earthly delights," and a character made invisible by a witch. She states that these transformations "embody in the realm of organisms a collision of two different worlds" (178-9). In Ruhl, the two different
worlds that collide are those of Matilde's parents and that of Charles and Ana, when
the latter, through an onstage costume change, revert to the former. The penultimate
scene leaves Charles slumped over Ana's dead body; Matilde opens the following
and final scene by cueing their resurrection as her parents:

Matilde: This is how I imagine my parents.
Ana and Charles transform into Matilde's mother and father.
Under Charles's parka he is dressed as Matilde's father.
Under Ana's bathrobe, she is dressed as Matilde's mother. (109)

This magic realist convention manifests in a distinctly, and transparently, theatrical
manner. Instead of utilizing stage magic in an attempt to hide the workings behind
an illusory transformation, the actors simply take off their outer layer of costuming.
In this way, Ruhl draws attention to the theatrical nature of the event rather than
concealing it. This presentation tightens the correspondence between Charles and
Ana and Matilde's parents, and enables Ana's death to flow into Matilde's described
birth scene. As Faris notes, a meta-fictional dimension is often present in
contemporary magic realist literature: "The texts provide commentaries on
themselves" (175). The meta-theatrical technique of onstage costume change may
be seen as analogous to this, as the audience member is reminded that what he or
she is watching should be regarded as metaphor rather than a representation of real
life.

3. Ghosts

Matilde's parents appear three times in the play, twice before the tenth scene
in the first act, and at the conclusion of the second act and the play as a whole. Each
time Matilde introduces them with, "This is how I imagine my parents." Although presented as imaginal rather than spectral, her mother and father fulfill functions typically assigned to ghosts in magic realist literature. In "Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction" (1995), Lois Parkinson Zamora details some of these functions:

> [G]hosts carry the burden of tradition and collective memory: ancestral apparitions often act as correctives to the insularities of individuality, as links to lost families and communities, or as reminders of communal crimes, crises, cruelties. They may suggest displacement and alienation or, alternatively, reunion and communion. (497)

The appearances of her parents concretize Matilde's longing for them, her desire to be reunited with her lost family, and her severed connection with her culture of origin as a whole. They highlight her isolation within both a foreign culture and Lane's household. Further, they remind her of the crisis that terminated her mother's life, of the powerful joke that proved too funny.

In their introductory scene, the parents dance poorly, laugh until "laughing makes them kiss," and "kiss until kissing makes them laugh." They are drunk on laughter, and their laughter spills over into sexuality and back again. Matilde notes that, "They are not the best dancers in the world" (15), and this lack of skill would seem to indicate the clumsiness of drunkards who are more interested in their own intoxication than in a precise execution of dance steps. Their daughter has previously introduced them as individuals whose highest concern is humor and who both waited to marry until a relatively late age, when they finally met their match in wit in each other. Her father explains that they have never been apart since the day
they met because, "I always wanted to know the next joke" (11). Their passion for humor both exceeds the human and, as described by Matilde, passes over into the animalistic: "My mother and father did not look into each other's eyes. They laughed like hyenas. Even when they made love they laughed like hyenas" (11). Their obsession with laughter and the humorous, mingled with sexuality, approaches a Dionysian ecstasy, and the tragic consequence of their overindulgence takes on mythic significance.

If these ghosts, haunting their daughter, belong to a sort of ecstatic cult of laughter, then they are also the holders of the initiation mysteries of this cult. In their second appearance, Matilde relates her mother telling her father a dirty joke, one which she fails to understand and which they refuse to explain to her, her mother putting her off with, "[A]sk me again when you're 30." In telling of the incident, Matilde laments, "Now I'm almost thirty. And I'll never know the joke" (24). Matilde's sorrow underscores her isolation and also her grief that her parents did not live to see her reach the age of 30. However, the stage directions indicate that her parents both look at her at this juncture before exiting, and this parting glance may be interpreted as one of expectation that she will find a way to crack the code on her own, an expectation that is fulfilled when Matilde finally thinks up the perfect joke and uses it to put Ana, her mother's double, to rest. Matilde enforces a peculiar sort of justice to right her father's wrong, that of accidentally killing his wife through the excessive use of humor, by reenacting the crime, but in Matilde's case applying the lethal force intentionally and as an act of mercy. The ghosts
manifest long enough to see Matilde attain their level of comic mastery. After she has demonstrated her prowess, they presumably will cease to haunt her as they share with her, as the stage directions indicate, "a moment of completion" (109). The reenactment of her birth symbolizes, as well, Matilde's full assumption of her parents' lineage through a process of initiation.

4. Metaphor Taken Literally

Another characteristic of magic realism demonstrated through Matilde's parents is that of metaphor taken literally, in that her mother "dies laughing." Matilde offers the doctors' explanation, one which she clearly rejects: "The doctors couldn't explain it. They argued. They said she choked on her own spit, but they don't really know" (11). Ana dies in the same manner. Although Ruhl's own father did not literally die laughing, he faced his illness with a courageous humor and made jokes until the very end. Likewise, Vogel's brother wrote out his memorial service instructions with a light touch. One could metaphorize them as people who died laughing. This metaphor is then made literal by the playwright within the boundaries of her play. Laughter, however, does not stand alone as an emotional reaction in moments of intensity. On several occasions, Ruhl pairs it with weeping. Shortly after learning of her husband's infidelity, Lane listens to a joke told by Matilde in Portuguese and expresses uncertainty as to how to react:

Lane: Is that the end?
Matilde: Yes.
Lane: Was it funny?
Matilde: Yes. It's not funny in translation.
Lane: I suppose I should laugh then.
Matilde: Yes.

Lane tries to laugh.

She cries.

You're crying.

Lane: No, I'm not.

Matilde: I think that you're crying.

Lane: Well -- yes. I think I am.

Lane cries.

She laughs.

She cries.

She laughs.

And this goes on for some time. (48-9)

In a moment archetypically theatrical, Lane's face alternates between the conventional masks of comedy and tragedy. Ruhl thus establishes an affinity between laughter and tears that will reemerge in the final monologue spoken by Matilde:

My mother said I was the only baby who laughed when I came into the world.

She said I was laughing at my father's joke.

I laughed to take in the air.

I took in some air, and then I cried. (109)

The laughter associated with Matilde's mother's death is clearly tinged with sorrow, as is that produced by Ana in her last moments. As she enters the world, Matilde's laughter is quickly replaced with crying. Although Ruhl's father and Vogel's brother may be metaphorized as having died laughing, certainly their deaths elicited sorrow as well, and thus the laughing and weeping drama masks present a more balanced symbol of their passing and, by extension, of the human condition in general. Ruhl suggests the masks placed side by side, rather than either one in isolation, in a blending of the comic and upbeat with the serious and heavy characteristic of her
work in general.

5. Overlapping Space As Metaphor

Hegerfeldt expands the role of literalization in magic realism beyond that of
metaphor and positions it as an umbrella concept encompassing various techniques
(56-9). For example, ghosts represent the literalization of the influence of the past,
in the case of Matilde her longing for her parents and the oppressive effect of their
tragic deaths. They only vanish after she has exorcised them by performing a
certain task that relieves her of her burden. In her discussion of literalization,
Hegerfeldt notes techniques that deconstruct "traditional dichotomies such as
abstract/concrete, word/thing, past/present" (57). The mirroring that occurs between
Matilde's parents and Charles and Ana concretizes an analogy; whereas a realist text
might draw comparisons between two different couples, a magic realist one utilizes
the technique of mirroring, one that may be reinforced in dramatic literature by
techniques such as double casting and onstage metamorphosis through costume
change.

Another way in which Ruhl makes the abstract concrete is through her
manipulation of space. Ruhl metaphorizes space in a distinctly theatrical manner
through the use of overlap. In placing Ana's balcony over Lane's living room, the
playwright allows the messiness of the affair to spill over into Lane's neatly ordered
world. From the balcony and into the living room fall apple cores, a spice jar
thrown in a fight, and Charles's shirt tossed aside when he goes swimming. These
objects stain the pristine whiteness of Lane's home with splashes of color,
destroying her illusion of control and order while simultaneously bringing an
uncomfortable vividness and liveliness into her world. Matilde acts as the go-
between and is called from one household to the other as if the two represented
spaces were as proximate as they are physically adjacent on the stage. The
presentational and representational coexist, and the "metaphysical Connecticut,"
which is indicated as the setting, becomes metaphorical as well. The state of
internal chaos and disorder imposed upon Lane through the disintegration of her
marriage manifests externally through this inventive use of space. The intense
discomfort with which she imagines Charles and Ana together towards the end of
the first act, and her mental obsession with their transgression, take concrete form
through their physical proximity.

Alaskan snows fall on the balcony and the living room, suggestive of
Charles's quest for a yew tree. The first instance occurs after Lane has forgiven
Ana, and Charles appears in the distance, trudging across the stage dressed in a
parka and bearing a pickax (93). The snow falls equally on both women and
represents their reconciliation and mutual connection to Charles. As with the
proximity between balcony and living room, the appearance of snow collapses the
distance between the women and Charles, manifesting a psychic or mental
proximity as a physical one. As Charles looms large in their thoughts, so must they
in his, and the encompassing precipitation provides a concrete manifestation of this
closeness. The snow reoccurs with Charles's next appearance as he reads aloud his

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6 Why Charles bears a pickax, rather than an axe for chopping down the tree, is not explained in the script. Perhaps it lends him the look of an Arctic explorer.
telegram, in which he explains that the tree that he has harvested will not fit on the plane and that therefore he must learn how to fly one. While reemphasizing the closeness with which the characters hold each other in their thoughts, the snow also simultaneously, through its association with coldness, manifests Charles's remoteness. Ana longs for the warmth of his presence but can only lament his absence: "I want him to be a nurse and he wants to be an explorer. Asi es la vida. (That's life.)" (98). Through its association with winter, snow also represents Ana's passing through the final season of her life. The effectiveness of onstage snow as spectacle further enriches its functioning during the work in performance. Stage spectacle is a technique denied to literature, so here once again Ruhl employs magic realism in a distinctly theatrical manner.

6. Mythos and Logos

The techniques of magic realism cannot be divorced from its thematic elements. Although the magical elements may challenge a rationalist perspective, representing an alternative way of viewing things, this alternative does not supplant that which it challenges. Rather, the two modes of perception coexist, creating a tension in the mind of the reader as to which is to be most closely adhered to. Hegerfeldt convincingly argues that "the magic realist mode is used to explore and question ways of knowing the world" (157). She explains further:

Magic realism's investigation of knowledge combines two aspects. On the one hand, sanctioned paradigms of Western knowledge are scrutinized and in some sense found wanting. The texts examined here markedly focus on

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7 The Spanish in this passage and elsewhere has been left in plain text, rather than italicized, in keeping with the published version of the play.
The two paradigms of knowledge under discussion by Hegerfeldt may be summarized as logos, corresponding to Western empiricism, and mythos, or narrative knowledge. The magic realist attempt to reclaim rejected forms of knowledge is consistent with efforts made by both postmodernism and postcolonialism. Hegerfeldt draws on Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, with its critique of the rationalist worldview, to buttress her argument.

As is consistent with the mode of magic realism in general, a tension between mythos and logos is sustained throughout *The Clean House*. The two doctors practice the empirical science of modern medicine; Matilde counterbalances them with her stories about and visions of her parents, and her humor, as joke-telling is a narrative form. Alternative modes of healing trouble modern medicine at various points in *The Clean House*. During the surgery, Charles and Ana break out into "an ethereal medieval love song in Latin about being medically cured by love" (51). A medieval song would predate the Enlightenment and the birth of Western rationalist thinking, and the subject of the song introduces a decidedly non-scientific element into the procedure. Ana's first line in the play is, "I have avoided doctors my whole life" (52). She then lists all of the characteristics of the profession that
she despises, admitting that she fell in love with Charles in spite of herself. Ana resists the standard doctor-patient relationship by refusing to cry when told that she has cancer, and by taking control of the consultation by demanding an immediate mastectomy, refusing less radical alternatives. She refuses to give herself over to a scientific approach to healing that she mistrusts. Later, when her cancer comes out of remission, she declines further treatment altogether, explaining:

People talk about cancer like it's this special thing you have a relationship with. And it becomes blood count, biopsy, chemotherapy, radiation, bone marrow, blah blah blah blah blah. As long as I live I want to retain my own language.

Mientras tengo vida, quiero procurer mantener mi propio idioma.

No extra hospital words. I don't want a relationship with a disease. I want to have a relationship with death. That's important. But to have a relationship with a disease -- that's some kind of bourgeois invention. And I hate it. (96)

She approaches medicine through mythos rather than logos, expressing her dislike as a problem of language rather than procedure, of relationship rather than diagnosis. She prefers to die at home, or at least in Lane's home, rather than in the hospital, and faces her painful condition without partaking of the relief that painkillers could provide. She crosses over into the next world with the assistance of the shamanic figure Matilde, who ministers to her with the perfect joke, rather than passing away in a hospital room attached to a machine.

7. Community

The valuation of community over individual achievement, as evidenced by the women coming together around the dying Ana as opposed to Charles's futile quest in Alaska, is also consistent with magic realism. In her list of the
characteristics of the mode, Faris notes that, "the Jungian rather than Freudian perspective is common in magical realist texts; that is, the magic may be attributed to a mysterious sense of collective relatedness rather than to individual memories or dreams or visions" (183). The presence of ghosts reinforces the sense of community by connecting characters with their ancestors, thus providing a sense of social continuity. Lane, Charles, and Virginia lack community at the beginning of the play; the intrusion of Ana ultimately brings them together, drawing Matilde into their circle as well. Although initially isolated socially, Matilde experiences community through her connection with her deceased parents.

The women achieve their fullest sense of community as they gather around Virginia's homemade chocolate ice cream, all eating out of the same container. The sharing of food serves to bond them and while they eat, Ana relates the story of the captain who sailed a ship from Europe to South America in an effort to transport ice; when he arrived, all he had was, "a ship full of water" (100). This anecdote reflects poorly on Charles who has isolated himself from the group by embarking on a heroic quest, one that will ultimately yield no tangible result. He does eventually return from his journey, however, to rejoin the collective in the shared act of grieving.

It should be noted that Ruhl risks stereotype in portraying the Latin American characters as the ones who bring life and community to the North Americans, playing into the notion that Americans are puritanical and repressed and Latinos are free and lively by comparison. However, she works against stereotype
in a number of ways. Importantly, each character is finely drawn as a unique individual with concerns apart from those mandated by stereotype. Additionally, Ana's religion is Judaism and the discussion of soulmates as basherts stirs up the ethnic mix somewhat. Ultimately, the thematic concerns of the play transcend the ethnic and cultural differences, and the risk of stereotyping those differences, between the characters.

8. Magical, Not Absurd

Ruhl's magic realism may superficially resemble absurdism, as both genres are to a great extent defined by their seemingly irrational departures from realism and a strong reliance on the staging of metaphor. However, magic realism differs from absurdism in a number of crucial ways, and Ruhl's work is clearly aligned with the former. Martin Esslin introduced the latter term in his definitive The Theatre of the Absurd, initially published in 1961 and revised in a third edition in 1980. In it, Esslin describes a theatrical movement that emerged after the Second World War, one based in the philosophy of Existentialism. Esslin differentiates between Existentialist and Absurdist playwrights in their attitude toward and use of language and intellect. Whereas the former employ language and logic to argue their case for the irrational, inexplicable nature of the human condition, the latter prefer to demonstrate the uselessness of language and its inadequacy to address the illogical nature of existence. Engaged in "a radical devaluation of language," they attempt "a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself" (Esslin 26).
Esslin centers the Theatre of the Absurd in Paris, highlighting the works of Parisian residents including Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet. In The French Theater of the Absurd (1991), Deborah B. Gaensbauer roughly dates the movement to 1948 through 1968 (xv). However, just as the term magic realism need not apply only to works of literature from the 1960s Latin American boom, nor does the term Theatre of the Absurd need be confined to two decades of productions in France. Esslin addresses non-Parisian playwrights as well, and in a later edition devotes an entire chapter to Harold Pinter; indeed, playwrights such as Pinter and Edward Albee continue to write in this mode. Albee's recent The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?, in which an architect conducts an affair with a barnyard animal, serves as just one example. In it, the brutal poetry of the absurdist stage image is powerfully realized when the philandering husband's wife brings home the carcass of her husband's paramour, whom she has slaughtered, and heaves it onto the carpet.

Nevertheless, the movement is moored in the postwar decades, influenced in France by "the development of the hydrogen bomb; the return to a smug bourgeois complacency...; and distrust of the hegemony of the United States coupled with a growing disillusion with the Soviet Union." It expresses "a very personal but widely shared anguish and seemingly incurable ennui" (Gaensbauer xvii) and reflects suspicion "of a language that had been worn out in slogans, propaganda, and jargon" (xix). Ruhl grew up some decades after this during a time with its share of dire problems, but without an immediate memory of the Second World War and in a
society grown accustomed to, although not at ease with, the presence of nuclear weapons. Although war and genocide continue to occur, an American growing up during the 1980s would be insulated from the immediacy of these events. Although Ruhl clearly has experienced grief and melancholy, these emotions are not equivalent to postwar anguish and ennui.

Ruhl's characters do not inhabit an absurd world, but rather one rich with meaning. Ruhl has stated that two of her major preoccupations are the themes of love and death, and her characters find meaning in the face of the latter through the former, namely through relationship and community. The encounters between Eurydice and her father in the underworld do not reflect an existentialist philosophy, rather they are imbued with a loving tenderness that is sufficient unto itself. In Melancholy Play, Frances tragically turns into an almond out of sadness, but her friends save her from her loneliness by becoming almonds themselves. Mathilde's joke kills, but out of compassion, and the deceased Ana, as will be explored below, joins a community that extends beyond that of the living. As is the case with Albee's goat, the absurdist image frequently demonstrates the brutality and senselessness of life. Ruhl's images usually are related, on the contrary, to some sense of connection between characters. She could perhaps be best qualified as a humanist. The worlds she creates onstage encompass the mysterious and unknowable, but within these worlds it is human contact that creates meaning. In her short play about global warming, Snowless, she expresses a faith in human ingenuity as capable of solving the current climactic situation. This worldview is
congruent with the values typically present in magic realism, but at odds with those of absurdism.

Furthermore, as a former poet, Ruhl cherishes language and makes no attempt to devalue it. As noted elsewhere, she is interested in an economic use of words that allows each line to "sing." In The Clean House, as shall be seen, she imbues language with the power to both kill and redeem. This approach is fully consistent with the practices of magic realism, in which "[t]he reader may experience a particular kind of verbal magic -- a closing of the gap between words and the world, or a demonstration of what we might call the linguistic nature of experience" (Faris 176). As discussed above, this verbal magic is frequently manifested through the literalization of metaphor. Absurdist are, on the contrary, interested in demonstrating the gap between words and the world, the utter inadequacy of language to address existence, and their stage metaphors are employed to this purpose.

F. Tone

The shifts of tone in The Clean House may be, to a large extent, attributed to it being constructed in the style of magic realism. In the first act, living room realism alternates with Matilde's fantasies of her parents. These shifts help to reinforce the mirroring between Matilde's parents and Charles and Ana, since the latter are first introduced through a fantasy of Lane's. This fantasy is framed in the manner established by Matilde, as Lane introduces it in the same way that Matilde has introduced hers, with a phrase beginning with, "This is how I imagine...."
Matilde's case, of course, she is imagining her parents; in Lane's, she is introducing "my ex-husband and his new wife" (46). In the two scenes of Matilde' parents up to this point, they have been seen laughing manically. The scene with Charles and Ana assumes a decidedly different tone as they kiss each other on different body parts in what Lane describes as "a sacred ritual" (46). Matilde's parents have been depicted with a ribald sexuality. Charles and Ana's sexuality manifests in a decidedly more serious way, assuming a sacredness that seems to be missing from that of their counterparts. However, these two versions of sexuality and love are complementary rather than oppositional, particularly in regards to the metaphysical significance accorded to humor in the second act, all the way up to the final lines in which Matilde describes her version of heaven. The earthly humor of her parents, with their sharing of dirty jokes, supplements rather than counteracts the otherworldly attraction exhibited between Charles and Ana.

The second act opens in a fantastic vein as "Charles Performs Surgery on the Woman He Loves" (51), to quote the scene title. Unlike the previous magical scenes, this one is not framed as emanating from any character's imagination, but rather is presented to the audience to stand on its own. Ruhl utilizes the magic realist technique of literalization to externalize the feelings shared between the characters through the use of song, thereby transforming the normally clinical act of surgery into a love duet:

Charles takes out surgical equipment.
He does surgery on Ana.
It is an act of love.
If the actor who plays Charles is a good singer, 
it would be nice if he could sing
an ethereal medieval love song in Latin
about being medically cured by love
as he does the surgery.
If the actress who plays Ana is a good singer,
it would be nice if she recovered from the surgery
and slowly sat up and sang a contrapuntal melody. (51-2)

A modest metamorphosis via costume change occurs at the end of this surgery, as when Charles removes the sheet Ana is shown to be wearing "a lovely dress" (52) and the two kiss. The transformation emphasizes that this act of surgery is also an act of love.

In the second act, the boundary between realist and magical scenes becomes blurred. The scenes that occur on the balcony and the living room are essentially realist in nature, but the overlapping of the spaces introduces a magical quality. The snowfall in particular has the potential to evoke a sense of wonder in the audience. This softening of the boundary between realist and magical modes allows for the externalization through the environment of internal states, particularly through the dishevelment of Lane's living room as discussed above. This entry into a liminal space helps Ruhl to achieve her stated aim of dealing with cleaning on a more spiritual level in the second half of the play. She also introduces a third tone in the second act, that of the melodrama of soap opera. It first occurs in the flashback to when Charles relates to Ana the diagnosis of breast cancer, to which she responds by demanding an immediate mastectomy. They instantaneously fall in love and begin to "kiss wildly" (55). Ruhl raises the scene to the level of satire by pushing
the style of soap opera to the extreme and through the injection of humor, as when Charles proclaims, "Ana, Ana, Ana, Ana... your name goes backwards and forwards... I love you" (56). This scene provides a counterbalance to that of the surgery and to the encounter imagined between the two by Lane. Reviewer David Rooney describes the former in the Lincoln Center production as, "a scene of unsettling beauty and sadness." This combination of profundity and humor is characteristic of Ruhl's work, as has been noted.

Ruhl breaks the fourth wall of realism by allowing her characters direct audience address. She opens the play with monologues from Lane, Virginia, and Matilde, in which they communicate their primary concerns, allows Matilde to introduce her parents' scenes and share her thoughts about jokes, and gives her as well a closing monologue. As discussed above, this positions her as a quasi-narrator as is consistent with the mode of magic realism. Ana and Charles also deliver monologues near the opening of the second act in which they describe their mutual attraction. The use of monologue allows a direct transmission between character and audience, the revealing of inner thoughts without the interference of other characters. Ruhl uses it as a mechanism for the characters to introduce themselves before plunging into interaction with the others. Brecht used direct address to contribute to the alienation effect, and indeed it does work against a realist style. However, a magic realist script is working against strict realism in the first place, particularly a play with meta-theatrical elements such as The Clean House. As Hegerfeldt argues, the reader or audience member may come to question both the
realist and magical elements, suggesting that a sort of alienation is already taking place, and therefore the breaking of the fourth wall fails to disrupt the magic realist effect.

G. Humor Theory

Since jokes play a crucial role in The Clean House, it would be helpful to examine those jokes in the light of theories of humor. Philosophers since Plato and Aristotle have developed such theories, as have later psychologists and linguists as well as experts in other fields. In The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor (1987), John Morreall generalizes such theories into three categories, those of superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory (3-6). Ascribed to by Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, superiority theory holds that "laughter is always directed at someone as a kind of scorn" (3), and that a joke elevates the status of the teller or a specific group at the expense of the joke's target. Relief theory treats laughter as "the venting of excess nervous energy" (6) or the preservation of psychic energy, as hypothesized by Freud. Both superiority and relief theory have failed to prove comprehensive enough to cover all types of jokes. Incongruity theory comes closer to providing a comprehensive solution. It holds that, "what amuses us is some object of perception or thought that clashes with what we would have expected in a particular set of circumstances" (6), and can be found in Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard.

Semantic theories originating in the mid 1980s fall into this latter category. In Semantic Mechanisms of Humor (1985), Victor Raskin proposes a set of two
requirements as the "necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be funny" (99). His definition relies on the notion of a "script" associated with every word in a statement, a script consisting of a lexicon of associated words and ideas, representing "the native speaker's knowledge of a small part of the world" (81). His two conditions are:

(i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
(ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite in a special sense.... (99)

The special sense referred to in the second condition is an oppositional one, that between "real" and "unreal" situations. He breaks this opposition down into three subcategories, actual versus non-actual, normal versus abnormal, and possible versus impossible. He further stipulates that, "in each of the jokes [used as examples]... there is an element which renders the unreal situation less unreal than it looks" (111).

David Ritchie refines Raskin's theory in "Frame-Shifting in Humor and Irony" (2005), taking into account semantic theories of humor that have emerged since Raskin. What Raskin refers to as scripts, Ritchie calls frames. He posits that jokes set up a socially acceptable frame first, which the punchline invalidates by introducing a second one subversive of the first, "in the sense that it contradicts the polite fictions or 'stipulated' realities by which we ordinarily conduct our everyday social interactions." He lists some of these stipulated realities as "the constraints of physical reality,... as well as a pretense that political, religious, and social leaders always behave in a role-appropriate manner and that bodily functions are always
under control" (281). He analyzes the following joke as an example: "By the time Mary had her fourteenth child, she’d finally run out of names to call her husband" (276). A "strong pronatalist sentiment" in the United States will lead the typical hearer to consider a new addition to Mary's family to be a positive event, even in spite of the atypically large size of her family. The initial frame sets up the expectation that Mary is having difficulty thinking of names to call her new baby. The "culturally licensed ending" would be the "sharing of a moment of affectionate mirth" over the difficulty of thinking up a name. The substitution of the word "husband" for "baby" at the end of the joke subverts this frame. The alternate scenario takes into account "the pain and discomfort of pregnancy and childbirth and the inconvenience and expense of child-rearing" (281). The punchline activates the secondary frame which contradicts the first, culturally licensed one.

The newer semantic theories of humor do not invalidate the older historic ones as summarized by Morreall, which still apply to certain, although not all, cases. For example, the three jokes told in Portuguese by Matilde may be explained by aggression theory. One side-effect of aggression theory is that, by attacking a particular social group, the teller and the listener, if they belong to an oppositional group, strengthen their own bond. This effect is commonly achieved through the telling of ethnic jokes in which one ethnic group is portrayed as being inferior in some way to the dominant, or some other, specific ethnic group. Matilde's jokes target gender rather than ethnicity, specifically men. In doing so, they create the potential for bonding between women. Two of the three jokes target male sexuality
specifically; the third attacks Argentinian men in particular.  

Matilde opens the play by telling a "dirty" joke in Portuguese to the audience. The joke concerns a virginal young man who goes to the doctor for advice for his wedding night. The doctor first tells him to put a $10 bill in his right pocket and practice saying "10! 10! 10!" while moving his hips to the right. After a week, he tells him to put a $20 bill in his left pocket, and alternate between saying "10!" and "20!" while moving his hips from side to side. Finally, he instructs him to place a $100 bill in front, and say, "10! 20! 100!" while moving his hips correspondingly. When he is finally in bed with his wife, he is unable to maintain the pattern which the doctor had him practice, and exclaims, "Oh, fuck the change: 100! 100! 100" (112-3)! This joke contains several elements common to sexual humor. According to Raskin, sexual humor usually falls into the category of what he terms "suppression/release-based theories" which fall under the general umbrella of release theory:

The prevalent thesis has been that sex, along with other physiological functions and direct violence, is normally suppressed and repressed, and humor provides an outlet for its release in a way which may be more appropriate and socially and ethically acceptable than the more direct and natural way. In other words, according to this view, sexual language is substituted for sexual behavior in sexual humor, and the pleasure from sexual humor is of a sexual nature. (148)

The sexual pleasure is enhanced in Matilde's joke in that the joke-teller is instructed to move her hips according to the doctor's instructions as she tells the joke. 

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8 Ruhl allows for the substitution of different jokes in various productions, should "more perfect Brazilian jokes" (112) be found. Nevertheless, it must be assumed that the ones published with the text achieve the desired tone.
The joke provides a context in which this suggestive movement may be performed in a socially acceptable situation. The physicality also provides a visual cue for audience members who may not understand Portuguese, helping to alert them that a joke is being told.

The joke also evokes "the binary script of sexual ignorance or inexperience," which is quite common in sexual jokes. The young man's inexperience justifies his willingness to go along with the doctor's somewhat unusual instructions. The joke also includes a sexually obscene trigger in the utterance of the word "fuck" in the punchline. In certain primitive jokes the inclusion of such a trigger is adequate in itself to provoke laughter with, as Raskin puts it, "certain audiences" (152), presumably unsophisticated ones. Ultimately, however, the joke points out the sexual selfishness of the young man who abandons a technique presumably designed to maximize his wife's pleasure and follows his own impulse in order to more fully satisfy himself. The fact that the doctor has had him place the most valuable bill in the front of his pants during his practice sessions indicates a degree of complicity on the doctor's part. The joke potentially bonds women together by attacking sexual selfishness in men.

The second joke told by Matilde in Portuguese follows in the same vein. She riddles an uncomprehending Lane, "Why are men in bed like microwave food? They're done in thirty seconds" (113). This much shorter joke gets right to the point in comparing two quite disparate kinds of objects, men and microwave food, to hypothesize a general inadequacy in men, again having to do with sexual selfishness.
and lack of staying power. This inadequacy is reinforced through the comparison with microwave food, which is generally of lower quality than food that might be cooked on a stove or in an oven. In both of these jokes, the woman's pleasure is sacrificed. The microwave joke also references a woman's traditional role as food-preparer, hinting at male ingratitude for responding to home-cooked meals with a substandard offering in bed. Thus it criticizes male sexual inaptitude while subtly reinforcing traditional gender roles. The last joke told in Portuguese by Matilde targets gender and ethnicity rather than sexuality. She tells Ana, who is herself Argentinian, "The best investment ever is to buy an Argentinian for what he is really worth and later sell him for what he thinks he is worth" (113). The pronoun "he" in English translation, and its equivalent in the original Portuguese, must be taken to be gender-specific rather than gender-neutral. The joke relies on a stereotypical belief that Argentinian men overvalue their own worth, one which Ana seems to appreciate. The joke serves to strengthen the bond between the newly introduced Matilde and Ana since, immediately after praising it, the latter offers to hire the former and have her come live in her house. Traditionally, sexual humor has been made by men at the expense of women. Since such humor tends to objectify the target of the joke, the "dirty" joke has had the effect of solidifying male power in a patriarchal society while marginalizing women. By turning the tables, Matilde reclaims female sexuality in an empowering manner.

In the ninth scene of the first act, Matilde shares her musings on humor with the audience:
The perfect joke makes you forget about your life. The perfect joke makes you remember about your life. The perfect joke is stupid when you write it down. The perfect joke was not made up by one person. It passed through the air and you caught it. A perfect joke is somewhere between an angel and a fart. (24)

In spite of the last statement, with its angel and its fart carrying two frames, the first of which could potentially be subverted by the second, Matilde clearly does not subscribe to any of the three major theories of humor. She endows the perfect joke with metaphysical significance. She also credits jokes with cleansing capability: "A good joke cleans your insides out. If I don't laugh for a week, I feel dirty. I feel dirty now, like my insides are rotting" (26). Although this may sound similar to release theory, the cleansing she describes goes a step beyond release in actually performing a purgative function and removing accumulated psychic waste. Although consistent with the themes of the play, it is not entirely consistent with humor theory.

Further, Matilde believes that, as a joke-writer, "Sometimes you have to suffer for the really good ones" (71) and that:

The perfect joke happens by accident. Like a boil on your backside that you pop. The perfect joke is the perfect music. You want to hear it only once in your life, and then, never again. (74)

She again mixes images of the sacred and profane in her description of the perfect joke, defining it as a once-in-a-lifetime event which is both earthly and sublime. A particular vision of death fits this description as well, not coincidentally since Matilde's telling of her perfect joke precipitates Ana's death. Within this vision, the body collapses and the soul ascends, perhaps even to a heaven filled with laughter.
The recipient of the "joke" goes through an experience both intensely physical and metaphysically freeing, one that is undergone only once in a lifetime. Death functions as the final joke, an abrupt frameshift that subverts physical existence and earthly consciousness.

H. Shamanism

In *The Clean House*, then, a joke may be more than a joke, serving as a metaphor even for the passage from life to death. At the level of utterance, the perfect joke functions as a curse or incantation, capable of triggering the journey from life to afterlife. Intended as an anniversary gift, as a blessing on his marriage, Matilde's father's joke inadvertently lands as a fatal curse. Called upon to assist in Ana's final passage, Matilde whispers the appropriate words in the correct order, as one would a magic spell, in order to speed her friend on her way. Both Matilde and her father function as shamans do in non-industrial societies. The shaman officiates at rites of passage, such as births and deaths, and serves as the liaison between the worlds of the living and the dead. As Matilde does with her parents, the shaman is capable of communicating with the spirits of the deceased. Although not necessarily, frequently the role is passed on along familial lines, with an offspring assuming the social and spiritual functions of his or her parent or parents after undergoing an initiation (Smith 14).

Matilde's initiation consists in both receiving and withstanding the perfect joke. She makes clear that the creation of the perfect joke is a metaphysical endeavor requiring a transcendence of personal boundaries: "The perfect joke was
not made up by one person. It passed through the air and you caught it" (24). She also expresses doubt that she will survive the transmission. She confides in Virginia that, "I'm looking for the perfect joke, but I'm afraid if I found it, it would kill me" (35), a sentiment that she repeats later in a discussion with Ana (72). The shaman enters into trance in order to communicate with spirits, and Matilde here indicates a community made up of entities beyond herself that transmit the magical joke mystically "through the air."

Shamans frequently function as healers in their communities, and Matilde's explanation of the purgative agency of jokes matches the ideology of shamanistic healing more closely than it does the joke theory of release. Shamans commonly attribute illness to the intrusion of malevolent spirits into the patient's body, or to the introduction of foreign objects sent by adversaries, and their rituals aim at driving the spirits or intrusive objects out. In "Dark Side of the Shaman" (1989), American anthropologist Michael F. Brown discusses the beliefs of a people from the Peruvian Amazon in this regard:

In common with most peoples who preserve a shamanic heritage, the Aguaruna believe that life-threatening illness is caused by sorcerers. Sorcerers are ordinary people who, driven by spite or envy, secretly introduce spirit darts into the bodies of the victims. If the dart isn't soon removed by a shaman, the victim dies. Often the shaman describes the dart as a piece of bone, a tiny thorn, a spider, or a blade of grass. (252)

The victim must be purged of these intrusions if he or she is to recover. An anthropologist who became initiated into shamanism in the course of her research, Barbara Tedlock quotes a Native American healer, Essie Parrish, who actually
envisions these external intrusions as a form of uncleanliness in *The Woman in the Shaman's Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine* (2005):

> When I take it out you can't see it with your bare eyes. But I can see it. The disease inside a person is dirty. I suppose that's what white doctors call "germs," but we Indian doctors call it "dirty." (18)

Along these lines, Matilde envisions jokes working as shamanic rituals, capable of sweeping away the "rottenness" festering inside of a person's body.

The shaman travels from the ordinary to extraordinary worlds and back again, and thus would feel quite at home within a work of magic realist fiction. Carpentier lists a popular belief in the supernatural as being one of the features contributing to Latin America as the continent of *lo real maravilloso*, and certainly shamanism relies upon the existence of such a belief system. Although relatively little has been written about the connection between shamanism and magic realism, Renato Oliva broaches the subject in his analysis of a Nigerian poet and novelist in "Re-Dreaming the World: Ben Okri's Shamanic Realism" (1999). Oliva draws parallels in the tendencies of both to habituate the liminal:

> If, as we have already noted, one of the characteristics of the shaman is his ability to shift his level of consciousness, thus moving between conscious and unconscious, reality and dream, natural and supernatural, this is equally true of magical realism. One of the typical elements of magical realism is, in fact, the constant crossing of thresholds and frontiers. (177)

Both the shaman and a magic realist alternate between normal and supernormal worlds. One frequently crossed threshold in magic realism is that between the

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9 The source uses the convention of italicizing quotations. The italics have been removed here for readability.
living and the dead, as may be seen in the frequent occurrences of ghosts in magic realist literature. The shaman as well passes freely into the domain of the deceased to communicate with spirits, and officiates at important transitional events such as births and deaths.

Except for the lack of malevolent intent, Matilde's father's killing of his wife through the agency of the spoken word would be accepted as quite probable within the worldview of shamanism. Danish anthropologist Peter Skafte quotes a Nepalese shaman named Ashok as he relates his belief that his curse killed his three business partners in "Interview with a Killing Shaman" (1992):

In the heat of passion, I directed a deadly mantra against my partners. Now, in hindsight, I realize that I not only sought revenge but also wanted to prove to myself the power of my mantras.

Within a few weeks, one of the men became very ill. He died three days later.

Frightened, I tried to undo this spell on the other two, but it was to no avail. One man developed severe dysentery and the other was hit by a car. By the end of the month, both were dead. Because I had vowed to the gods that I would use my power only to serve others, not to hurt them, I lived in terror of being punished for breaking my oath. And my fears came true. My little son and daughter became ill with terrible fevers and died within a month. (Ashok and Skafte 236)

Ashok believes not only that his mantra killed his business partners, but that the gods retaliated by taking his children. Once spoken, the curse could not be recalled. From this perspective, Matilde's father's utterance could easily prove as fatal as a loosened arrow or the spirit darts described by Brown.

Although the above sampling of accounts from the Peruvian Amazon, North America, and Nepal may seem randomly diverse, as far back as 1951 Romanian
religious historian Mircea Eliade published the seminal *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, documenting "the striking correspondences in shamanic practices, worldviews, and symbolic behaviors in hundreds of societies around the world" (Narby and Huxley 4). Although it was previously believed that shamanism began in North Asia more than forty thousand years ago and later spread into the Americas, newer studies indicate that it was "independently reinvented over and over in many places," and that the similarities occur because, "shamanic consciousness and healing practices are based on an understanding of the human immunological system and psychobiology rather than on a narrow set of culture-historical traits or patterns" (Tedlock 14-5). Even though the details vary of course from location to location, the general principles remain remarkably similar. The five tenets of shamanism as presented by Tedlock may be summarized as: (1) all entities are imbued with a holistic life force, (2) all things are interconnected, (3) the world consists of interconnected cosmic levels between which the shaman is able to move, (4) societies designate shamans who are able to change events in the ordinary world, and (5) actions taken in an alternative reality effect normal reality, and vice versa (20-1).

Frustrated at Ana's refusal of further treatment, Charles somewhat confusedly abandons his hospital in search of a natural alternative, loosely allying himself with the shamanic healer. The duties of many shamans include that of healing, and they generally rely upon local plants as healing substances. Exactly what he intends on doing with the tree remains somewhat unclear, as Matilde
reports both that he is going to create a new medicine out of it, and that he simply wants to plant it in Ana's courtyard so that she can smell it from her balcony (86-7). Lane notes that the anti-cancer drug Taxol was made out of the bark of the yew tree in 1967 (86). As Jordan Goodman and Vivien Walsh report in The Story of Taxol: Nature and Politics in the Pursuit of an Anti-Cancer Drug (2001), Taxol is no longer derived from the tree since a "semi-synthetic method of production" has been developed (2). This synthetic product continues to be used in the treatment of, among other cancers, those of the ovary and breast and is the "best-selling anti-cancer drug ever" (1). Charles returns to the source, so to speak, either to derive a better treatment from it or to apply it to Ana in its raw form.

Up to a point, Charles's quest follows that traced by Joseph Campbell in The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949). Campbell examines myths from cultures across the globe searching for common elements and from this extracts the archetypical heroic journey:

The hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (30)

Charles ventures forth into the harsh conditions of Alaskan snow, trudging through a blizzard with his pickax, teaches himself how to fly a plane, and returns with his boon intending to bestow it on his beloved, but he returns too late. Like the ship full of ice that sailed from Europe to South America in the story recounted by Ana to the other women over ice cream, Charles arrives as bankrupt as the captain with "a ship
full of water" (100). Meanwhile, the women take care of and comfort Ana in her final days. Ruhl values community over heroism in this situation. Charles's ineptness in this mission is foreshadowed by his failure to complete a joke in his monologue directed to the audience: "There are jokes about breast surgeons. You know -- something like -- I've seen more breasts in this city than -- I don't know the punchline. There must be a punchline" (53). Given the significance accorded jokes in this work, this qualifies as a serious shortcoming in terms of Charles's overall potency.

Charles's flubbed joke is the only one attempted in English in the play. By limiting successfully completed jokes to Portuguese, a language that presumably most of the audience will not understand, Ruhl mystifies them and thereby facilitates the attribution of special powers to them. Including jokes told in English would dilute this effect. Additionally, especially if the jokes told in Portuguese elicit laughter, they foreshadow Matilde's concluding vision of heaven as "a sea of untranslatable jokes" at which "everyone is laughing" (109).

Ultimately, Charles does make a contribution in a shamanic sense to the final tableau. In shamanic cosmology, a great tree or mountain connects various levels of existence (Tedlock 21). The shaman travels up or down the tree or mountain to reach these other worlds. In providing what the stage directions describe as "an enormous tree" (107), Charles supplies a metaphorical ladder for Ana to climb in order to reach the realm of the afterlife. Rather than serving to sustain life as Charles had hoped, the tree reaffirms the continuity between life and
death, the interconnectedness of the realms of the living and the dead. Whereas modern medicine focuses to a great extent on the mechanics of the body, the shamanistic approach treats the entire individual and envisions life continuing after the body's collapse. Although Charles fails to save Ana as a corporeal being, he assists her in moving on to the next stage of her existence.

The yew itself symbolizes sorrow, death, and resurrection ("Yew"). Its foliage was used as a symbol of mourning in ancient Egypt and the practice was passed along to the Greeks and Romans. In Great Britain, it is commonly found in church graveyards (Partridge). Certain varieties of the tree appear to live to be 1000 years old or older (Greenwood), and the yew is believed to have been adopted as a symbol of the resurrection by early Christians due to its evergreen foliage and long life span. The tree regenerates itself by extending shoots down from its branches into the ground which then become new trunks as the inner core decays with age, so it may be said to resurrect itself in a naturalistic sense (Partridge). As a species, it serves particularly well as a symbol of the transition between life and death.

Beneath Charles's yew tree, standing as a shamanic bridge between the living and the dead, Matilde's recounting the story of her birth immediately after Ana's passing symbolizes not only Matilde's rebirth, but also Ana's birth into a new metaphysical existence. As noted above, when Matilde finds herself possessed of her father's potency in her ability to tell a deadly joke, she thereby assumes her place in her parents' shamanic lineage. For her part, Ana moves on to some other realm, perhaps the heaven filled with laughter envisioned by Matilde. Even as Matilde's
joke accompanies Ana's passing, and her father's joke brings about the mother's demise, another joke told by her father triggers her mother's laughter that pushes out baby Matilde. Between the two of them, Matilde and her father "officiate" at two deaths and a birth. Matilde is born under a tree, and the presence of the shamanic symbol of the bridge between worlds suggests a soul's journey from a distant realm into an infant's body.

Shamans typically inhabit rural, agrarian societies, and as such are highly in tune with the cycles of nature. The ending of The Clean House harks back to early Orphic myths discussed in connection with Eurydice in which Orpheus's destruction and rebirth parallels the cycle of night into day. Matilde symbolically murders her mother in the person of Ana, relating her own birth, which functions as the resurrection following the destruction of the mother. The new replaces the old as it does in nature. The tree towering over the stage symbolizes the shamanic connection of all things. In sharp contrast to the dripping stillness at the end of Eurydice, Ruhl offers a vision of death flowing back into life and death continuing into afterlife, of a cycle rather than a plummet, accompanied by laughter in place of silence.

A community of both men and women gathers in support of one of their members in Melancholy Play. They perform a ritual in order to assist Frances, who has turned, out of melancholy, into an almond. Tilly fulfills the role of shaman, providing her own tears as an elixir that catapults the entire group into the almond state. Rather than scaling a gigantic tree in order to explore the macrocosm, they
squeeze down to the size of a nut and join each other in miniature. Like Matilde, Tilly must learn to master the energies running through her, which in her case are the components of melancholy, sadness and lightness. Ruhl invokes Jacobean drama, European cinema, and words from Japanese, Russian, and Portuguese, in order to draw a portrait of the sorrowful humour, in the process bringing humor to her Melancholy Play.
III. Melancholy Plague

A. Farcical Melancholy

As in *Eurydice*, water imagery in *Melancholy Play: A Contemporary Farce* is frequently associated with sadness or, more precisely, the feeling of melancholy. A sudden rainfall prompts Tilly, the protagonist, to mourn the impermanence of flowers, and she later likens herself to a river of sorrow; characters longingly smell the ocean all the way from Illinois and dream of sea voyages; and drinking from a vial of tears transforms each of them into an almond. The object of loss here, however, is concealed, unlike in *Eurydice* and *The Clean House* in which the deceased are clearly identifiable. The cause of Tilly's melancholy remains uncertain; she seems to enjoy the emotion for its own sake. In spite of this apparent vagueness, *Melancholy Play* may be read as a continued expression of the playwright's grief as manifested in *Eurydice* and *The Clean House*, both through its celebration of melancholy and through explicit and implicit references to death.

Indeed, the central crisis of the work, that of being transformed into an almond, serves as a metaphor for death, and the ever-present Julian, the cellist, functions as a death figure providing accompaniment as the ensemble partakes in a sort of Dance of Death as they progress towards the terminal "almond state."

Ruhl draws on Jacobean literature for inspiration, both in terms of dramatic presentation and style and for a definition of melancholy. She both directly quotes and paraphrases Richard Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, a treatise that delves into the causes and cures of the malady in great detail. She insists that,
"Melancholy in this play is Bold, Outward, Sassy, Sexy and Unashamed. It is not introverted. It uses, instead, the language of Jacobean direct address" (Ruhl, "Melancholy" 231). Ruhl explains specifically what she means by this:

I was worried that it would be played as a meditation when I was looking for something more outward. That's why I refer to Jacobean plays. In the plays of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods melancholy is still in outward, yearning, active thing. It's not a depressive, internal, shaggy, filmic state. Even Hamlet's melancholy is just partially internalized; it's still very outward. When I started doing readings of the play I realized that many people of my generation don't think of melancholy in that Jacobean -- or even 1940s-movies -- way, where it can be an externalized longing. (qtd. in Weckwerth 32)

The Black Death was a terrifying threat before, during, and after the reign of James I, and Ruhl has implanted references to this as well, to a certain extent equating melancholy with the plague.

As Ken Prestininzi, who directed Melancholy Play at Brown University in November 2007, points out, the word "play" in the title can be read both as referring to a theatrical work and as meaning an enjoyable engagement with something (Gray). Thus the title in conjunction with the subtitle presents two paradoxes: it suggests playing with melancholy while announcing a melancholic farce. Ruhl accommodates both, valorizing melancholy through tactics such as drawing on historical concepts of the condition and setting it against the modern American notion of depression as an ailment that is best treated, and eradicated, through the application of pharmaceuticals. Each of the other characters falls in love, in turn, with Tilly because they find her sorrowful mood to be irresistible. She herself relishes the feeling and creates rich associations with the word "melancholy"
through her invocation of foreign words that denote different types of sadness. The work is a contemporary, as opposed to traditional, farce for a number of reasons. The dictionary definition for farce is, "a light, humorous play in which the plot depends upon a skillfully exploited situation rather than upon the development of character" ("Farce"). Ruhl certainly exploits the situation of Tilly's emotional state in a humorous fashion, but adds weight to the play by giving serious consideration to that state. For example, the dolorous musical score performed on the cello lends a certain aura of gravitas. The subgenre to which it bears the closest resemblance would be the bedroom farce, which derives much of its situational humor from acts of infidelity. In Ruhl's play, although Tilly changes sexual partners several times, since none of the relationships are bounded by marriage these shifts fail to evoke any sense of moral transgression. As a result, Melancholy Play is devoid of the subterfuge and evasion that provides the foundation for much of the comedy in a traditional bedroom farce.

The farcical plot can best be traced through Tilly's changing partnerships or, more generally, the attractive pull that her melancholy exerts on those she encounters. Her psychiatrist, Lorenzo the Unfeeling, falls for her first; she resists his advances, finding him altogether too cheerful. She develops a closer affinity for her tailor, Frank, who is somewhat melancholic himself. Next, a haircut leads to an intimate encounter with her stylist Frances. However, that too is short-lived, as she becomes involved with a woman who writes obituaries (but who does not actually appear as a character). Along the way, Frances's live-in girlfriend Joan, a nurse,
also develops a crush on Tilly, although her love is not consummated. Midway through the play, the protagonist suddenly becomes inexplicably and relentlessly happy and the rest of the characters, who had fallen in love with her due to her exquisite sadness, now find her intolerable. Frances meanwhile seems to have caught Tilly's melancholy and begins to change into an almond, completing the transformation when she downs a vial of Tilly's tears. Unable to change her back, the rest of the ensemble joins her in the "almond state" by partaking in a tear-drinking ceremony. As all the characters are united, Frank and Frances discover that they are each other's long-lost twin, separated at birth.

As the farcical plot develops, so does the definition of melancholy. Ruhl differentiates it from the American notion of depression and links it to its Jacobean sense while also associating it with a particular vision of European culture. As a practitioner of American psychiatry, Lorenzo offers to medicate away Tilly's malady, an offer that she refuses, preferring to cling to her feeling of sadness. Indeed, she is only seeing the psychiatrist at the urging of her employer, a bank. Whereas Lorenzo regards her condition as a clinical one, she prefers to express it in romantic terms:

I'm not particularly smart.
I'm not particularly beautiful.
But I suffer so well, and so often.
A stranger sees me cry --
and they see a river they haven't swum in --
a river in a foreign country --
so they take off their trousers and jump in the water.
Maybe my suffering is from another time.  
A time when suffering was sexy.  
When the afternoons, and the streets,  
were full of rain.  (275-6)

Within the play, Ruhl provides two different pasts to which Tillie might be referring. One is an idealized vision of Europe such as one might find in old films, the other, Jacobean England. In the former, life moves at an unhurried pace. There is time to spend long afternoons gazing out the window at the rain. Children are raised in sweet-shops, as was Lorenzo (235); reservations are made at restaurants in grand hotels (241); and old Italian men play cards in the piazza while drinking out of small cups (251-2). Ruhl's set directions suggest a hotel lobby or drawing room out of this idealized Europe:

Many windows, a chaise and several doors from which to enter and exit rapidly. A mirror. A potted palm. A red velvet chair or two. A few chandeliers. Or lamps. A Victrola? Perhaps. (226)

Her costume instructions likewise reinforce a sense of the past while also suggesting the quality of film: "I imagine that Joan wears an old-fashioned nurse's uniform. Even though we are in Illinois, there is a sense of the iconic and cinematic" (228). Joan herself evokes the cinematic when she states, after first meeting Tilly, "It's strange, Frances. But I have this sexy sad feeling I've never had before. Like I'm in a European city before the war" (279). The inhabitants of this imaginary Europe
have the leisure time at their disposal to fully experience an erotic melancholy, as
does Tilly.¹

**B. Cult of Melancholy**

In addition to this past, which resembles a cinematic Europe, Ruhl points to
Jacobean England through her references to *Anatomy of Melancholy* and her
appropriation of Jacobean stage techniques. Her selection of this time period is apt,
since a so-called cult of melancholy can be traced through the literature of Early
Modern England during a span of years inclusive of the reign of James, which
extended from 1603 until his death in 1625, as described by Lawrence Babb in *The
Elizabethan Malady: A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580 to
1642* (1951). Babb references Burton and cites examples from, among many other
works, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of
Malfi* (106-14). The composer John Dowland, whose motto was *Semper Dowland,
semper dolens* ("Always Dowland, always mourning"), is associated with the cult as
well. Melancholy itself was simply fashionable during this period, although the
causes of it were hard to pin down. According to Peter Holman in his *Dowland:
Lachramie* (1604) (1999), contemporaries suggested causes such as, "social change,
political uncertainty, challenges to religious and intellectual certainties, frustrated
ambition, or just *fin-de-siècle* malaise" (50).

Robert Burton likewise fails to identify any clear, single cause; rather he
extensively catalogs each and every conceivable possibility. *The Anatomy of

¹ This imaginary, cinematic Europe is akin to the one in Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* minus the
intrigue, as discussed in the chapter on *The Clean House*.  

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Melancholy was published in five editions, the first in 1621 and the last in 1638 (Jackson viii). Ruhl quotes part of Burton's subtitle at the beginning of her script: "What Melancholy is, with all the kinds, causes, symptomes, prognostickes, and severall cures of it" (Ruhl, "Melancholy" 223). His methodology consists of literary quotation, and he has assembled an exhaustive collection of citations. His list of causes is so vast as to be practically meaningless, an expansiveness that Ruhl spoofs in her own poetic style through her character Frank:

[W]e must anatomize melancholy --
take stock of the causes:
stars a cause
love a cause
death a cause
morning a cause
afternoon a cause
evening a cause
the odd times in between morning afternoon and evening:
a cause. (234)

As, among other causes, is listed any time of the day, Frank implies that perhaps melancholy requires no reason, or that the melancholic Tilly will accept any reason to justify her preferred state. Similar lists of causes serve as reprises throughout. When Joan attempts to think up a cure for Frances, her lists of cures and causes points out the contradictory nature of the Anatomy, deriving from Burton's attempt to encompass everything written on the subject:

Cures for melancholy:
Food a remedy.
Music a remedy.
Love -- a remedy.
Okay.

Causes of melancholy:
Food a cause.
Music a cause.
Love -- a cause.
Well. That's a problem. (313)

The listing of causes reaches a moment of intensity in Scene 7, "A Song from the Company," which cites various types of junk food in reference to Burton's identification of bad diet as a cause (Burton 1:216-25):

Junk food a cause
Cheetos and Doritos
And cheddar Goldfish a cause. (Ruhl, "Melancholy" 305)

The song conflates the two pasts of the play, those of Burton's England and a cinematic Europe:

Stars a cause
Love a cause
Death a cause
Oh, for the melancholy Tilly!
....
Life used to be so slow
Life used to be so sweet
Life used to be banisters
And rain-drenched cobbled streets!
Oh, for the melancholy Tilly! (305)

Melancholy is thus positioned as a romantic longing for a more leisurely time; it is without discernible cause and must be allowed to run its own course, as it is resistant to attempts at a cure. In these latter characteristics it resembles an incurable disease, such as the bubonic plague used to be, a similarity that will be taken up below.

Melancholy is one of the four humors of Early Modern thought, the theory of the humors themselves deriving from the writings of Galen (c. 130-200 A.D.).
Each humor is associated with one of the four elements and its attributes, melancholy with earth as being cold and dry (Evans 324-7). Sir John Harington's translation from Latin of The Englishmans Doctor, or the School of Salerne (1608) lists the predominant qualities of the melancholic personality which are here quoted in part:

The Melancholy from the rest do vary,  
Both sport and ease and company refusing;  
Exceeding studious, ever solitary;  
Inclining pensive still to be, and musing;  
Extreme in love sometime, yet seldom lustful....  (qtd. in Evans 328)

Although Tilly's characteristics do not align with the list exactly, her personality matches the type in a general sense. Like the Jacobean melancholic, Tilly is somewhat solitary, excusing herself from company on occasion; she is apt to sink into thought for long stretches, as when she considers the "lost Art/ of the Handkerchief" for three hours (Ruhl, "Melancholy" 269); and she tends to be extreme in love, for example, becoming so overcome with emotion at having all of her friends gathered together to celebrate her birthday that she must excuse herself to go lie down (286).

C. Multilingual Melancholies

Ruhl does not, however, confine herself to a Jacobean definition of melancholy. Tilly alludes to words in foreign languages that encompass expanded definitions of the word. Ruhl encourages her casts to seek out these words (229) which, it so turns out, are culturally important ones. In the first instance, Tilly is trying to remember not just a word, but rather the phrase mono no aware:
There's a word in Japanese for being sad in the springtime -- a whole word just for being sad -- about how pretty the flowers are and how soon they're going to die. I can't remember the word. (240)

The phrase was popularized by the 18th century literary scholar Motoori Norinaga in an effort to identify a Japanese aesthetic as distinct from that of the Chinese (Varley 216-8); it has since become a defining concept of Japanese culture. It means roughly an appreciation of the beauty of things as dependent upon an awareness of their impermanence. The concept is emblematized by the cherry blossom due to its fragile beauty and short life (Linhart 228), hence Tilly's reference to dying flowers.

Kazumitsu Kato analyzes the term epistemologically in "Some Notes on Mono no Aware" (1962). Mono means, generally, "things." Aware is a qualitative term that occurs spontaneously as in an exclamation and "expresses serious and profound feelings towards mono." No is a connecting participle between the two other terms. The term may thus be understood as signifying a flash of insight about the nature of things involving "an identification by the perceiver with the object" (559), which object may be either human or non-human. In order to truly experience mono no aware, one must have a deep understanding of the world inclusive of both the phenomenal and the noumenal. The experience originates in the mind of the beholder and occurs spontaneously through an immediate identification with the object (Kato 558-9). Ruhl again references this concept when Tilly is overwhelmed by the beauty of her guests at her birthday party as she is playing Duck Duck Goose:
Duck...
You're all so beautiful. I can't stand it.
Duck...
Life really does have moments of transcendent beauty, doesn't it?
At a party -- each face -- a flower -- each face a --
Duck.
Duck...
I'm so happy --
Duck --
I'm so happy --
...
I'm so happy -- I don't know what to do... I'm sorry. I'm going to go in the other room to lie down. Joan, you be it. (286)

Tilly is able to appreciate the beauty of her guests' faces because she takes the time to understand the world in such a way that she invites the state of *mono no aware*.

The next foreign word that Tilly evokes is in Portuguese: "I can't remember the name -- it means melancholy -- but not exactly -- it means you're full of longing for someone who is far away" (248). The word is *saudade* and it assumes differing shades of meaning in the Portuguese and Brazilian idioms. It has been adopted by the Portuguese as indicative of their national character and includes the meaning of "a melancholic longing for an idealized past, whether in one’s own home place or in the Portugal of some vanished golden age," a meaning that was cultivated by 19th century Portuguese writers. More specifically, it refers to the sense of loss that the Portuguese colonizers of and settlers in Brazil felt for their home country (Ortiz-Griffin and Griffin 177). This meaning is paralleled in *Melancholy Play* through the nostalgia for a Europe of the past viewed from the state of Illinois, situated as it is in a country that was formerly a British colony. Ironically, Tilly looks back not to a golden age of wealth and glory, but to one in which the suffering was richer.
In *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (1992), Nancy Scheper-Hughes discusses the Brazilian meaning of the word at some length. As with the Portuguese, *saudade* figures into the national identity, conceptualized as a "Brazilian sadness." Scheper-Hughes admits that the concept cannot be fully comprehended without a deep understanding of Portuguese and Brazilian poetry, a knowledge that she confesses that she herself lacks (434-6). It is not comparable to the American concept of depression, bearing a richer meaning inclusive of complex associations between pleasure and regret, desire and pain, attachment and loss. It is not to be confused... with the biomedical concept of depression, which has medicalized and reduced the associations among painful longing, burning desire, and unbearable loss to a psychiatric symptom. (436)

One may certainly feel *saudade* for a deceased loved one although not for a dead infant, since not enough time would have elapsed for the infant to have built up a history (437).2 The painful memory of the deceased is preferable to no memory at all so that one could even exclaim, as Tilly might if she spoke Portuguese, "Ai, que saudades de saudades que eu não tenho!" Oh, what sad longings for the longings that I don't have" (435).

The sense of *saudade* as a longing for someone who is not present frames the speech that Tilly gives shortly before she alludes to the Portuguese word:

```
It's just that --
everyone is always coming and going.
I wish they would stay in one place.
At the bank -- after they get their money --
customers -- leave.
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I stay -- I stay there all day!

I THINK ABOUT MY CUSTOMERS ALL THE TIME.
She is on the verge of tears. (247-8)

The depth of her feeling for her customers exceeds what might normally be expected of a bank teller. As Kato explains, one who truly understands *mono no aware* is one who possesses a "broad and profoundly human feeling" (558). In the context of these non-English words, Tilly's melancholy assumes a humanizing function in that her feeling, and the expression of it, connect her more closely to those around her.

The Russian word for melancholy serves a similar function. Tilly describes it as follows: "Oh. There's a word in Russian -- it means melancholy -- not exactly - - it means to love someone but also to pity them" (260). The word is *zhalost'* and it typically is translated as *pity*, although according to David S. Danaher in "The Semantics of *Pity* and *Zhalost*' in a Literary Context" (2002), the meanings of the two words differ considerably. Danaher explains that the Russian word may be used in either a negative or positive sense, but that the latter is dominant in contemporary usage. Whereas the English word *pity* implies a superiority of subject over object, *zhalost'* assumes an affinity between the two. The subject empathizes with the pain of the object, indeed perhaps even shares in that pain. Contained in the usage of *pity* is the assumption that the sufferer is responsible for his or her situation, whereas with *zhalost'* no such assumption is made, rather misfortune or other circumstances beyond control are seen as the cause of the suffering. A desire
on the part of the subject to alleviate the object's suffering may also be implied. The
ingstinctive love of a parent for a child qualifies as *zhalost*. Danaher reports that
Virginia Woolf, whose *Orlando* Ruhl has adapted for the stage, "saw the suffering-
zhalost relationship as one of the key themes of Russian literature and one of the
most difficult for a Western reader to comprehend" (Danaher 1-6).

Once again the foreign, forgotten word suggests a humanistic suffering
based on awareness and compassion. Tilly alludes to it upon learning that Frances
lives with a nurse named Joan who "kind of" takes care of her. Exactly what Tilly
means is unclear, though perhaps she is implying that Joan both pities and loves
Frances, which certainly becomes the case after Frances turns into an almond.
Through allusions to *mono no aware*, *saudade*, and *zhalost*, Ruhl enriches the sense
of the word *melancholy* and thereby elaborates on the nature of Tilly's suffering as
well as its cultural framing. Although audience members may find themselves
unable to identify these words during performance, they will nonetheless benefit
from the richness they contribute to the work as Ruhl has layered their meanings
into the text of the play.\(^3\)

**D. Melancholy a Cause**

Death is included in various lists of the causes of melancholy, but within the
logic of the play the inverse is true as well: melancholy is a cause of death. The
characters catch the condition from Tilly one at a time and, as it runs its course, it

\(^3\) The playwright confirms that the word in "a dead language" that means "to be so melancholy that
you turn into an inanimate object" (316) does not, to her knowledge, actually exist (Ruhl, "Re:
Melancholy question").
ultimately terminates in the almond state, which is a metaphor for death, for all of them. Melancholy spreads like the plague, a much-feared disease of the Jacobean era, and both its cause and cure remain a mystery, as did those of the plague prior to the 19th century. Ruhl's personal history supports this interpretation, as she lost not only her father but also both grandmothers to cancer which, although it is not a communicable disease, is similar to the plague in the sense that its causes are unknown and its remedies uncertain. Just as the plague has historically decimated families, cancer has robbed Ruhl of three close relatives. Also operational within the work is the phase of grieving which is referred to as "seeking and finding" as described in the chapter on Eurydice. The rest of the characters search for and find Frances in the sense that they discover a way to join her in the almond state, much as Orpheus succeeds in following Eurydice to the underworld.

Before examining the deadly spread of melancholy, other references to death will be discussed. The foreign words offer an entry point. Saudade may be experienced as a longing for someone deceased, as is mentioned above. Mono no aware encompasses an awareness of the transitory nature of life and an appreciation of beauty based on the knowledge that neither life nor beauty can last. Even in contemporary English, melancholy is by definition inclusive of a sense of mourning: "Affected with, characterized by, or showing melancholy; mournful; depressed" ("Melancholy"). Another death-related element in the play is the recurring theme of the loss of parents, which takes the form of abandonment but is presented in a way that hints at a more permanent disassociation. Lorenzo describes being orphaned on
the doorstep of a candy shop and then being rejected once again by his mother when she comes to visit him. She wears black as if in a state of mourning (235-6). Frank describes himself and his sister as being abandoned by a mother who "sailed the fjords and never came back," followed by their father who "longed" to join his wife (315). The trope of death as a voyage across a body of water dates back at least to the Greek myth of the River Styx and the boatman Charon who ferried souls to the underworld. Frank and Frances's parents have thus metaphorically passed away rather than just moved on.

Ruhl invokes this watery trope on other occasions as well. Rejected by Tilly, Lorenzo fantasizes riding in an almond-shaped boat through the afternoon and into the evening, with the passing of the diurnal cycle into darkness reinforcing the death motif. The fantasy manifests a death-wish on the part of Lorenzo, one which is, however, frustrated as he finds himself stalled in the afternoon. He is unable to visualize the piazza with its old men playing cards, men that "know [his] family name" (250-1). The failure of his imagination demonstrates his inability to conjure the idealized, cinematic Europe so integral to Tilly's sense of melancholy. Possessed more of an American than European sensibility, Lorenzo is unable to mourn and therefore unable to visualize death in all of its fullness. Lorenzo's initial cheerfulness stems from an inability to acknowledge death in a culturally fulfilling manner. Possessed as she is with a sense of mono no aware, Tilly enriches her experience of life with a melancholy that acknowledges the inevitability of death. For her part, Tilly longs to "go on a ship for three years" so that she can write "a
long letter to Frank by candlelight” (281). Her feeling at the moment she imagines this could be best described as *saudade* in the sense of longing for someone who is not present. She longs to increase her longing for him by expanding the distance between them to the greatest distance possible, that between the living and the dead across a body of water. At this moment, Frank enters to wish her a happy birthday and draws her back from her reverie. She abruptly recovers from her melancholy and becomes happy as someone might who, pulled back from the brink of death, recovers from the plague.

The almond is clearly linked to death and melancholy, and not just through Frances's transformation. An almond tastes bitter, as does death in a metaphorical sense. Ruhl provides three epigraphs: one from Burton and two having to do with almonds. In a passage credited to A. Jaruwat, M.D., part of the brain called the *amygdala* is described. Named after the Greek word for almond, it is the center of emotion in the brain and is susceptible to, "seizures, uncontrolled electrical storms within the brain" that can cause, "feelings of sadness or fear" or even the "smell of bitter almonds" (qtd. in Ruhl, "Melancholy" 231). Ruhl references this passage in Frank's perception of Tilly's happiness:

```
Frank: Tilly.
      I feel your happiness coming on like a great big storm.
Tilly: A storm?
Frank: Your eyes aren't looking at me. They're looking at a great big storm of happiness. On the horizon. (290)
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To credit Tilly's sudden mood change to a storm in her brain fails to adequately explain it, since the source of the storm itself remains a mystery. Through its
association with this portion of the brain, the almond is linked to inexplicable emotions such as melancholy. The third epigraph is uncredited and may be assumed to have been written by Ruhl. It explains the ancient symbol of the *mandorla* which consists of two overlapping circles forming an almond shape when circumscribed; its name is from the Italian word for almond. Ruhl includes a diagram (290). The *mandorla* is used in medieval art to enclose an ascending, religious figure, although the shape used in these cases is that formed by the intersection of the circles rather than an encompassing curve. Its associations are listed in *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols* (2004); the aspects most relevant to Ruhl's play are those having to do with the transition from life to death:

> It [also] represents the duality of heaven and earth -- depicted as two intersecting arcs. This would explain why mandorlas usually enclose emblematically ascending figures, symbolizing not only their sanctity but also their transfiguration. ("Mandorla")

The *mandorla* encloses saintly figures that are in a liminal state, that of the transition between earth and heaven or life and death. Through this symbol, the almond is directly linked, not only to death, but also to transfiguration, that is, a change in outward form or appearance such as that undergone by Frances.

**E. The Black Death**

Ruhl's work abounds with oblique references to the plague. The bubonic plague, or Black Death, appears to have first arrived in Europe from India via Asia Minor in the 14th century, arriving in Sicily in 1347. Within a year it had spread across the continent and reached England, eventually earning the status of the "most
feared of all the diseases that afflicted late medieval and early modern Europe" (Porter 1). It advanced with great speed, was highly contagious, resulted in a high mortality rate and afflicted a large percentage of the population (1). Within a relatively brief time period encompassing James's reign, London experienced five major outbreaks, in 1593, 1603, 1625, 1636, and 1665 (Moote and Moote 10). As the bacterial cause of the illness would not be isolated until after the advent of microbiology in the 19th century, along with the discovery of its means of transmission from rats to humans through fleas (275-8), earlier societies were forced to arrive at methods of treatment and containment through trial and error.

The most overt references to the plague occur in the scene in which Joan and Tilly are trying to decide what to do with the almond into which Frances has been transfigured. To begin with, Tilly advises against notifying the authorities (311). In The Great Plague (1999), Stephen Porter reports that it was common for communities to conceal outbreaks in order to avoid the social and financial disruption that would be certain to ensue if the outbreak were revealed. However, Tilly's warning is to no avail as the authorities are already aware of the situation, as becomes apparent when a letter is slipped under the door. The letter tells of a general epidemic of melancholy and advises quarantine:

If you are experiencing any form of melancholy: Stay in your home. I repeat: STAY IN YOUR HOME.... People experiencing melancholy have been turning into almonds on the street.

Do not eat these almonds. Do not step on these almonds. If you do find an almond, or if a family member becomes an almond, do put him or her in a zip-lock bag and deposit it in the nearest mailbox. (312)
The letter references the plague in a number of ways. Quarantine was a standard means of attempting to contain its spread: most of those infected in England were shut up in their own homes for a time period lasting 40 days after the household's last fatality (Moote and Moote 14). As "turning into almonds" is equivalent to dying within the play, the letter suggests that people have been dropping dead in the streets. Lorenzo reinforces this image when he exclaims:

   It is -- an epidemic!
   The streets are littered --
   littered -- with almonds! (313)

True to his unfeeling persona, he gleefully crushes them underfoot. The letter recommends a means of dealing with the "deceased" which suggests mass burial. The almond is to be placed in a "zip-lock bag," which is somewhat akin to the modern body bag, and deposited in a mailbox. Presumably the mailbox will fill up with almonds as a burial pit would with corpses. Mass burials were standard during plague epidemics as the only practical means of disposing of the great number of corpses.

   The Black Death is memorialized in a nursery rhyme:

   Ring around a Rosie
   A pocket full of Posy
   Atchoo! Atchoo!
   We all fall down!

In The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year (2004), Moote and Moote break down the rhyme's meaning:

   "Ring around the Rosie" characterized the red tokens of plague that appeared on the chest. The "pocket full of Posy" was a satchel of herbs worn as
protection against infectious air. "Atchoo" was the sound of sneezing that spread the plague from person to person. "All fall down" was the sadness of sudden death, as people were known to collapse on the streets, sometimes with few symptoms of the sickness. (7-8)

Ruhl substitutes the children's game Duck Duck Goose for the nursery rhyme. The participants in the game sit in a circle, and the person who is "it" walks around them, touching each on the head and saying either "duck" or "goose." The person designated "goose" becomes "it" and must, in turn, tag the person who was "it" before that person runs around the circle and takes the seat of the "goose." In the Midwestern variation of the game being played in the play, a person who is tagged out sits in the "mush-pot" in the center of the circle. Once there are too few people left in the circle, the game is started over ("Duck Duck Goose"). The game mimics the spread of the plague passed along from person to person. Although person-to-person transmission only occurred in the relatively rare pneumatic version of the disease, the Jacobeans were not aware of this, hence the practice of quarantine. The plague struck apparently at random with no indication of who would be designated "goose" next, and those afflicted most often did not survive and were consigned to the burial pit, the equivalent in the game being the mush-pot. The population of active players is depleted to the point where it is not possible to continue playing, symbolizing that the disease has run its course.

The term "mush-pot" bears a similarity to the word "mushroom," and Tilly employs a peculiar image involving the latter as she describes her melancholy to Lorenzo:
I would like to die and be reborn as a mushroom.
I would like to stay warm and slightly damp.
I will release spores now and again when it suits my mood. (237)

The fleas that transmitted the plague from rats to humans liked to stay warm and
slightly damp as well, requiring warmth and humidity in order to thrive to the extent
necessary for them to contribute to a plague epidemic (Scott and Duncan 59). The
rat flea, which is the species responsible for transmitting the plague from rats to
humans, thrives at temperatures of 64°-74° F with high humidity (Barroll 95).

Tilly’s mushroom propagates by releasing spores "now and again." The plague
bacteria spread when fleas, feeding and breeding on an infected rat, are "released"
from the rat to find a new host, either rodent or human. Tilly metaphorically
spreads her melancholy through the release of her infectious spores.

As recited in the play, the lists of causes and cures for melancholy, which are
so numerous as to be impractical, not only refer to the breadth of Burton’s attempts
but also to the confusion evident in historical efforts to understand the plague. The
four causes most often proposed were: "(1) God’s punishment for a wicked people;
(2) corrupt air; (3) certain conjunctions of the stars and planetary aspects; (4) the
individual’s natural bodily constitution" (Evans 333). In regard to the last of these,
an excess of any of the four bodily humours, including melancholy, was considered
a possible cause, with the appropriate treatment consisting of measures taken to
reduce the level of the offending humor in the body (Wilson 6-7). As included in
Ruhl’s lists and considered by Burton as a factor in melancholy, "stars a cause"
certainly applied to the plague as well since astrological factors were given wide
credibility. The first cause, that of God's retribution, does not figure at all in Ruhl's play, but the second, that of corrupt air, does so to a significant extent.

Miasmatic air was widely considered to be a cause and/or carrier of the plague. Polluted air could be produced by such divergent things as "contaminated soil, the motion of the planets, or even earthquakes" (Moote and Moote 70). An urban center such as London would abound in sources of noisome emissions such as garbage and sewage, and even heavy fog was considered a factor. Burton recognizes "bad air" of all types to be a cause of melancholy as well (1.237-41) and devotes quite a few pages to how to improve air, including a discussion of when it is prudent to open a window, and which window one should open (2.65-6). Ruhl specifies that her set should include "many windows" and, "if possible, a real balcony, opening into the night air" (326). Although her characters fail to list air as either a cure or a cause, the windows provide a visual representation of the need for fresh air in the treatment of both melancholy and the plague.

Of all the characters, Lorenzo is the most resistant to melancholy, and he is also the only one to adopt measures consistent with those that were taken to ward off the harmful effects of miasma. Some felt that pleasant odors would ward off bad air, and so would protect themselves by carrying "nosegays, sprigs of rosemary, rue, or other sweet-smelling herbs, and... by puffing a pipe of tobacco" (Porter 18). Raised in a sweet shop, Lorenzo seems to have built up a resistance to melancholy. He eats marzipan while seeing patients and, while doing so, laughs at Frank as the
patient discusses his melancholy (300). Eventually Lorenzo succumbs to the "almond state," but only by drinking from the vial of tears at Tilly's urging.

The vial serves as the material manifestation of the agent of infection. Lorenzo links it to death when he tells Frank that the Romans buried vials of tears with the dead (299). It serves as Frances's final beverage before she turns into an almond, and the means by which the others join her. Although bubonic plague typically does not spread from human to human, infection through bodily fluids is a fairly common means of transmission with other bacteria and viruses. Tilly's tears serve as the poison that seals the suicide pact entered into between her and the rest of Frances's friends. Melancholy, through association with the plague, kills them all.

**F. Dance of Death**

Julian's cello playing accompanies the action from start to finish, "scoring melancholy inside the head" like "an organ at a silent movie." Ruhl stipulates that he should remain onstage the entire time (227-8), but that the rest of the characters do not notice him or hear his playing until the end (322). She requests that he be, "handsome, and brooding," and if possible, "from a country other than the United States" (228). As a foreigner, then, he would possess an innate sense of melancholy that the Americans in the play, other than Tilly, lack. He can reasonably be envisioned as an inhabitant of Tilly's slow, sorrowful, and cinematic Europe. Although the characters do not acknowledge Julian or his music, Ruhl instructs the actors to, "respond to the music as actors, rhythmically and tonally" (227). Julian,
then, is setting the pace and tone of the performance without the characters being aware of him doing so. He plays the role of the musician Death to whose melodies the characters respond in a Dance of Death.

As defined by James M. Clark in "The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance" (1950), the Dance of Death consists of:

literary or artistic representations of a procession or dance, in which both the living and the dead take part. The dead may be portrayed by a number of figures, or by a single individual personifying Death. The living members are arranged in some kind of order of precedence, such as pope, cardinal, archbishop, or emperor, king, duke. (1)

The representation of the Dance emerged during the Middle Ages and may be said to have reached a climax in a series of woodcuts by Hans Holbein produced during the 16th century. Its depictions served as a reminder of the impermanence of earthly life and of the leveling power of death, which brought down both high and low. Frequently, for example in Holbein, the death figures are shown playing musical instruments. The plague functioned as a major inspiration for the Dance of Death ("Dance of Death")

Julian serves as a single death figure, playing a musical instrument to which the characters, unbeknownst to themselves, "dance." Although they are not arranged in order of precedence, a variety of professions is represented including, if the former careers of Frank and Frances are counted: psychiatrist, bank teller, nurse, physicist, accountant, tailor, and hairdresser. They are only able to perceive Julian, and hear his music, once they have passed into the almond state, at which point he joins with them in a waltz, expressing the Dance as such and bringing the play to a
close. Just as the final scene represents the demise of the ensemble, it culminates the grieving process of seeking and finding. As Orpheus follows Eurydice to the underworld, Joan and her companions pursue Frances into the afterlife. The joyful celebration brings to mind the gentle confusion implied in Matilde's vision of heaven, in which everyone is laughing without comprehending the joke. Equally befuddled, Frances and friends are unable to determine where they are but nevertheless take pleasure in each other's company. Before joining Frances, and after drinking the tears, they hold a ceremony that is somewhat like a memorial, vocalizing something "between a madrigal and a liturgical chant" (319). They commemorate lost, broken objects, and passageways:

A broken fence, a broken onion,  
lost objects, windows, dust,  
hallways with a particular smell  
which you will never revisit,  
most forms of longing,  
windows, wind, windows. (320)

They also invoke measures against miasma, since onions were thought to absorb the infection from bad air (Porter 17), and the wind blowing through an open window could have a cleansing effect. They are all permanently cured of both melancholy and the plague as they are blown into another world.

G. Sadness and Lightness

As discussed in the introduction, Ruhl admires Italo Calvino's Six Memos for the Next Millennium, particularly his essay on "Lightness." Citing Saturn and Melancholy (1964), by Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl,
Calvino defines melancholy as "sadness that has taken on lightness," and humor as "comedy that has lost its bodily weight." Humor lacks "a dimension of human carnality" present in comedy. The "weightless gravity" of the Jacobean period derives from "melancholy and humor, inextricably intermingled," as may be found in Hamlet or in one of his many "avatars" in Shakespeare, such as Jacques in As You like It (Calvino 19-20). Jacques characterizes his own melancholy as "humorous sadness" (qtd. in Calvino 20). The humorous complement to the sadness in Melancholy Play is easily discernible. The formulation of melancholy as a combination of sadness and lightness deserves closer scrutiny.

The cinematic references in the play conjure up an elegant yet sorrowful Europe that encompasses both sadness and lightness. One film that captures this melancholic mood is The Third Man (1949), set in Vienna after the Second World War. The film is an example of British film noir. Its interior settings convey a sense of old-fashioned grandeur, whereas many of the exterior shots are situated amongst the ruins of a war-ravaged Vienna. Holly Martins, a hack writer of cowboy novels, arrives in the city at the behest of his friend, Harry Lime, only to discover that Harry is presumed dead in an automobile accident. Holly suspects foul play, and sets about investigating the incident. In doing so, he meets and befriends Harry's girlfriend, Anna. The characters' situations are desperate: Holly arrives from America broke; Anna is a struggling actress with a fake passport, in danger of being deported to Czechoslovakia; and Harry, who it turns out is still alive, is hiding

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4 The Third Man served as a major influence for Vogel's The Baltimore Waltz, as discussed in the chapter on The Clean House.
from the police. In the midst of this misery, several characters express the sentiment that it would be better to be dead than alive. And yet, the mood of the film is surprisingly cheerful.

The distinctive zither musical score contributes much to this mood. Although the score is, at times, doleful, more frequently it is cheerful and often, even, exuberant. The music lightens various scenes, such as the one in which Holly is waiting for Harry by the Ferris wheel, or the one in which Holly is mistakenly accused of murdering the porter that works in Harry's apartment building. The manner in which certain characters are played lightens the mood as well. The rakish Harry Lime has profited off of the illnesses and deaths of children by selling watered-down penicillin on the black market. Orson Welles plays him as a charming and likable villain, without revealing the slightest pang of remorse. Even when threatening to throw his old friend off of the top of the Ferris wheel, his tone remains light and collegial. The young boy who mistakenly accuses Holly of murdering the porter does so gleefully, laughing as he chases the panicked Holly and Anna down the street while the zither music strikes up. Director Carol Reed handles his heavy subject matter with a light touch throughout, demonstrating the European melancholy alluded to in the play.

In Ruhl's work, Tilly's melancholy may be gauged by the extent to which sadness or lightness predominates. The terms take on gravitational significance. Tilly describes the gravitational effect that occurs when she is unable to express her euphoria:
You want to wrap your arms around life, life itself, but you can't, and this feeling wells up in you, and there is nowhere to put this great happiness -- and you're floating -- and then you fall down and become unbearably sad. And you have to go lie down on the couch. (275)

Later in the play, when her mood consists almost entirely of lightness, she tells Frank that she is trying to become heavier:

And meanwhile, I feel lighter and lighter.
I'm trying to cultivate -- a sensation of -- gravity.
But nothing helps.

When she is overcome by joy at her birthday party while playing Duck Duck Goose, she insists on counteracting the sensation by going into the other room to lie down (286). After her party, lightness predominates her emotional makeup. However, this lightness cuts her off from the other characters. Her sadness carried with it a sense of intimacy, which caused Lorenzo, Frank, Frances, and Joan to fall in love with her, in turn. Her sense of empathy was also tied into this sadness, through the state of mono no aware, which identifies with, and mourns, the transient beauty of people and things.

Tilly assumes responsibility for Frances's transformation, implicating her own state of self-absorption brought about by an excess of happiness. Frances turns into an almond because her melancholy lacks lightness, consisting as it does entirely of sadness. Whereas Tilly wears her melancholy with grace and beauty, Frances "unravels" (295). Tilly's melancholy opens her to the world and to people; Frances's sadness makes her want to shut herself off from the world. Lorenzo's mood consists of lightness without sadness, which is framed as a sort of American happiness and
related to a happiness induced by anti-depressant drugs. Lorenzo's happiness, like Frances's sadness, cuts him off from the world. He is an unsympathetic psychiatrist, unaware of his own emotions. The almond epidemic could symbolize both a wave of sadness and its opposite, a societal overabundance of happiness: both extremes have the same isolating effect. The events of the play suggest that both sadness and lightness are essential for a balanced emotional state.

Ruhl has tipped the scales in favor of lightness in Dead Man's Cell Phone, to be discussed in the following chapter. Unlike Tilly, the protagonist, Jean, is a person who tries to be invisible; she has a kind heart but lacks Tilly's irresistible aura of melancholy. The only character that falls in love with her is Dwight, a kindred spirit who has been dominated all of his life by his mother and brother. Jean experiences a moment of mono no aware early in the play, gazing on the face of Gordon, who is Dwight's brother, and at that moment falls in love with him. His face "is transfigured, as though he was just looking at something/ he found eminently beautiful" (10). He appears to have experienced mono no aware as well, gazing at Jean. As he remembers later, "I look over at her, and she looks like an angel" (57). The transient nature of life is readily apparent to both of them, since their moments of revelation occur immediately before, and after, his death.
IV. Falling in Love with Long Distance: Dead Man's Cell Phone

A. Beyond Grieving

The remnants of Ruhl's grieving process may be seen in Dead Man's Cell Phone in the very inclusion of an afterworld and in a thematic affinity to both Eurydice and A Clean House. In all three works, the author is concerned with issues of memory: in Eurydice, as the very fabric of relationship and personality; in The Clean House, as the connective tissue binding the individual to the family of origin; and in Dead Man's Cell Phone, as the means by which the deceased individual is not only kept alive, but reinvented, in the minds of his or her survivors. The father restores Eurydice to her previous personality by re-teaching her language and refreshing her knowledge of her familial past, whereas Matilde conjures the ghosts of her parents through the act of remembering them. In Dead Man's Cell Phone, Jean makes up stories about Gordon, the dead man, in order to enable his family and loved ones to remember him in a better light; in doing so, she constructs a fulfilled image of him for their benefit.

The dead man of the title is named Gordon, and the plot indeed revolves around his cell phone, which Jean takes into her custody after discovering him dead in a café. Although a stranger to him, she feels a certain responsibility in being the first to find him after his fatal heart attack, and so she takes it upon herself to notify his callers that he has passed away. In doing so, she becomes involved with the primary figures in his life, which include his mother, his wife, his brother, and his mistress. Jean, a lonely yet kind person, constructs a romantic image of Gordon
with which she falls in love, but which is at odds with what she learns about him from his family and mistress. She takes it upon herself to make up stories about Gordon's last moments in order to ameliorate his survivors' suffering by making each of them think that they were in Gordon's final thoughts. While tying up some loose ends for Gordon, Jean is seemingly killed and transported to a peculiar hell in which souls are condemned to spend the rest of eternity with the person that they loved the most. This person turns out to be Gordon who, she quickly learns, falls short of her expectations. As the plot speeds towards its conclusion, she returns to the land of the living and is reunited with Gordon's brother Dwight, with whom she has fallen in love. Upon learning of the nature of the afterlife from Jean, Gordon's mother self-incinerates by throwing herself on the barbecue in order to be reunited with her eldest son. The play closes with Jean and Dwight pledging to love each other with "the strongest love in the world" (98).1

As Ruhl progresses, in her plays, further and further from the point of loss, the characterization of the deceased male resembles her own father less and less. The father in Eurydice is closely based on Ruhl's own; Matilde's father in The Clean House shares a strong sense of humor with Ruhl's, but this characteristic is taken to a magic realist extreme; in Dead Man's Cell Phone, Gordon does not even fill the role of father, but rather that of a love interest, albeit older. His selfishness and ruthlessness contrast sharply with the caring and concern displayed by Eurydice's and, by extension, Ruhl's own, father. As the personality of the deceased changes,

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1 All citations refer to, and all quotations are taken from, Theatre Communications Group's 2008 edition of Dead Man's Cell Phone rather than the 2007 First Look edition.
so does the relationship between the female protagonist and the deceased, which is nevertheless always marked by longing. This longing finds temporary fulfillment in Eurydice's reunion with her father, is manifested and eventually released by Matilde through the visions of her parents, but is repudiated in Jean's encounter with Gordon, as the image of the beloved that she has constructed turns out to be a fantasy at odds with the man whom she encounters in the afterlife. Furthermore, the afterworld bears no resemblance to the joyous heaven described by Matilde, and is potentially even more unpleasant than the Greek-inspired underworld of Eurydice, which lacks the element of psychological torture implicit in Gordon's place of internment. The underworld in Eurydice is flat and gray, but also peaceful and quiet for the resident who has had his or her memory erased. In the afterworld of Dead Man's Cell Phone, one is trapped for eternity with the person that one loved most. Jean quickly discovers that she has made an error in judgment and finds Gordon to be intolerable; it is her good fortune that she is not actually dead and is able to return to the land of the living.

**B. Power Phone**

The cell phone both connects and isolates. As such, it is an emblematic device of the information age. Like the Internet, it links individuals who may be thousands of miles away while potentially simultaneously reducing communication between those situated within a few feet of each other. The cell phone is the portable electronic device par excellence, as it keeps absorbing more and more functionality, operating as web browser, e-mail station, camera, global positioning
device, with ever increasing computational power enabling it to assume more and more of the tasks previously possible only on larger machines.

In Foucault's terms, knowledge is power; this truism is especially relevant in the information age. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, the titular device functions as a power object. It serves as the matrix of all of Gordon's business and social communication and contains valuable data in the form of his business associates' contact information. When Jean appropriates the cell phone, she assumes with it Gordon's power and the license to shape knowledge to suit her needs. Gordon's family bestows Jean with privileged status as the possessor of his phone, status that she uses to rehabilitate Gordon's image by concocting fantasies about his last moments on earth. Jean both desires and is repulsed by the device that puts her, so to speak, on the power grid. Described as someone that "*doesn't want to take up space*" (7), she eschews claiming even virtual space: "I never had a cell phone. I didn't want to always *be there*, you know. Like if your phone is on you're supposed to be there. Sometimes I like to disappear..." [italics are Ruhl's] (52). In this equation, unavailability equals invisibility.

On the other hand, she desires the cell phone because it connects her to her fantasy of the other in the image that she has constructed of Gordon:

But when Gordon's phone rang and rang, after he died, I thought his phone was beautiful, like it was the only thing keeping him alive, like as long as people called him he would be alive. That sounds -- a little -- I know -- but all those molecules, in the air, trying to talk to Gordon -- and Gordon -- he's in the air too -- so maybe they all would meet up there, whizzing around -- those bits of air -- and voices. (53)
Retaining the cell phone not only preserves a connection with Gordon, it enmeshes Jean in his social network as it causes her to appear on the "grid." This makes her visible to the Other Woman, among others, who desires the cell phone for the information it contains and is willing to inflict bodily harm in order to obtain it. Once Jean loses the power object, she is unable to maintain her fantasy of Gordon; her encounter with him in the underworld displaces her imagined concept of him.

Disillusioned and fallen off the grid, Jean returns to Dwight who represents, through his association with the stationery store, a pre-technological sanctuary. It is within the supply closet of this store that Jean and Dwight come together. A shared appreciation of embossed paper, explored through the sense of touch, leads to Dwight (ineptly) braiding Jean's hair, which in turn leads to even greater intimacy. This scene, which closes the first part of the play, was beautifully realized in the premiere production mounted by Woolly Mammoth Theatre in Washington, D.C. In accordance with the stage directions, bits of paper fell from the sky like snow, followed by the lowering of paper lanterns shaped as houses as Jean and Dwight embraced in the closet; the elements came together to create a peaceful, heavenly stage picture. Just as Eurydice and her father love written language, to the extent that the father remembers his daughter's name by seeing the letters of which it is composed between the raindrops, Jean and Dwight cherish the embossed written words which can be felt on the page, in contrast to the digital, ephemeral transmission of cell phone messages zipping through the air. Dwight stresses this affinity when he dreams of Jean as the last letter of the alphabet: "Two lines -- us --
connected by a diagonal. Z" (62). He thus envisions a grid with only two nodes, invisible to the rest of the network.

This paper-based sanctuary is a nostalgic one. From his vantage point in the afterlife, Gordon observes that the pace of modern life violates the integrity of body and soul:

I believe that when people are in transit their souls are not in their bodies. It takes a couple minutes to catch up. Walking -- horseback -- that is the speed at which the soul can stay in the body during travel. So airports and subway stations are very similar to hell. People are vulnerable -- disembodied -- they're looking around for their souls while they get a shoe shine. That's when you bomb them. In transit. But I didn't know that then. (58)

Consistent with this passage, the set of the Woolly Mammoth production was built to resemble a tiled subway station in chrome and off-white. The semi-circular back wall towered over the actors who performed on a thrust stage. The stationery store closet was a small set piece rolled out by stagehands. In contrast to the back wall, it was finished in the appearance of a fine wood such as oak and was rolled on with the back, to which a few large-sized letters of the alphabet were affixed, facing the audience. Stagehands spun it around to reveal an interior with shelves and books, resembling an old library. The closet evoked a feeling of sepia warmth and formed a cocoon that sheltered Jean and Dwight from the cold sterility of the set at large. Theirs was a sanctuary of warm touch, in contrast to the subway station hell in which Gordon torments Jean by attempting to rip his organs out of his body. The stationery store stands in as the place of genuine human connection unmediated by technology. Through it, Ruhl expresses nostalgia for a time when life moved at a
slower pace and when human relationships could develop more directly, with less reliance on technological devices.

Ruhl revised the play for productions in New York and Chicago in March 2008. The New York premiere occurred at Playwrights Horizons, featured Mary-Louise Parker as Jean, and was directed by Anne Bogart (Isherwood, "A Nagging Call"). Steppenwolf Theatre Company mounted the Chicago production (Ruhl, Dead 2-3). Theatre Communications Group has published the new version.

Changes include Mrs. Gottlieb reading from Tale of Two Cities at the memorial service (15), Gordon appearing onstage just before the intermission and opening his mouth as if about to speak while Jean and Dwight kiss in the stationary closet (56), and Jean and Dwight agreeing that the letter Z will be their secret password (63). The Woolly Mammoth staging suggested that the afterlife looks like a subway station; this was a production choice that was not mandated by the script. In the rewritten version, the stage directions suggest that Jean and Gordon meet in a café and repeat the gestures from the first scene "over and over again" (80).

Ruhl has expanded the scene between Jean and the Stranger in the airport, which was brief in the Woolly Mammoth version, enhancing the mood of film noir, as will be discussed below. Jean's transition back to life has been reworked as well. In the Woolly Mammoth version, Jean calls out just a few lines to Dwight before reappearing at the airport. In the newer version, she tries unsuccessfully to call him on the cell phone, apologizes to him over the phone even though she knows it is not working, throws the phone down, and then repeats their agreed-upon secret
password, "Z," two times. Just as Dorothy's mantra "there's no place like home" returns her to her family, the password uttered by Jean whisks her into the arms of Dwight, the one whom, she now realizes, she truly loves. Jean's exhortation to love in the final scene has also been changed to include an acceptance of Dwight's shortcomings:

   I want to love you because of and not in spite of your accidental charms.
   I want to love you when you burn the toast and when your shoes are awful and when you say the wrong thing.... (98)

The addition of these lines increases the expectation that this love affair could possibly endure.

These changes only strengthen the script. The Dickens passage read by Mrs. Gottlieb is referred to elsewhere by Hermia, and its inclusion in the memorial service reinforces the theme of isolation and the unknowability of the other. Gordon's appearance at the end of Part One symbolizes his interference in the romance that is developing between Jean and Dwight, and sets up his opening monologue of Part Two. The establishment of the password "Z" is put to good use in Jean's return from the afterlife. In staging the afterlife as an endless repetition of Jean and Gordon's first scene in the café, Ruhl establishes the concept that they are trapped in the moment of their initial encounter, at which time Jean first started to construct her fantasies about Gordon. The campy, film noir-ish struggle in the airport sets the zany tone for the final sequence. Jean's attempt to call Dwight on the cell phone from the afterlife succinctly points up both the promise and
limitations of technology as a facilitator of human interaction. Finally, Jean's recognition of Dwight's flaws only strengthens the prospect of an enduring relationship between them.

C. A Taste for Flesh

The coldness of the set as realized in the Woolly Mammoth production is consistent with Gordon's uncompassionate business endeavors. Gordon has engaged in a capitalistic enterprise in which he clearly benefits from the misfortune of his donors, and a social Darwinism is at work in which the aggressive and opportunistic characters take advantage of those more passive than themselves. The exploitive nature of Gordon's business is illustrated in a story told by Hermia. According to her, her husband purchased a kidney from a man in Brazil for $5,000 cash to sell to a woman in Israel, making a profit of ten times that amount from the transaction. The Brazilian man had his money stolen when he returned home. His only recourse was to send letters to Gordon's home on which he would draw pictures of his lost kidney which "looked like a broken heart" (74). With the proceeds from the sale, Gordon bought his wife a rare and expensive yellow diamond.

Gordon preys on those weaker than him. His position in the food chain as the top predator is reflected both in his appetite for flesh and in his mode of perceiving his fellow humans. He tells of blackmailing a former business associate who had become a sushi chef into giving him the choicest cuts of *hamachi*, those from the belly rather than the tail. He desires lobster bisque for lunch on the last
day of his life because he does not “want to eat something that remind[s] me of body parts” (59). He perceives humans as collections of body parts. During his last morning alive, he notes the implacable curve of his wife's "back" and decides against giving her a kiss on the "cheek" that might soften her "face" (57-8). On the way to the subway, he notes that one umbrella covers "three bodies." The subway is, "A tomb for people's eyes" (58). The man behind the counter in the café is a "giant" with "really huge knuckles" (60). His preference for meat over vegetable matter is discernible in his opinion of lentil soup, for which he has to settle for lunch:

Lentil soup is never that great. It's only ever serviceable. It doesn't really make your mouth water, does it, lentil soup? Something watery -- something brown -- and hot carrots. Like death. Serviceable, a little mushy and warm in the wrong places, not as bad as you'd think it's going to be, not as good, either. (60)

Gordon's inability to appropriate Jean's food, her bowl of lobster bisque, signals a weakening that foreshadows his impending collapse. When informed the café is out of the bisque, he attempts to purchase Jean's portion, but he is too late, as Jean is finishing the last spoonful. She has beaten him to the kill. Moments later, his heart starts giving out and, once it does, Jean appropriates his cell phone and with it, his power.

Gordon's mother shares his aggressive personality as well as his taste for meat. Inviting Jean to dinner, she explains her menu choice: "We'll be having large quantities of meat. I'm a little anemic, you know. I eat a large steak every day and it just goes right through me" (32). Indeed, Jean and Dwight discover later that she
has served a meal consisting entirely of meat dishes (43). Jean and Dwight lack the aggressiveness shared by the rest of the characters, including the Other Woman and to a certain extent Hermia. Dwight recalls that he was always dominated by his brother. He tells Jean an illustrative story:

One time Gordon made up a character named Mr. Big X and he said: I'll take you to meet Mr. Big X! I was really excited to meet Mr. Big X. But in order to meet him, Gordon wrapped me up in a blanket and pushed me down the stairs. (54)

Mrs. Gottlieb makes no attempt to conceal her preference for Gordon over Dwight. As Gordon explains, he realized early on that he was more charismatic than his brother and felt no qualms in taking advantage of him (85). As a vegetarian, Jean feeds lower down on the food chain and, like a grazing animal, lacks the fighting instinct of a Gordon or a Mrs. Gottlieb. Only after she returns from hell does she request a steak, and a rare one at that (94-5). As a plot device, this fires up the barbecue upon which Mrs. Gottlieb will throw herself. Jean's desire for meat also signifies a rise in her status in relationship to Gordon; she quits her self-assumed, subservient position as his receptionist and takes her place among the other top-tier carnivores. Released from the clutches of the alpha male, she is free to mate with the less-dominant Dwight.

D. The Unknowable Other

Hermia complains of the inability of human beings to ever truly know one another: "What did Charles Dickens say? That we drive alone in our separate carriages never to truly know each other and then the book shuts and then we die?
Something like that" (71)? In the passage to which she refers, which is to be found in Tale of Two Cities and is included as an epigraph in the script, Dickens describes the impenetrability of the human soul using the metaphor of the individual traveling in his or her own insular, horse-drawn coach, illustrating the point that even the most intimate companion can never be fully known (Ruhl, Dead 5). This point seems to be borne out by the relationships in the play: Gordon and Hermia's marriage is a sham; Gordon is uncertain of his mother's love until Jean confirms it for him; Mrs. Gottlieb has played favorites with her sons, somewhat neglecting Dwight; and Jean appears to lead an isolated existence, one measure of which is the fact that the person she loves most is someone she has never met. Whatever positive meaning various characters glean from Gordon's death comes from anecdotes invented by Jean. Gordon actually does think of each of them in turn during his last moments, as he recounts from the afterlife, but refrains from calling any of them for the selfish reason that what he wants to hear last is an "indescribably tender" female voice (61). Due to the manner in which he has conducted his personal relationships, he recognizes that the possibility of eliciting that tone from any of his female relationships is quite slim. Indeed, the woman most inclined to think of him in tender terms is Jean, the one who does not know him.

Ruhl depicts relationship as being based on perception. Jean loves Gordon based on an image she has constructed of him, and continues loving him until her encounter with him shatters that image. Hermia imagines herself to be someone else in order to tolerate making love to her husband. Certainly Gordon's unethical
line of business has contaminated his personal life and impaired his capacity for intimacy. His focus on body parts, as described above, causes him to conceptually dissect others, viewing them as fragmented physicalities that he evaluates to determine whether or not they will satisfy his mercantile appetites. Obsessed with his own needs and wants, he finds himself unable to undertake even the conciliatory act of kissing his wife goodbye in the morning. In contrast, Jean undertakes acts of kindness and looks for the best in everyone. She perceives goodness initially even in Gordon, because that is what she is looking for.

The dismal state of Gordon and Hermia's marriage may be partially attributed to incompatibility. Hermia confesses to Jean that she felt that she had married "the wrong man" (71). She was repulsed by his business: "Sexual revulsion can be caused by moral revulsion" (73). And yet she acknowledges complicity in his livelihood through her enjoyment of the concomitant financial rewards. Their lack of intimacy illustrates the theme of the unknowability of the other. Their lovemaking was like a fun house of mirrors, in which she would pretend to be another woman with which he was having an affair: "I pictured what Gordon was seeing -- and I picture me, looking back at Gordon. And there is more and more desire, like two mirrors, facing each other -- it's amazing what the mind can do" (69). Hermia substitutes the other woman for herself in order to enact her husband's fantasy, and this brings her pleasure. She imagines the gaze that she shares with Gordon as two mirrors infinitely reflecting each other, never settling on a foundational image that might be associated with the identity of either one of them.
Whether or not the union between Jean and Dwight might be headed towards a greater degree of happiness remains ambiguous. With the cell phone removed and Jean rid of her obsession with Gordon, they are free to pursue their own relationship and seem well-suited to one another. Jean proposes the terms:

Let's start loving each other now, Dwight – not a mediocre love, but the strongest love in the world, absolutely requited. (98)

However, the closing lines of the play appear to cast some doubt about the possibility of these terms actually being met:

DWIGHT: Then let's do it, Jean. Let's love each other better than the worthies did.
JEAN: Who are the worthies?
DWIGHT: It's from a poem.
JEAN: Did you write it?
DWIGHT: No John Donne did. I'll take you to my letterpress and show you.
JEAN: Now?
DWIGHT: Not right now. Now we kiss. And the lights go out. They kiss, And the lights go out. (98-9)

Ruhl provides as an epigraph the concluding stanza from the sonnet, "The Undertaking," to which Dwight is referring:

... you have done a braver thing
Than all the Worthies did;
And a braver thence will spring,
Which is, to keepe that hid. (qtd. in Ruhl, Dead 6)

The poem has alternately been titled "Platonic Love" (Redpath 290), and in it the speaker brags of attaining a nonsexual love. The Worthies were generally considered to be "three Gentiles (Hector, Alexander and Julius Caesar); three Jews
(Joshua, David and Judas Maccabaeus); and three Christians (Arthur, Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon)," figures generally not known for their capacity for spiritual love (Redpath 290). The humor in the poem derives from a number of factors, one of them being that the speaker is bragging about not bragging about his accomplishment. Moreover, although he claims to have loved a virtuous woman and exhorts the listener to do the same, he also states that no such deserving woman exists (Pinka 67). In reference to the content of the sonnet, then, Dwight is suggesting that he and Jean undertake a platonic love which they keep a secret from others.

Within the context of character and scene the meaning conveyed by his reference is somewhat different. In terms of character, Dwight is a quirky bumbler. His cure for the hiccups is to drink a glass of bourbon upside down (36); one of his talents as a child, as remembered by his mother, was to "grow stiff as a board and his friends pretended he was a plank or a dead insect and they would carry him around the living room at my lunch parties" (38); and he has difficulty completing even such a simple task as braiding Jean's hair, weaving two strands rather than the usual three (55). His reference to a John Donne sonnet reinforces his shared love of the written word with Jean; the inappropriateness of the citation falls in line with his character. Within the context of the play, by the Worthies, Dwight could be referring to those characters who have achieved greater material success than he and Jean, particularly Gordon and Hermia, who have not loved particularly well. Seen in this light, then, Dwight's citation of Donne supports Jean's entreaty to absolute
love quoted above. Nonetheless, the associated content of the poem to which he refers somewhat dims his endorsement. Ruhl states that the ending is intended to be "an actual hymn to love" (Ruhl qtd. in Lahr, "Surreal"). The ending as revised for the New York premiere reinforces this interpretation in having Jean promise to love Dwight in spite of, or perhaps even because of, his faults, rather than blindly vowing to establish "the strongest love in the world."

E. A Comic Dead Man

Although *Eurydice* and, to a greater extent, *The Clean House*, both contain a good dose of humor, this humor is leavened with pathos. The dominant mood of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is, however, definitely comic. The memorial scene, set in a church, is no exception. Mrs. Gottlieb begins to eulogize her son by expressing her appreciation for the high ceilings in the church, which in her view create a space vast enough to contain her grief. These lines were delivered to great comic effect by Sarah Marshall, who played the role in the Woolly Mammoth production. When the ringing of Gordon's phone, in Jean's possession, interrupts the service, Mrs. Gottlieb launches into a vulgar diatribe against cell phones in general, raising the comic stakes. This in turn derails the entire service, which concludes with a campy rendition of "You'll Never Walk Alone," a song from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel* (1945). In the musical, it is sung after the death of Billy to give his pregnant wife Julie courage, and reprised later at their daughter Louise's high school graduation. Significantly, the song alludes to the dead guiding the living, as Billy is allowed to return to earth in order to offer support to his daughter. Furthermore,
Billy, who dies by suicide after a foiled robbery, redeems himself through this intervention, thereby winning entry into heaven. This action finds a parallel in Ruhl's play, as Jean attempts to redeem the deceased Gordon, albeit unsuccessfully. Sarah Marshall's enthusiastic rendition of the song elicited much laughter from the audience.

Ruhl's work played as a comic tour de force at Woolly Mammoth. Highlights included Marshall's performance as well as Rick Foucheux's deft handling of Gordon's soliloquies. The tone becomes highly farcical as Jean returns to the world of the living and is whisked away by Dwight, who suddenly appears in South Africa, back to his mother's house. Mrs. Gottlieb reveals that Hermia, in a random plot twist, has returned to the ice follies as a professional skater. Jean abandons her vegetarianism and Mrs. Gottlieb self-incinerates while reprising "You'll Never Walk Alone," to which Dwight shrugs, "She always did love [Gordon] best." Finally, Jean and Dwight vow everlasting love. All of this takes place within a seven-page scene. The Woolly Mammoth production recaptured some of the tenderness of the stationery closet scene by once again lowering the paper-house lanterns as the lights went down.

**F. Ruhl and Postmodernism**

As Ruhl is writing during what is considered the postmodern era, it can rightly be expected that a postmodern sensibility will inform her work. Nevertheless, traditional elements are present as well. The term postmodernism resists easy definition. In *The Theater of Transformation: Postmodernism in*
American Drama (2005), Kerstin Schmidt provides useful guidelines for identifying features of postmodernism, particularly as they apply to the theater. She posits a theater of transformation as a model, rather than a norm, of postmodern drama; given the sprawling nature of any definition of postmodernism, her model provides a convenient basis for discussion. A useful starting point is to consider the ways in which postmodern drama departs from traditional drama. A drama that may be considered postmodern troubles "most of the features that have traditionally defined it, such as character, plot, and agon" (13).

Ruhl's work generally does not trouble these three traditional features. As noted in the introduction to this study, Ruhl has expressed an interest in drama that proceeds by way of small transformations rather than building to a big climax. Although her plots do not drive relentlessly forward in the style of, say, Greek tragedy, events in them are nevertheless linked by cause and effect. Her characters are depicted in a traditional way as well, which is to say as cohesive rather than fragmented entities. And certainly agon, or conflict, figures importantly in her work. Ruhl's oeuvre resists categorization with those of the postmodern playwrights highlighted by Schmidt, who include Jean-Claude van Itallie, Megan Terry, Rochelle Owens, and Suzan-Lori Parks. Parks may serve as an example: she replaces linear plot development with a strategy of repetition and revision inspired by jazz improvisation, she represents identity as fragmented and shifting rather than cohesive and stable, and she avoids depicting conflict in the standard
protagonist/antagonist binary. Ruhl's treatment of these three traditional elements is, compared to Parks, conservative.

In addition to stating the ways in which postmodern drama departs from tradition, Schmidt identifies three issues that are critical to her definition of a postmodern theater:

[T]he postmodern sense of self[;] a problematization of the dramatic text, performance and authorship in postmodernism[;] and aspects of the theatrical space and its relationship to postmodern mediatized culture. (13)

As noted, in comparison to Parks, Ruhl's characters fail to meet the first criterion as they tend to be traditional rather than postmodern. In regards to the second issue, Schmidt notes that postmodernism is associated with the "death of the author." As a collaborative art, the theater subjects a writer's efforts to interpretation in the very act of staging the dramatic text, and thus the writer's autonomy is from the outset less than that granted to an author of narrative fiction. Under postmodernism, a playwright's position may be destabilized to an even greater extent. Scripts might be developed in collaboration with performers and directors in a workshop environment. Language itself might be devalued, and the emphasis placed on creating images rather than stories (59). Ruhl stages powerful images, but they are placed in the service of narrative and there is no doubt that, in her case, the author is alive and well as is evidenced by the great care she takes in selecting every word of dialogue, and even in carefully crafting stage directions. She thus fails to align, in many respects, with Schmidt's first two issues of postmodern theater. However, one aspect of Schmidt's second issue, that of intertextuality, raises interesting questions
in regards to Ruhl's work. For the sake of convenience, this will be discussed in relation to Schmidt's third issue.

Her third issue is "aspects of the theatrical space and its relationship to postmodern mediatized culture." Schmidt relates time to space and includes a discussion of it under this issue. She contends that "postmodern drama... aims at deconstructing time as a continuum and a linear progressive movement" (76). This may be achieved by presenting events and objects asynchronously, as Ruhl does in *Eurydice* and *Melancholy Play*. The playfulness with which Ruhl handles time in these two works contributes to the sense of nostalgia that is expressed therein. In *Late*, Ruhl compresses time during the holiday sequence in order to represent the pressure that Mary feels to conform to a middle-class, heteronormal, family-oriented existence.

Schmidt's third issue addresses the influence of the media upon contemporary life. She notes that, "Postmodern dramatists employ a variety of contemporary media -- most prominently television, film, and video -- in order to translate their idiosyncrasies into a language for the theater" (77). Although, unlike some postmodern dramatists, Ruhl does not deploy video images on the stage, she does draw on film for inspiration. However, she does so more to inform her narrative structure than her theatrical space, and so her appropriation of specific films may more aptly be discussed as an example of intertextuality than a reflection of mediatized culture. Obviously, she is concerned with the impact of technology,
as may be seen in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, the titular object of which qualifies as an instrument of interactive media relevant to Schmidt's third issue.

Intertextuality occurs in *Dead Man's Cell Phone* in the referencing of *film noir*. Gordon's lack of morality and his involvement in an illegal trade bring to mind the *film noir* antihero Harry Lime from *The Third Man*, a film discussed briefly in conjunction with *The Clean House*, serving as it does as the basis for Paula Vogel's *Baltimore Waltz*. Lime is engaged in an illegal penicillin trade that is harming children and, like Gordon, displays a brazen lack of concern for the consequences of his actions in his pursuit of profit. The Other Woman of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is based upon the *femme fatale*, with her foreign accent, world-weariness, and a concern with beauty and glamour that references classical movie actresses. Two scenes in particular spoof *film noir*; these are the clandestine meetings between Jean and the Other Woman at a café and at the Johannesburg airport.

During their first encounter in the café, the Other Woman assumes that Jean was also having an affair with Gordon. They are thus positioned as rivals which, in a sense, they are, since the Other Woman was Gordon's mistress and Jean imagines herself to be in love with him. The humor in the scene derives from a stylistic clash: the Other Woman behaves as though she is a *femme fatale* displaced from a movie from the 1940s or 1950s, in contrast to Jean who behaves like an ordinary, modern woman. The other woman coaches Jean on how to appear glamorous. She is
imperious throughout as Jean attempts to placate her. When she implies that Jean was Gordon's lover, Jean simply fails to register the accusation:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
Jean: & I don't know what you mean. \\
Other Woman: & You don't need to pretend. \\
Jean: & I know. (18)
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

The Other Woman admits that she arranged to meet with Jean in order to find out if Gordon said something about her before he died. Even so, she claims to "hate sentiment" (21) as is consistent with a hard-boiled \textit{femme fatale}.

The \textit{film noir} influence is even more pronounced in the encounter at the Johannesburg airport. The Other Woman has disguised herself in a raincoat and sunglasses as a stranger with "an Eastern European accent" and the stage directions call for "\textit{film noir music}" (76), with which she is associated in other scenes as well. She has arranged to meet with Jean in order to exchange illegal goods for money and gives Jean detailed instructions for making the exchange. Choreographed violence breaks out when Jean reveals that she is reneging on the deal: the Other Woman pulls a gun on her, Jean topples her with an expert kick to the leg, then the Other Woman gains control of the gun and uses it to deliver a blow to Jean's head. As in the café scene, Jean deviates from the \textit{film noir} scenario, offering in this case a speech about the importance of love, and a lamp in the shape of the kidney. Both scenes play as spoofs of \textit{film noir} in which a bumbling incompetent finds herself thrown into situations that are outside of her frame of reference.

The lost innocent appears frequently in Ruhl's plays: Eurydice journeying to an underworld that is likened to Alice's Wonderland; Matilde struggling to survive
as a housekeeper in what is, to her, a foreign country; Tilly navigating the currents of her mood swings and the entanglements of her relationships; Mary freeing herself from her abusive spouse; and Violet, from the third part of Passion Play, struggling to come to terms with war by drawing pictures of birds. In each case, except for that of Eurydice, the innocent succeeds in emerging from the rabbit hole perhaps because of her naïveté as much as anything else. A hidden hand guides these characters who are essentially good at heart, imparting the moral that perhaps, after all, goodness is its own reward.

Jean's assumption that humans are basically good enables her to fall in love with the deceased Gordon. After his funeral she is immediately thrown into the hell of dinner with his family, one that begins about as badly for her as it could: she is a vegetarian seated at a meal consisting entirely of meat, Gordon's mother berates and belittles her, she suffers an attack of the hiccups, and her inappropriate gift to Mrs. Gottlieb sends the matron upstairs in tears and brings the dinner to a close. Nevertheless, the evening turns out well for Jean as she leaves in search of broccoli and zucchini with Dwight, who will turn out to be the one she loves most. Ultimately, she survives her trials with the Other Woman and Gordon to be reunited with the younger brother.

Although Ruhl spoofs film noir, that is clearly not her primary purpose in writing this play. Rather, the referencing of film noir serves to subtract weight in that the illegal organ trade is depicted in a light and playful manner. The slipping in and out of film noir parody is consistent with the tonal inconsistency of
postmodernism. As Schmidt notes in regard to intertextuality, "The mixing of
heretofore rigidly separated genres, or, rather, the transformation of one genre into
another results in a disregard for generic rules" (37). Other genres incorporated into
Dead Man's Cell Phone include character-based comedy, fantasy, and farce. The
journey to the underworld is best categorized as fantasy. As discussed in
conjunction with The Clean House, Ruhl's work does not fit the mold of absurdism.
Nor does this particular play qualify as magic realism because a foundational sense
of realism is never established. Up until the last scene, much of the humor is
character-based; after that, the plot accelerates and the play becomes farcical. The
work as a whole may best be classified as a postmodern comic fantasy.

It is worth noting a connection between Schmidt's paradigm of
transformation and Ruhl's theater training through the person of Viola Spolin, the
renowned teacher of theater improvisation. Schmidt adopts this paradigm from an
acting technique that was practiced in Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater. In this
context, transformation "meant the abrupt taking on and dropping of different roles
without any accompanying changes in setting, costume, or lighting" (12). Schmidt
credits Spolin with originating the exercise. The Piven workshop, where Ruhl
received her early theater training, was established in order to continue Spolin's
teachings, as has been discussed. Certainly Ruhl was exposed to the spirit of this
exercise, if not the exercise itself, as is evidenced in her expressed preference for
small transformations over big climaxes. Nevertheless, the influence of the Spolin
exercise as a proclivity for fragmented or shifting characterizations can only be
found, in Ruhl's plays, in the onstage transformation of Charles and Ana into Matilde's parents in the final scene of *The Clean House*. Elsewhere, it manifests as a fondness for minimalistic settings that allow for quick scene changes.

Magic realism is generally understood to be a component of postmodernism (Dawson 171), and thus Ruhl is, by definition, practicing postmodernism when she slips into the mode of magic realism. In "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism in Postmodern Fiction" (1995), Wendy B. Faris analogizes the relationship between modernism and postmodernism utilizing the character from her title.\(^2\) She situates Scheherazade of *The Thousand and One Nights* as "a popular paradigm of the high modernist narrator -- exhausted and threatened by death, but still inventing" (164). Within her analogy, magic realism corresponds to Scheherazade's children in the sense that it is a generative force that moves fiction from exhaustion to replenishment. She associates modernism with epistemology, or questions of knowledge, versus postmodernism's concern with ontology, or questions of being. Whereas a modernist will be inclined to remember and reconstruct, a postmodernist invents (166). Faris notes that Jean-François Lyotard characterizes postmodernism as a search for new forms that attempt to present the unpresentable, and suggests that magic realism does just that (185).

Faris's argument appears to fly in the face of Schmidt's definition of postmodernism. If measured according to the latter's guidelines as discussed above, magic realism does not seem to qualify as postmodern at all, even taking into account Faris's article has previously been cited for its definition of magic realism in the discussion of *The Clean House*.

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\(^2\) Faris's article has previously been cited for its definition of magic realism in the discussion of *The Clean House*. 
account Faris's focus on literature versus Schmidt's on theater. For one thing, magic realism typically does not trouble character, plot, and agon to an appreciable degree. Indeed, Faris observes that magic realist fictions "often (though not always) cater with unidirectional storylines to our basic desire to hear what happens next" (163). In terms of character, although metamorphosis may occur in the sense of drastic transformation, and therefore indicate an unstable identity, the type of fragmentation that might be found, for example, in a Parks play is not typical of magic realism. Conflict tends to play a traditional role within the unidirectional storylines. Besides failing to trouble the three central characteristics of traditional drama, magic realism fails to qualify as postmodern when judged by Schmidt's three issues for defining postmodern theater. However, this discrepancy may be attributed to the wide scope of postmodernism rather than to a faulty analysis on the part of either scholar.

Indeed, Faris lists aspects of magic realism that are congruent with Schmidt's larger definition of postmodernism. These include meta-fictional (or meta-theatrical) dimensions, intertextuality, defamiliarization, the employment of "repetition as a narrative principle," and a tendency to be opposed to the established social order (Faris 175-80).

Ruhl's employment of magic realist techniques is most pronounced in The Clean House and Melancholy Play, as has been discussed elsewhere. In addition to magic realist tendencies, Ruhl may be classified as postmodern in her employment of intertextuality and her playful sense of time; she qualifies as a traditionalist in her adherence to more-or-less-standard constructs of plot, character, and agon.
general, she demonstrates a postmodern rather than modern attitude as judged by both Schmidt and Faris's distinctions between the two: she affirms a playful disposition rather than seeking the truth and origin of things, and is more interested in ontology than epistemology.

Ruhl's postmodern tendencies are readily apparent in *Late: A Cowboy Song*, inclusive of a playful handling of time and the incorporation of a variety of texts. Ruhl deals more directly than in her other plays with American archetypes, such as that of the cowboy and the American family as posited in the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, brushing up against the American dream in the process. She also raises questions about art and life by invoking the modernist American painter Mark Rothko and draws a parallel between the act of cooking and the creative process. Furthermore, she includes issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, questioning traditional definitions of what constitutes a family as well as blurring the lines that delineate male and female. This play, and the issues it raises, will be examined in the following chapter.
V. A Cowboy Stew

A. The Ruhl Recipe

Baking lasagna has long been my own personal paradigm for writing a play. A good play I think should always feel as though it's only barely been rescued from the brink of chaos, as though all the yummy nutritious ingredients you've thrown into it have almost-but-not-quite succeeded in overwhelming the design. The play should have barely been rescued from the mess it might just as easily have been; just as each slice of lasagna should stand tall, while at the same time betray its entropic desire towards collapse, just as the lasagna should seem to want to dissolve into meat and cheese stew, so you can marvel all the more at the culinary engineering magic that holds such entropy at bay, that keeps the un-stackable firmly, but not too firmly, stacked. A good play, like a good lasagna, should be overstuffed: It has a pomposity, and an overreach: Its ambitions extend in the direction of not-missing-a-trick, it has a bursting omnipotence up its sleeve, or rather, under its noodles: It is pretentious food.

-- Tony Kushner, "On Pretentiousness" 61-2

A Ruhl play is more like a clear soup than an overstuffed lasagna. In Late: A Cowboy Song, Mary expresses her appreciation of such a soup:

I love this soup.... The clear soup -- with vegetables -- all bright and clear and separate in the broth. You know how in Campbell's soup the vegetables get all mashed together?... I like it when the vegetables are separate. So a carrot really looks like a carrot. (141-2)

Rather than overloading her play to the point of collapse, Ruhl selects a relatively few choice ingredients and suspends them, in a balanced manner, in a delicious broth. The juices of her thematic materials simmer and mingle as she brings the concoction to a rolling boil. Her dialogue is sparer than that of Kushner; she strives for poetic economy. Although Kushner's writing is certainly elegant he does not shy away from playful verbosity, one example being the entire first act of Homebody/Kabul, which consists of a monologue delivered by the Homebody, who
delights in obscure, multisyllabic words. A Kushner play requires some digesting, and although one by Ruhl certainly serves up food for thought, it tends also perhaps to clear the head, as Mary's soup does (Ruhl, Late 202). In this chapter, Late will be used to examine Ruhl's approach to playwriting. In this case, her thematic material includes sexual and gender identity issues as well as the myths of the cowboy and the American family. As usual, her dialogue is economical and she delights in the crisp, poetic turn of phrase and in unexpected, whimsical juxtaposition.

Ruhl has jokingly described her own writing process as "hell" (Kaplan), so it is perhaps not far-fetched to read Mary's trying attempt to prepare soup as a metaphor for the playwright's own creative process. Mary reads from, and comments on, The Joy of Cooking:

"A clear soup is supposed to be as bracing as a clear conscience."
How about that. I've thought the very same thing.
"It disappoints us to have to tell you that, while they are unsurpassed as appetite stimulators, the experts give them an indifferent rating as food."
That can't be right.
"Instead of calling for things young and tender, remember that meat from aged animals and mature vegetables will be most flavorsome. Bones are disjointed and crushed.... As the stock heats, quite a heavy scum rises to the surface. If a clear soup is wanted, push the scummy albuminous crust to one side. Continue simmering. Again, push the scummy foam to one side. Add lean ground beef, one egg white and crumpled shell, and several uncooked fowl carcasses. Beat these additions into the stock."
My God.
It's violent, isn't it? (152-3)

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1 Ruhl has obtained permission to use excerpts from the All New Joy of Cooking for this passage, as is noted on the copyright page of The Clean House and Other Plays. She has, however, rearranged the material. She draws from pages 146, 488, and 489 as presented in the 1973 edition of the cookbook, which is titled Joy of Cooking (Rombauer and Becker).
Although a Ruhl play is surely more nutritious than a consommé, the process of writing one may be as violent as that of preparing the soup, as Ruhl draws on her own sometimes painful memories as raw material, disjointing and crushing the bones of her own experience in order to cook up a work of art. And in rewriting, the scummy foam must continually be scooped to the side and discarded in order to achieve clarity.

B. It's a Not-So-Wonderful Life

Ruhl draws from various sources for inspiration. The Clean House was built around an overheard anecdote. She rewrote the myth of Orpheus, centralizing the female figure, in Eurydice, and she follows a similar tack with Late, except instead of looking as far back as Greek myth she excises material from the 1946 film It's a Wonderful Life. The film is the story of George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, a man who gives up his dreams in order to look after other people’s interests. He abandons his plans to attend college, travel, and then “build things,” instead taking over and rescuing his deceased father's savings and loan, marrying, and starting a family. The film was released the year following the conclusion of World War II at a time when personal sacrifice for the greater good was highly valorized and the country was entering a period of great prosperity. Citizens were eager to resume life as normal, the baby boom was just beginning, and gender roles were clearly defined. The movie idealizes the American family and holds up George and Mary as the perfect couple; his difficulties and near-suicide result only in a greater
appreciation of his marital state on his part and leads to a happy Hollywood-style reunion at the conclusion of the film.

Nevertheless, there is a dark side to their history. George's life reaches a crisis point when his absent-minded uncle loses an $8,000 deposit on Christmas Eve, endangering the continued existence of their business and leaving George open to charges of embezzlement. As a stressed George returns home to his family later that day, he loses his temper, yells at the children, knocks over a model of a bridge representative of his dream to someday build something, and throws objects against the wall. He collects himself and apologizes when he notes the horrified looks on his children's faces, only to once again fly into a rage and storm out the door. Mary, portrayed by Donna Reed, plays the supportive wife throughout, protective of the children but also solicitous towards her husband. As the evening progresses, George makes his way to a bridge and prepares to commit suicide by throwing himself into an icy river. His guardian angel saves him by jumping in first, counting on George's impulse to rescue him, and then graces him with a vision of how badly off the townspeople would be if George had never been born. After he has been taught his lesson and returns home a new man, his wife and family welcome him with open arms, and the townspeople, grateful for his lifetime of assistance, put together a collection that covers the missing money.

Ruhl isolates the pattern of domestic abuse to be found in the film. In The Domestic Violence Sourcebook (1998), Dawn Bradley Berry outlines the three stages of domestic violence: during the first, tension builds as the man becomes
"edgy, critical, [and] irritable" while the woman tries to appease him; the second consists of the violent outburst; lastly comes a stage of loving contrition, during which the man might apologize and ask for forgiveness, swearing to reform himself. The woman, grateful that her partner is behaving positively towards her, is willing to overlook the abuse and the couple reconciles. Each time the cycle repeats, the violence is liable to become more severe (35-7). It need not take physical form but may be limited to psychological abuse (1-2). In the film, the first stage is played out when George returns home and behaves irritably towards his family. He passes into the second stage when he knocks over and throws objects against the wall, moves into the third stage as he expresses contrition and apologizes to his wife and children, and then retreats once more into the second stage, storming out of the house in a fit of rage. When he returns after his encounter with the angel, he fully enters into the third stage, reconciling with his wife and children.

Ruhl uses George and his wife Mary as the starting point for her characters Crick and Mary. Crick is given to outbursts of anger and threatening behavior, which ultimately escalate to the point of physical violence against his wife. He throws a pot (184), a loaf of bread (186), and a Christmas present (208) against the wall, makes his hand into a fist while they are arguing (170), and on one occasion waits at home for her with baseball bat in hand (215). During their final encounter, he "puts his hands on the back of her neck, hard" (217). Up until the last incident, they make up after fighting, reconciling through physical affection. In both works, the couples have known each other since childhood. Ruhl's Mary is emotionally
dependent upon Crick, who has laid claim to her love since their eighth birthday. Like the couple in the movie, they experience ongoing financial difficulties; unlike George, however, Crick is unable to provide any sort of stable income. Crick is a version of George stripped of his redeeming social conscience. As he is reduced in this way, focus is placed on his marital interactions. In the film, Mary's rival for George's affection is the coquette Violet; in the play, the female member of the relationship, rather than the male, has an outside interest in the person of Red. She bears the name of a color, as does her counterpart in the film, and Ruhl induces gender complications by introducing a same-sex attraction.

Tellingly, Crick demonstrates a fondness for *It's a Wonderful Life*, viewing it on three separate occasions. The first time is on New Year's Eve as he watches the ending of the movie in which the ensemble celebrates George with a rendition of "Auld Lang Syne." Mary asks if he would like to go with her to her mother's house as she is "all alone." Crick puts her off as he is absorbed in the movie, and Mary calls her mother to tell her that they will not be coming. Ironically, Crick's fascination with the ideal family as portrayed in the movie interferes with the coming together of the actual family of which he is a part. His TV-watching even encroaches on Mary's conversation with her mother as Crick turns up the volume when Mary starts talking on the phone. Crick finds himself moved at the conclusion of the film, and even admits to Mary that he is crying "a little bit" (155-7). He next watches the movie on Thanksgiving. After a fight, Mary has left angrily on a long
walk, and he is alone with their baby, Blue. In the film, what is essentially George's marriage proposal takes the form of an angry diatribe:

George: "Now you listen to me! I don't want any plastics! I don't want any ground floors, and I don't want to get married -- ever -- to anyone! You understand that? I want to do what I want to do. And you're... you're... Oh, Mary... Mary..."

Mary: "George... George... George..."

George: "Mary." (qtd. in Ruhl 189)

They kiss passionately and the next scene is their wedding. George delivers the above speech with great vehemence, grabbing Mary by the shoulders while he does so, obviously conflicted between his dreams and his feelings for Mary. For her part, Mary reverses the traditional gender roles by courting him when he comes to her house, since he is too conflicted to court her.

Mary has had her eye on him since they were young children, much as Crick has loved his Mary since their eighth birthday:

Crick: Do you remember when I first knew I loved you?
Mary: Tell me again.
Crick: It was our eighth birthday. We were supposed to blow out the candles on our cupcakes at the same time. But you were so beautiful, I couldn't blow out my candles. I just kept looking at you. (192)

Crick uses this anecdote, which has been established as the foundational story of their personal mythology, to keep Mary bound in an abusive relationship with him. Crick watches the movie for a third time on Christmas, in this instance viewing the opening sequence in which various characters pray for George. The movie is structured as a flashback so that it opens at the crisis point when George is considering suicide. Ironically, the last line from the movie heard during the play is,
"Please, God, something is the matter with Daddy" (Ruhl, Late 203), a sentiment which Ruhl's Mary takes to heart as she finally leaves Crick on this holiday.

As the word "crick" itself is cowboy slang for creek, the name of Ruhl's character may be linked to the river into which George throws himself. George finds himself reborn after symbolic baptism in the river, which marks his initial encounter with his guardian angel. Crick is continually reborn through the cycle of abuse in the sense that, after becoming physically agitated in a fight with Mary, he becomes his better self in order to make up with her. As Red teaches Mary how to ride a horse, a river functions as a boundary, the crossing of which requires courage (172). Mary must cross a crick on a horse, that is, she must overcome her fear of Crick, before she is able to escape the boundaries that he has set around her.

The love triangle is a common thematic ingredient in Ruhl's work, and here she adapts and intensifies the one from the film. In an early scene in the movie, Mary and Violet both express interest in the young George who is working as a soda jerk. However, the flirtatious Violet never poses a serious threat to the more proper, and hence more suitable, Mary. In the play, Violet has become Red and Mary, rather than George, occupies the apex of the triangle. Crick marries his childhood sweetheart but has her stolen away by a female cowboy. Love triangles figure prominently in Ruhl's other works as well: father, daughter, and her lover in Eurydice; husband, wife, and other woman in The Clean House; a lesbian couple and another woman in Melancholy Play; a woman and two brothers in Dead Man's Cell Phone; and two men and a woman in Passion Play.
C. Holiday Fatigue

Holidays figure prominently in Late. The scene in It's A Wonderful Life from which Ruhl draws primary inspiration takes place on Christmas Eve. Holidays are traditionally a time when families gather together to celebrate, but they also tend to bring out problems and conflicts. This is epitomized in the movie when George's despair over giving up his dreams reaches a new low. Nevertheless, he is brought back into the fold through divine intervention; in light of this Christian theme, it is not coincidental that the scriptwriter chose this particular day for the climactic scene. The first holiday to occur in Late is likewise Christmas, and Mary and Crick play out in mild form the dysfunctional pattern of their relationship in the sense that they resolve a conflict through physical affection. Crick, an aficionado of modern art, presents Mary with an abstract painting. She reacts with dismay, and they experience some friction, but she eventually comes around to granting half-hearted approval and they smooth things over with a kiss. The scene ends happily. A stronger note of discord is sounded on New Years Eve. As Crick is absorbed in watching the movie, Mary calls her mother and then Red, to whom Crick declines to wish a happy holiday. Mary notes that Crick is crying over the movie (157), obviously moved by the story.

On Veteran's Day, Crick loses his job and comes home early. Again, the presence of Red is felt as Mary tries to hide the fact that she went horseback riding with her earlier in the day. They make love. On Thanksgiving, Mary returns to Crick after a long walk after a fight, promises to stay with him and to never see Red
again. At this point, the holidays begin to pass by with accelerating velocity, as Part 3 of the play consists of a sequence of holidays that builds in speed until "it is faster than real time" (195). The sequence concludes with Mary venting her frustration:

(To herself) I'm sick of holidays.
(To God) I'm sick of holidays!
(To the world) I'M SICK OF FUCKING HOLIDAYS!!!!!!!

She sits down, surprised at herself. She breathes. (200)

As the title of the following scene indicates, "Mary Calls Her Mother for Guidance":

Mom, I was wondering. Did it ever happen to you, when you reached a certain age, that every day felt like a holiday? (Pause) No, not in a good way. I mean -- I have no -- recollection of the normal days -- in between the holidays. Do you think having children could do this to you? (201)

Mary finds herself trapped in a sequence of holidays because she is trying to conform to the abstract notion of the ideal American family, an ideal that has been linked to Christmas Eve in particular, and holidays in general, through It's a Wonderful Life. The ideal is wearing thin for her as Red has provided her with an alternative vision to a continued existence with Crick, and so she leaves him on Christmas Eve, as George left the movie Mary, except Ruhl's Mary returns only to collect her daughter rather than to stay permanently. Thus the holidays have come full circle, as the first and the last of them were Christmas and Christmas Eve. The Mary of the play leaves her psychologically abusive husband as opposed to that of the movie who is joyfully reunited with hers.

Two of the American playwrights discussed earlier in connection with Ruhl have also written plays that utilize holidays as markers of time. Both are short
works: Wilder's "The Long Christmas Dinner" (1931) and Guare's "In Fireworks like Secret Codes" (1981). Wilder tracks a family through 90 years of Christmas dinners which are, for the most part, pleasant and congenial. At stage left stands a portal symbolizing birth; opposite it stage right, one signifying death. Nurses occasionally wheel newborns through the left portal, and characters teeter out the other at intervals. The conversation tends towards the banal as Wilder sets the everyday and ordinary against the flux of birth and death. The holiday dinner serves as an occasion for reminiscing and the conduit through which generations pass, revealing patterns of behavior that are passed on from generation to generation. The work is thematically similar to "Pullman Car Hiawatha," with which it was published in 1931, and the later Our Town, setting the familiar and everyday against a broader backdrop, although here that backdrop is presented more simply, as indicated by the two portals. In contrast to Ruhl's handling of the holiday sequence, Wilder's characters cherish their time together; as in Ruhl, time passes too quickly, but it does so in the pleasant company of family rather than speeding by relentlessly. The family is an archetypal American one, more or less free from conflict, and not tested in the way that George and Mary's is in It's a Wonderful Life. Written in the late 1920s and published in 1931 (Wilder, Collected Short Plays 2), "The Long Christmas Dinner" belongs to an era in which the theme of self-sacrifice so important to the film would not have been valued as highly. The tradition finally dies out in the old house after all of the younger generations move away, leaving only the aged spinster cousin to exit through the death portal. Even her exit,
however, alludes to the continuing cycle of life, since in her final words she mutters the names of the newest additions to the family, who have been christened after the ancestral couple that set the first Christmas dinner in the house 90 years before.

Guare's play takes place on the Fourth of July as five well-to-do friends watch the fireworks from a New York City penthouse. Between calling out the colors of the display, they reminisce about past holidays. One recounts ringing the bells during a hectic service at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem on Christmas day; another tells a story of a man wrongly accused of sexual harassment on the New York subway on Memorial Day. The characters contrast what they term the "hysterical" nature of holidays against the poetry of ordinary days. In keeping with the holiday hysteria, the host's partner shocks him by announcing that he is moving back to England after living in the United States for 12 years. In regards to non-holidays, one of the guests contends that Tennessee Williams's dramatic poetry came from the way that people speak in everyday life in New Orleans, another that Harold Pinter was just writing about the "neighborhood on an ordinary day" (257). In this work, holidays do mark time, but not in the same way as in Wilder or Ruhl. The English host especially remembers the Fourth of July in 1976 because that was the year that the tall ships sailed up the Hudson, and the remembrance of that date sets him to calculating how long he has been living in New York (258). Nevertheless, holiday remembrance primarily serves to invoke stories, anecdotes about holidays past. The British expatriate complains that he cannot fully understand America, hence the title of the play in reference to the Fourth of July.
Although holidays are cast as hysteric, this play lacks the frenetic energy of Ruhl's sequence, as the observations are couched in witty repartee and even the startling revelation on the part of the expatriate is met with a measured, well-reasoned response from his partner (258).

One link between the Guare and Ruhl plays is the inclusion of the song, "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," an Irving Berlin melody from the movie Holiday Inn (1942). One of Guare's characters reminisces about seeing the movie as a child, explaining that, "Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire opened a nightclub that was only opened holidays and Irving Berlin wrote a song for each holiday." When asked what they did between holidays, she admits that they "never delved that deep" (252). A love triangle figures in this story as well, as the two men vie for the affection of the singer/dancer played by Marjorie Reynolds. The Crosby character initially retreats to the country in order to take up farming and escape from a grueling performance schedule. He discovers that his new lifestyle is far from easy and cooks up the Holiday Inn scheme so that he will be able to work less and enjoy life more. The theme of retreating to nature in search of a slower, simpler lifestyle is echoed in Late. Mary and Crick sing a verse of "White Christmas" during the holiday sequence, and Ruhl may well have drawn inspiration for the sequence from the movie, since in both works the days between holidays simply do not exist.

D. "She's No Cowgirl, She's a Cowboy"

Ruhl sets the myth of the American cowboy against that of the American family. Red personifies the rugged individual who goes her own way as opposed to
the self-sacrificing family man, as exemplified by the protagonist of It's a Wonderful Life. In The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture (1979), William W. Savage, Jr., examines the myth of the cowboy as it has been established through entertainment and the media. He notes that some of the attributes of this archetype are a folksy sort of wisdom as well as a lack of connection with current events (20-3), a knowledge of the ways of nature (24), and a courteous manner towards ladies (97). Skillful horsemanship may be added to the list, as may be seen in countless Western films. Ruhl has bestowed all these characteristics on Red and uses her to gently satirize the myth. For example, she and Mary share a moment of cowboy wisdom in the café as they discuss different types of ethnic food:

Mary: I wonder if they feel bad, making food for us in America.
Red: Who?
Mary: The Vietnamese and the Koreans. After those wars. Why would they want to cook food for us, d'you think?
Red: Maybe they don't want to. Maybe it's for the money.
Mary: What exactly happened in those wars anyway? Who was fighting who?
Red: The north, the south. It's always the north and the south.
Mary: Maybe if people appreciated -- really appreciated -- the cuisines of other nations -- they would say to themselves -- my body has been nourished by this other country. I will be good to its citizens.
Red: Could be.
Mary: Well, I just don't know.
Red: About wars? How they begin and how they end?
Mary: Yeah.
Red: Me neither.
Mary: I wish I knew.
Red: Me, too.
All I know is what a cowboy needs. Simple food. No fancy spices. (143-4)
Red skirts the complexities of the Vietnamese and Korean wars, reducing them to battles between the north and the south, and denies the need for knowledge beyond that pertaining to her own needs. She is able to lead the simple cowboy life by keeping her mind uncluttered and refusing to engage in life's complexities, in contrast to the confused Mary:

Mary: Lately -- I can't decide simple things, like should I eat this potato chip or should I take a walk.... If you want to eat something, you eat it.
Red: I reckon so.
Mary: If you want to take a walk, you take a walk.
Red: I do.
Mary: You don't think about it before hand.
Red: Nope.
Mary: That's nice. (154-5)

Her laconic responses are also consistent with the cowboy's tendency to say no more than is necessary. She is comfortable to even just sit with her companion without engaging in conversation (182-3).

Red exhibits her knowledge of the ways of nature through her skill with horses. Mary reports that Red "sings horse lullabies for a job" (130). Although she lives in Pittsburgh, Red works outside the city limits (148) and she knows how to break horses (179-81). Not only is she courteous to ladies, she insists on defining Mary as one:

Red: I think you are a real lady.
Mary: No, I'm not.
Red: You are.
Mary: No, I don't wear the right things. I don't write the best thank-you letters and death notes. I know I don't.
Red: Well, I think you're a true lady.
Mary: Well, thank you.
Red: See? A true lady knows how to accept a compliment.
Mary: I just did that, didn't I?
Red: Yeah. (210)

She teaches Mary how to ride a horse, and this causes conflict in Mary's marriage, as when she tries to hide that she has been out of the house with Red when Crick comes home early on Veterans Day (173-4), or when Red delivers her to her house on horseback (183).

Red's songs punctuate the action of the play. She performs either alone or with Mary singing along, accompanying herself on the guitar if the actress playing her is able to do so (122). The improvisational quality of her singing is established in the first song, in which she makes a nonsensical rhyme with "man" of "crayon," as if searching for a suitable word (133). As a singer of horse lullabies, Red upholds the cowboy tradition of singing to soothe animals; music was used to calm cattle to keep them from stampeding at night (Savage 79). She also takes her place in the tradition of the commercial singing cowboy. Performers of country music adopted the "strong, masculine image of the cowboy" beginning in the 1930s because it sold better than the other available persona, that of the "yokel" or "barefooted clodhopper" (Savage 80-1); the association between the cowboy and country music continues to this day. In addition to lullabies, which Red sings both for horses and for Mary's baby Blue, she performs songs that reveal her thoughts, such as a love song for Mary (148), a celebration of the carefree life of the cowboy (158), a lamentation over a broken heart (175), and a composition urging Mary to leave
Crick (188). She thus loosely chronicles the transference of Mary's affection from Crick onto herself. Ruhl uses song elsewhere to reinforce thematic ideas, as in the "Song from the Company" in Melancholy Play, which laments the passing of Tilly's sorrowful mood (305-6), and in the "Spring Song" in the first part of Passion Play, which celebrates that season as one of fornication (20).

Another quality attached to the myth of the cowboy is that of "unadorned masculinity," an association that has been reinforced through cigarette advertising (Savage 4). Ruhl calls for "an image of the Marlboro Man [hovering] in the distance" (121) in her set design. The Marlboro Man was designed to sell a product previously intended for women; the ad campaign started in the 1950s, appeared in television commercials through 1970, and continued in print ads after that time. The campaign was finally discontinued when two of the models that had appeared in the ads died of lung cancer (Schalch).

Visual artist Richard Prince began exhibiting rephotographed Marlboro ads in 1983 (Heartney). He recropped the images and removed all of the text. This effort has been situated within the first wave of postmodernist photography, which "pillaged the mass media and advertising for its 'subject'" and challenged assumptions about what constitutes authorship (Solomon-Godeau 204). In "Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics" (1989), Abigail Solomon-Godeau observes that Prince began producing his cowboy images near the beginning of the Reagan presidency, and that this series "pointedly addressed the new conservative agenda and its ritual invocations of a heroic past....
Prince made visible the connections among cultural nostalgia, the mythos of the masculine, and political reaction" (204).

Although Ruhl's appropriation of the Marlboro Man does not reference the political relations agenda of the Reagan administration, it does evoke connections between cultural nostalgia and the mythos of the masculine. Ruhl subverts this mythos by making her cowboy a woman, stressing, in her character description of Red, that, "She's no cowgirl, she's a cowboy" (121). In *Gender Trouble* (1999), Judith Butler calls on drag to make the case that gender is performative rather than essential (171-80). She discerns three strands of corporeality that come into play in drag: "anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance" (175). Red is presumably anatomically female, although the possibility that she is possessed of both male and female biological features, like Blue, is not ruled out. Her identity and performance are masculine. By raising issues of gender through the incorporation of a female cowboy, the playwright draws attention to the playing out of normative gender roles in the relationship between Crick and Mary, behavior which echoes that of the idealized cinematic family portrayed in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Ruhl elaborates on the thematic element of sexual identity by way of Mary's baby, who is born with both male and female sexual features. Ruhl gives special thanks to Anne Fausto-Sterling and her *Sexing the Body*, published in 2000 (Ruhl, *Late* 122). Fausto-Sterling is a professor of biology and gender studies at Brown University and is Paula Vogel's spouse ("Paula Vogel, Anne Fausto-Sterling"). In
her book, she argues against conceptualizing sexual identity as limited to the male/female binary, providing evidence that a whole range of configurations exist through case studies of individuals who are biologically endowed with various combinations of male and female attributes (see her Chapter 2). She opposes the prevalent medical practice of surgically altering sexually ambiguous newborns, advocating for greater acceptance of the intersexual individual (95-109). Such a surgery is performed on Mary's baby Blue in order to define her as a girl. Consistent with Fausto-Sterling's opinion, Mary expresses, if not outright opposition to, at least some measure of concern about the procedure: "I guess it's a girl now. I don't know why they couldn't have left well enough alone" (164). These sexual identity politics play into a broader theme of individuality versus conformity that is also expressed in the struggle between Crick and Mary over the baby's name. Crick would like to name her Jill because "things are going to be weird enough, without her having a weird name" (167). Mary would like to name her Blue partly in honor of her friend Red (147), and partly as an expression of a unique individuality: "Because everyone is named Jill. And she's not like everyone" (167). Blue is specified to be invisible because she is a blank, like the two fortunes which Mary unwraps in the Chinese restaurant which, according to Red's interpretation, leave the future open to strange and beautiful possibilities (213). Her physical sexuality is ambiguous and her gender identification and performance are as yet undetermined; Ruhl casts this as a state of creative opportunity rather than one of confusion.
E. Shades of Rothko

Ruhl references the visual artist Mark Rothko in her "Notes on Production," calling for "reds, blues, [and] greens" from his palette (122). She evokes painters in other works as well, such as Edward Hopper in Dead Man's Cell Phone and René Magritte in Melancholy Play. Hopper appears in two stage directions in the former, both describing Jean:

Jean sits alone.
She looks small and tired.
An Edward Hopper painting, for 5 seconds. (33)
...
She is left alone --
an Edward Hopper painting,
but in the afterlife -- a woman without her shoes. (62)

An American realist, Hopper often depicted scenes of loneliness in paintings in which the mood was "quiet, passive, [and] stark" (Sweet), and thus the invocation of his art provides a visual representation of Jean's isolated state. Rule supports this interpretation by providing an epigraph about Hopper's paintings, attributed to Mark Strand: "In Hopper's paintings there is a lot of waiting going on... They are like characters whose parts have deserted them and now, trapped in the space of their waiting, must keep themselves company" (Ruhl, Dead Man's Cell Phone 3, 2008 version). In Melancholy Play, "A Song from the Company" contains a reference to Magritte:

Life used to be so slow
Life used to be so sweet
Life used to be balconies
And paintings by Magritte! (306)
Much of the work of the Belgian artist, who lived from 1898 until 1967, naturally enough reflects an early 20th-century European sensibility, albeit within a surrealistic style, as may be seen in the clothing and furniture, for example, depicted in his paintings. This sensibility complements that of the cinematic Europe referenced in the play and, indeed, in the first three lines of the song’s refrain as quoted above.

Rothko figures more prominently in Late than the other two artists do in the works discussed above. Ruhl specifies a backdrop that is a cross between a Rothko painting and the cowboy's open sky:

The hyperrealism of a messy kitchen should float up against the sensation of a deep, abstracted landscape -- horizon lines, empty space. Reds, blues, greens -- think of Rothko. Think of Crick's obsession with modernism, up against Mary's obsession with open land. (121-2)

The names Red and Blue reference colors in Rothko's palette. The three elements in the set of the kitchen, modernist painting, and an open sky, all become associated with slowing down time and clearing the head through the course of the play. Mary prepares the soup with clarifying properties in the kitchen; the open sky is associated with the slower-paced cowboy life as represented by Red; and Crick uses modern art, both as found in the museum and in the form of the painting which he gives as a gift to Mary, to clear his own mind. Many of Rothko's paintings do indeed suggest landscapes, with two panels of color separated by a horizontal dividing line. The painting Crick touches in the museum, an act for which he is fired, matches the pattern of a Rothko:
At the museum is this painting of just the color red and white. Red on top and white on the bottom. You look at it and you just want to cry your eyes out -- you don't know why. I look at it all day. (177)

His response is consistent with that which might be evoked by a Rothko, as it has been noted that, in many viewers, the modernist's work elicits an experience of a religious, mystical, or spiritual nature (Chave 1).

Ruhl links Crick's response to modern art with, in addition to clearing the head, the slowing down of time. A scene is devoted to Crick examining his painting from different perspectives (151), and he later claims that looking at it helps him make time slow down (207). For her part, Mary seems unable to put the brakes on the harried pace of her life as is demonstrated in the holiday sequence. She finally achieves the desired slowness dancing with Red:

Red: Dance with me.
Mary: I can't dance.
   *They dance.*
Red: Just a two-step.
   There, that's it.
   *They dance.*
Mary: I'm late.
Red: There's no such thing as late. *Slow down.*
   *They dance.*
Mary: Are we in horse time now?
Red: Yeah.
Mary: No one's late in horse time, are they?
Red: No.
   *They dance, cheek to cheek.* (214-5)

Mary finally catches up with herself and reveals the meaning of the title of the play to be a malady and its antidote: the cowboy song does away with lateness by simply abolishing the concept of it. In tune with nature, the cowboy Red lives temporally
outside of the frenetic pace of modern life, just as she lives physically outside the city limits, and entices Mary to join her. Mary and Red are able to "experience time at the exact same speed" (213), a synchronicity that Mary is never able to achieve with Crick. He invites her to join him in the contemplation of his painting, but it simply does not have the desired effect on her (207).

The merging in the set of a Rothko painting and an open sky suggests that both are a means to the same end, which is the attainment of some measure of transcendent peacefulness. The high culture of modern art intersects the popular culture of the cowboy image as the Marlboro Man hovers in the distance. Crick's painting is represented by an empty frame, which he finally holds up to the landscape backdrop (219), viewing the Rothko sky through it. In the closing scene Mary and Red stand over a stroller wearing cowboy hats, Red having taken Crick's place in the family, and sing together a lullaby with a curious last line:

Oh, as the sun sets
The horses do sleep
The fields they are long
And the crick it is deep...
   Oh, find me a child
Who grows into a girl
Who rides like a man --
With a mask. (219)

The concluding line references identity as a mask, recalling the characterization of gender as performance as discussed above. Ruhl frequently resists sentimentality through the injection of humor, as for example with the fast-paced conclusion of Dead Man's Cell Phone, which ironizes the coming together of Jean and Dwight. In
this case she defends against sentimentality, not through humor, but by drawing attention back to two of the themes of the work, gender and sexual identity. Furthermore, the godlike presence of the Marlboro Man, looking down as if from an invisible billboard, ironizes the image of the cowboy as situated in a transcendent space outside of hectic, modern life. A modernist such as Rothko lived at a time in which one might be expected to strive to imbue one’s art with an essential meaning, but a playwright such as Ruhl, working in the postmodern era, troubles her characters' quest for fulfillment with an image from advertising dreamt up to sell cigarettes.

The employment of contemporary media may be regarded as a form of intertextuality, since "texts" in the postmodern sense are not limited to those in written form. Postmodern art frequently draws on popular culture (Schmidt 40), and so Ruhl's quotations of *It's a Wonderful Life* and the Marlboro Man may be seen as characteristic of postmodernism, drawing as they do on popular, mediatized culture. Her appropriation of the 1946 film assumes a political aspect in the sense that she centralizes the spousal abuse that is incidental to the film. This may be read as a feminist act in the sense that Ruhl brings attention to and champions the abused spouse, who is positioned as ancillary to the male protagonist in the film, centralizing her as the protagonist who succeeds in freeing herself from an abusive marriage. The reworking of an appropriated text in the service of a feminist agenda is consistent with the political efforts of various postmodern feminist playwrights as listed by Kerstin Schmidt, whose scholarship on postmodernism is employed in the
previous chapter, such as Suzan-Lori Parks, Ntozake Shange, Adrienne Kennedy, and others (39).

The blurring of the boundary between high and low culture, another aspect of intertextuality (40-1), may be found in Ruhl's setting for Late, combining, as it does, the palette of Rothko with the image of the Marlboro Man. The set is to suggest a landscape, and the experience of the landscape, and by extension nature, as mediated by the high culture of modernist painting and the low culture of cigarette advertising. As discussed above, a state of transcendent peace may be arrived at either through an experience of modern art, in the case of Crick, or through the cowboy lifestyle, as exemplified by Red. The American Transcendentalists extolled serenity achieved through the direct experience of nature; Ruhl's characters approach bliss through high art that suggests nature, and a mediatized understanding of the cowboy experience. In both cases, a copy of nature has replaced the original, or more precisely a simulacrum of a nature that never existed stands in for the experience of nature. Yet Ruhl does not mourn the absence of a direct experience of nature but rather deploys the simulacra in a playful manner as is consistent with postmodernism.

Schmidt differentiates between modernism and postmodernism in a number of ways. She paraphrases Jacques Derrida to posit two different modes of interpretation, the first associated with modernism, the second with postmodernism: one "seeks to discover the truth and the origin of things, whereas the other affirms a playful disposition" (Schmidt 20). In a modernist work, a disassociation from
nature would perhaps be cause for anxiety and alienation, whereas in a postmodern work it would most likely be seized upon as an opportunity for play. Ruhl utilizes the latter approach as she employs the Marlboro Man in order to expose the constructedness of the cowboy image and to counter and augment it with her own interpretation of the female cowboy. The characters seek, not the origin of things, but an experience of stillness, and the path to that stillness is presented as multiple rather than singular, accessible through both high and low culture. Ruhl appropriates images in a playful, postmodern manner in her one-act, Snowless, as well. In it, she quotes at length from Maurice Maeterlinck’s The Life of the Bee, a work that she clearly admires as she thanks the author, in her stage directions, for his "beauty" (Ruhl, Snowless 10). The graceful prose extracted from Maeterlinck's nonfiction study serves to educate the audience about the plight of the bee in the face of global warming; in this case Ruhl draws on the external text for didactic purposes. The tactic of filling up dialogue with direct quotation, from a nonfiction work at that, is representative of postmodern intertextuality.

**F. Additional Ingredients**

It has been seen that the Ruhl recipe calls for heaping quantities of mythology and archetype. She typically throws a strong sense of nostalgia into the mix as well, indicative of a longing for a simpler, slower time; perhaps this represents a desire on the part of the playwright to revisit her own childhood when her family was whole. Although death and bereavement are not dominant
components in Late as they are in other works, nevertheless they are included in small measure. Mary reveals her fear of death in a journal entry:

Bad things could happen. Your heart could stop ticking inside your body. Your husband could drop dead and you could find him laying there, his face blue. A window could fall on you. Some people have defective hearts that just stop ticking. There's nothing you can do. I might have one of those hearts. I might drop dead at any moment. Some people spontaneously burst into flames. No warning. (158)

Her obsession with death reflects an ongoing anxiety about her life in general and her marriage in particular. As if in reference to Eurydice, Crick compares weddings to funerals:

I think we shouldn't have bridesmaids. Those matching dresses -- it's weird. Like seven nurses in lilac preparing to take you to your deathbed. I don't want to have a big party.... A lot of poetry and music and flowers. Love isn't pretty like that. They try to make it pretty. Like a funeral. Cover up what's really going on. With people in uniforms running around arranging things. And meat cooked all wrong. (136)

This analogy equates love with death as something the true nature of which is concealed by a pretty ceremony; the perspective that he expresses does not bode well for the health of his marriage.

On several occasions, Crick expresses a preference for meat and specifically beef (124), which is ironic given that his wife leaves him for a cowboy; Mary and Red come together over a bowl of soup (141). At the risk of overloading the metaphor, it may be stated that the Ruhl recipe frequently calls for food and drink. Sometimes food reinforces community, as when the women gather over homemade, chocolate ice cream in The Clean House (98-100), or in the conciliatory meeting over tea between partners Joan and Frances, and Frances's lover Tilly, at which,
appropriately enough, sandwiches in the shape of triangles are served (269).

Elsewhere, a beverage takes on cultural meaning, as when the Brazilian Matilde serves Virginia an excellent cup of coffee, which, as Matilde sarcastically remarks, helps Virginia to place the housekeeper in her cultural context (20). Food and drink are also used to isolate characters, as when Virginia offers something to drink at the awkward meeting between Lane, Charles, and Ana; everyone requests coffee except for the jilted wife, Lane, who prefers "some hard alcohol in a glass with ice" (59).

In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, the vegetarian Jean goes hungry at the dinner with Gordon's family in which all of the dishes on the table consist entirely of meat (33). Apples (71) and spice (76) spill from Ana's balcony into Lane's living room in *The Clean House*, the first as Matilde and Ana's rejects, the second as thrown by Charles in a fight with Ana. In both cases, Lane's living room is cluttered with her rival's leftovers. In *Eurydice*, the protagonist's thirst, representative of her longing for her father, draws her away from her wedding party and to the water pump where she has her fateful encounter with the Nasty Interesting Man (349-50). Consistently, Ruhl serves up food and drink with her customary wit, as when Mrs. Gottlieb condescends to Jean: "You're very comforting, I don't know why. You're like a very small casserole, has anyone ever told you that" (26)?

The playwright's wit is certainly a hallmark of her style and, as it is evident throughout her work, one example from *Late* should suffice. In the museum, Crick's invitation to Mary to see his favorite painting induces labor:
Crick: Or we could head over to contemporary art. You could see my favorite painting in the entire world.

Mary: What's it called?

Crick: Untitled.

_She doubles over in pain._ (162-3)

The humor is intensified by Mary's lack of appreciation for Crick's taste in art. Ruhl's quirkiness is evident in this play as well, as in assigning Red the job of singing horses to sleep. Her style has been discussed elsewhere, but it should be emphasized that she mixes elements of pop culture, even to the point of camp, with references to high culture as in the case, for example, of the painters discussed above. A nostalgia for times past is set up against current concerns. As Ruhl has stated, "I tend to like the ancient and the modern up against each other" (qtd. in Pressley). She also prefers to end her plays on a positive note, as may be seen in Matilde's vision of heaven in _The Clean House_, the reunion at the conclusion of _Melancholy Play_, the vows of love between Jean and Dwight in _Dead Man's Cell Phone_, the formation of a new family in _Late_, and the airborne departure in a gigantic boat of Pontius in _Passion Play_. Ruhl is an optimist; her heroes and heroines overcome obstacles to obtain some sort of resolution and a degree of happiness. The exception is _Eurydice_, the ending of which expresses deep sorrow.

In _Passion Play_, Ruhl brings the modern and, if not the ancient, at least the early modern up against each other. If _Late_ is a soup, then _Passion Play_ is a buffet. The writing of the three-part cycle spanned twelve years, and shifts in Ruhl's style and concerns can be traced through it. The first part resembles _Eurydice_ in the dense imagery contained in the dialogue and in its tragic ending in a death by
drowning and a suicide. The second part contains less imagery but the ending is no
less tragic, culminating in a little girl taken prisoner and shipped to a concentration
camp. The third part follows the struggles of a Vietnam veteran as he tries to make
sense of his shattered life, a task at which he ultimately succeeds. The cowboy
appears here as well, through the persona of Ronald Reagan, who liked to portray
himself as a rugged, American outdoorsman. The play journeys from Elizabethan
England, to Nazi Germany, and finally to South Dakota and Washington, D.C.,
starting in the year 1575 and ending in the present day. Queen Elizabeth, Adolf
Hitler, and Reagan make appearances, as do Elizabethan sailing ships and big,
beautiful fish puppets.
VI. Apocalypse Deferred: Passion Play

A. Passionate Beginnings

Passion Play is Ruhl's most ambitious work to date. It consists of three parts, each of which could stand on its own, and each of which focuses upon a particular presentation of the biblical Passion. The first part is set in Elizabethan England, the second Nazi Germany, and the third, South Dakota during the Vietnam and Reagan eras. The complete cycle's entire running time is some three-and-a-half hours. Ruhl began working on the play 12 years prior to the premiere of the revised cycle at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in the fall of 2007 (Ruhl, "Playwright's Note" 2). The first part served as her undergraduate thesis at Brown University under the auspices of Paula Vogel (Wren 31). Ruhl describes how she began to formulate the play:

Passion Play came from a tiny idea. I thought: what if someone who played Pontius Pilate all his life wanted to play the role of Christ, played by his cousin? I had been traveling in England and brought with me a prized possession, a children's book called Betsy and the Great World. Perhaps this is not the place to publicize my fanatical love of the Betsy-Tacy series, but nevertheless, it was that book, with its travelogue of Betsy's pre-WWI trip to Oberammergau, Bavaria, that gave rise to the play. In Betsy's romp through Oberammergau, all the actors she meets are actually so holy as to embody the living picture of the New Testament.

I got to thinking: what if the woman playing the Virgin Mary were not quite as pure as her presentation might suggest? What if the actor playing Christ were a megalomaniac? As it turns out, Hitler came to the Oberammergau Passion in 1934 and was greeted with jubilation.... By the end of WWII, the entire village of Oberammergau had joined the Nazi party, with the exception of the actors who played Judas and Pilate. After having learned that information, I felt I couldn't end the play in the sixteenth century, which is how the first act ends. The Elizabethan's struggle with religious representation is only the beginning of a story that gets much darker in the twentieth century. (qtd. in Svičh 37)
Following this scheme, in the first part of the cycle the character who plays Pilate envies his cousin the role of Christ; in the second part, Hitler visits Oberammergau; and in the third, the actor who plays Jesus is a megalomaniac to the extent that he is an actor primarily concerned with the advancement of his career. Ruhl also drafted the second part while an undergraduate at Brown University, and continued to work on it after graduating (Vogel, "Sarah Ruhl" 58). The first part was awarded the Fourth Freedom Forum Playwriting Award through the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival and thus qualified for a reading at the Sundance Theater Laboratory in 2000 (Wren 31-2).

The reading at Sundance caught the attention of director Mark Wing-Davey who was there working on Naomi Iizuka's 36 Views. Wing-Davey notes that he was "struck" by Ruhl's play, "by the language and its approach, by its particular voice." He subsequently staged the first two parts of Passion Play at a small theater in London called the Actor's Centre on a budget of £100. It was only scheduled to run for one week but "the actors all fell in love with the play," and, even though the director and three cast members had to leave due to prior commitments, replacements were found for the actors and the run was extended (Wing-Davey, qtd. in "Directing Passion Play" 10). Arena Stage, in Washington, D.C., commissioned the third part, and the entire cycle was presented there in 2005, staged by Artistic Director Molly Smith (Isherwood, "The Life and Times"). Ruhl regrets that, for this
production, she "didn't have time to quite finish the third act" (qtd. in "A Passion for Theater" 2). She revised it for the Goodman Theatre production.

Each part revolves around a Passion Play presented at a different period in history: Elizabethan England in 1575; Oberammergau, Germany in 1934; and Spearfish, South Dakota, from 1969 through the present day. These are based upon historic occurrences of Passion Plays. In the "Playwright's Note" included in the script, Ruhl provides background information. She explains that about 100 villages would have been presenting the Passion in 1575; during that year, Queen Elizabeth banned all religious plays due to their Catholic associations. Hitler attended the Oberammergau Passion twice in 1934, and expressed admiration for its anti-Semitism (2). The recurring presentation by the Bavarian village came about as a result of a promise made to God in 1633 that if He would preserve the townspeople from the plague, they would mount a Passion Play every ten years (Creamer 7). The tradition continues to this day ("Oberammergau"). The Spearfish version, known as the Black Hills Passion Play, was established in 1939 by the German Josef Meier, who had led a touring version in the United States starting in 1932 (Sponsler 142-3). It also has survived into the present day (Black Hills). As Tom Creamer notes in "Queen, Fuehrer, President: Politics, Passion and Play," Ruhl has chosen the settings with "great care" at periods of "great political charge" that were "each dominated by figures able to imprint their personalities on history" (6). Ruhl inserts these dominating figures, inclusive of Ronald Reagan, Queen Elizabeth, and Adolph Hitler, into her play, and observes that, "each of those three figures addresses
questions of how powerful people use theater to make things happen; how they use
the same tricks that actors do to be liked and to control politics" ("Passion for
Theater" 3). The playwright expresses an interest in exploring "the relationship of
community to political icons" (Ruhl, "Playwright’s Note" 4).

B. Three Passions

As she began working on the play, Ruhl reports: "I started thinking, how
would it shape or misshape a life to play a biblical role year after year" (Ruhl,
"Playwright’s Note" 2)? Within each part of the play, the characters respond to the
pressures of playing their role, and they conform to or diverge from the biblical
roles that they assume to varying degrees. The same actor plays the same part in
each section of the play, and each part of the play assumes a different focus. In Part
One, Mary 1 finds herself unable to live up to her role, that of the Virgin Mary. She
lusts after the actor playing Jesus, and wanders outside at night in search of male
companionship. She becomes pregnant after an encounter with the actor playing
Pilate, who is himself named Pontius, and, despairing over her unworthiness in the
eyes of God, drowns herself. Pontius hates his good-looking and virtuous cousin
John, who plays Jesus. Pontius suffers from a physical deformity and is only
partially made, in a sense, as there is a hole where his bellybutton should be which
leaves him vulnerable to the outside world.

In the second part, the anti-Semitic nature of the Oberammergau Passion
Play is emphasized. Rule has inserted an historical speech made by Hitler in which
he praises the performance for its portrayal of the Jews as those responsible for
Jesus's death. The Village Idiot of the first part has become Violet, an orphaned Jewish girl, and she is taken prisoner by Eric, who plays the role of Jesus, and presumably transported to a concentration camp at the conclusion. The actress playing the Virgin Mary in this case, who is named Elsa, becomes involved sexually with the German Officer who is wooing her. An attraction exists between the Footsoldier, playing Pontius, and Eric, who plays Jesus; this liaison is threatened by the German officer who holds to the anti-homosexual Nazi party line. Thus both Jewishness and homosexuality are identified as targets of Hitler's regime.

In the third part, the actors playing Pilate and Jesus are now brothers competing over the love of the wife of P, as the actor playing Pilate is called. P serves in Vietnam and returns a broken man, unable to wash his hands of the blood of innocent civilians. His brother J becomes a successful soap opera actor. While P is overseas, J sleeps with his wife, Mary 1, and as a result the paternity of her daughter, Violet, remains unclear. J pushes to raise the standards of the Passion Play and to make it more commercial, towards which goal the Young Director, a draft-dodger with a fake English accent, is hired; he tangles with the veteran P who rejoins the production after his tour of duty. This section spans from 1969 until the present day and includes a number of appearances by Ronald Reagan.

C. Second Comings

In Arguing the Apocalypse, A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric (1994), Stephen D. O'Leary posits that the "three essential topoi of apocalyptic argument" are authority, time, and evil (19). Through the Apocalypse, the problem of the
existence of evil, which would seem to be at odds with that of a beneficent God, is resolved once and for all at the end of time (51). If it is to attract followers, any proclamation of an impending apocalypse must be issued from a position of some degree of authority. A primary source of apocalyptic thinking in the Christian tradition is the New Testament Book of Revelation in which John of Patmos relates a vision of a final struggle between good and evil, one that concludes with the triumph of good. In their introduction to Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements (1997), Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer observe that the apocalyptic model is one of crisis-judgment-reward:

A persecuting tyrant (e.g., Antichrist) oppresses the faithful and is destroyed by divine forces, after which there is divine judgment involving retribution for the wicked and a (possibly utopian) reward for the deserving. (5)

They distinguish between apocalyptics, "who focus mainly on the catastrophic apocalypse," and millenarians, "who are more concerned with a utopian postapocalyptic order" (9). They further differentiate between postmillennialism and premillennialism; in the former, Christ returns after the millennial kingdom has been brought about by human agency, and in the latter, Christ must vanquish the Antichrist at Armageddon before the millennium may commence. The millennium itself is a thousand year period of peace on earth presided over by Christ (9). In "Millennialism with and without the Mayhem" (1997), Catherine Wessinger suggests replacing the terms premillennialism and postmillennialism with the more descriptive phrases "catastrophic millennialism" and "progressive millennialism," respectively (48-52); her recommendation will be followed here.
Some versions of catastrophic millennialism incorporate the Rapture, in which the saints, or faithful Christians, will be lifted into the clouds to be united with Jesus and thereby escape the Tribulation (Robbins and Palmer 11). The scriptural source for the Rapture may be found in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.¹

In "Constructing Apocalypticism: Social and Cultural Elements of Radical Organization" (1997), David G. Bromley distinguishes between two methods for building religious authority, the priestly and the prophetic. The former builds continuity between the transcendent and phenomenal realms, the latter emphasizes discontinuity between the two. The priestly mode upholds the existing social order whilst the prophetic challenges it (33-4). Stagings of the Passion Play itself operate in the priestly mode in the sense that they make manifest the connection between the earthly and spiritual realms by reiterating the act that made possible the Christian salvation of all humankind.

Drawing upon theories of drama, O'Leary differentiates between tragic and comic versions of apocalypse. He notes that many scholars before him have analyzed Revelation in dramatic terms (66) and draws especially on the critical theories of Kenneth Burke and Susanne K. Langer as he formulates his terms. In

¹ This and other passages are taken from the New American Standard Bible.
the tragic, destiny is portrayed as Fate; in the comic, as Fortune. Whereas Fate is
predetermined and unalterable, Fortune is open-ended and variable. In the tragic,
evil is expressed "in terms of guilt," its "mechanism of redemption is victimage,"
and its plot advances toward sacrifice. In the comic, evil is expressed as error,
resolution comes about through recognition, and the plot advances towards "the
exposure of fallibility." The moral order is restored through suffering in tragedy; in
comedy, "by exposing the foolishness of pretension and vanity." Comedy is
episodic, tragedy progressive (68-9). It follows that a literal interpretation of
Revelation will produce a tragic vision of the Apocalypse as an event that will
invariably occur inclusive of the sacrifice of the Lamb, which leads to the final
restoration of the moral order through the banishment of evil. An allegorical
reading of Revelation will tend toward a comic interpretation in that the struggle
against evil is envisioned as a day-to-day battle in which the individual must strive
to overcome his or her foolishness and resist temptation.

The Passion and Resurrection of Christ as enacted in the Passion Play would
seem to fall, under O'Leary's definition, in the category of the tragic. Christ is the
victim in a pre-ordained sacrifice that resolves sin in his followers. Ruhl interrupts
the tragic depiction of the Passion in her play with versions of the second coming.
In the first part, Mary 1 attempts to pass off the impending birth of her child as the
second coming in order to legitimize her pregnancy. In the second, the Third Reich,
which Hitler characterized as a thousand-year empire (Shirer 5), functions as a
secularized millennium. President Reagan manipulates fear of a nuclear holocaust
as Armageddon in the third part. Ruhl presents various other counter-narratives to the Passion itself in all three parts.

**D. Frye's Apocalyptic Imagery**

In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye diagrams the archetypical symbols of the Biblical Apocalypse:

- **divine world** = society of gods = One God
- **human world** = society of men = One Man
- **animal world** = sheepfold = One Lamb
- **vegetable world** = garden or park = One Tree (of Life)
- **mineral world** = city = One Building, Temple, Stone (141)

He positions Christ as the unifying meta-symbol:

The conception "Christ" unites all these categories in identity: Christ *is* both the one God and the one Man, the Lamb of God, the tree of life, or vine of which we are the branches, the stone which the builders rejected, and the rebuilt temple which is identical with his risen body. (141-2)

Frye associates the world of the apocalyptic with "the heaven of religion" as opposed to imagery of the demonic. The apocalyptic images represent "human desire, as indicated by the forms they assume under the work of human civilization," as opposed to the demonic, which portrays "the world as it is before the human imagination begins to work on it;... the world also of perverted or wasted works, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly" (147).

Frye further notes that, in apocalyptic symbolism, man cannot be confined to "his two natural elements of earth and air," but must pass through trials of fire and water when traveling to other realms. Poetic symbolism positions fire above life in this world, and water below. The passage to heaven necessitates traversing a region
of fire that, like the heat of alchemy, serves a purifying and transmutational
function. On the other hand, as the realm below human life, water represents a state
of "chaos or dissolution which follows ordinary death, or the reduction to the
inorganic. Hence the soul frequently crosses water or sinks into it at death" (145-6).

Ruhl introduces imagery of fish and birds that challenges the sovereignty of
the Lamb and the unifying power of the Christ. The deaths of Mary 1 and Pontius
in the first part are met, not with images associated with Heaven or Hell, but with
the appearance of large fish puppets that carry off the body of Pontius. The sacrifice
is not of the Lamb, but symbolically of Pilate, the one who ordered the sacrifice of
the Lamb. Whereas Christ calms the storm and is associated with the anchor in
eyear Christian art, P incites the wind rather than attempting to overcome it, and
hoists his anchor in order to sail across the sky. He thereby rejects the stabilizing,
unifying symbol of Christ.

E. Undermining the Passion

Ruhl's inclusion of a wise fool character in the person of the Village
Idiot/Violet provides a comic counterpart to the tragic tone of the Passion. In Satire:
Spirit and Art (1991), George A. Test reports that the wise fool as a type reached its
height during the late Middle Ages (210). The Christian humanist Erasmus
provides a rich exploration of the wise fool in his "Praise of Folly" (1511), asserting
that all men are fools, even the Savior:

All this surely points to the same thing: that all mortals are fools, even the
pious. Christ too, though he is the wisdom of the Father, was made
something of a fool himself in order to help the folly of mankind, when he
assumed the nature of man and was seen in man's form; just as he was made sin so that he could redeem sinners. (148)

Along similar lines, in "Sileni Alcibiadis" Erasmus discusses the Sileni, which he describes as small statues made out of wood which, when opened, reveal inside the image of a deity. Erasmus reports that Alcibiades, in Plato's *Symposium*, compares Socrates to this type of statue in the sense that his unattractive exterior concealed his great wisdom. Erasmus extends the metaphor to Christ:

And what of Christ? Was not He too a marvelous Silenus, (if one may be allowed to use such language of Him)?... Observe the outside surface of this Silenus: To judge by ordinary standards, what can be humbler or more worthy of disdain? Parents of modest means and lowly station, and a humble home; poor Himself and with few and poor disciples, recruited not from nobleman's palaces or the chief sects of the Pharisees or the lecture-rooms of philosophers, but from the publican's office and the nets of fishermen. And then His way of life: what a stranger He was to all physical comforts as He pursued through hunger and weariness, through insults and mockery the way that led to the cross! (Erasmus, "Sileni" 264)

Shakespeare would almost certainly have been familiar with these works; regardless, his plays provide numerous examples of the wise fool. The fool in Shakespeare and elsewhere is granted "the freedom to speak forbidden, unwanted, or unrecognized truths" (Test 210).

The positioning of even Christ as a wise fool counters a tragic vision of the Apocalypse. A fool, even a wise one, is by definition prone to error, and so restoration of the moral order through the revelation of error is a more likely progression than that of the tragic vision in which order is restored through suffering and sacrifice. Additionally, Ruhl's wise fool offers images and narratives that run counter to those of the Passion Play. In the first part, the Village Idiot disrupts the
rehearsal by playing with a Jack-in-the-box. The image of Jack the puppet corresponds to Pilate in this section's interpretation of the Passion which casts him as a mere pawn, playing an essential, if unsavory, role in the crucifixion. This correspondence is mapped through the actor playing the part, who bears the same first name as the character, that of Pontius. The script gives clues as to his physical deformity: he complains that the doctor did not sew up his umbilicus correctly at his birth (21) and that he can cry only out of one eye (24). In the 2007 Goodman Theatre production, actor Brian Sgambati reinforced this physicalization by turning one foot in, walking with a limp, and hunching and twisting his spine. Twice Pontius experiences himself as a puppet, crying out, "[A]h, the tingling in my head again -- something pulling -- like a string at the top -- a puppet -- up down up down, string" (10) and later, "The pain in my head again -- as though a string is attached... a puppet -- up down up down, string" (24). He also refers to the moon looking down at him with "the fat white face of a dunce" (21).

The Village Idiot may as well be describing Pontius as she speaks to her Jack-in-the-box: "Jack! You again -- darling Jack, I thought I'd never see you again, shut down in that dark, dark box, your body all bent and twisted.... Beautiful, beautiful Jack with your heart in a box" (15). Pontius keeps his heart in a box in the sense that he hides his love for Mary 1, who is infatuated with John, feeling that he cannot compete with his more attractive rival. He consummates his desire for Mary 1 only after the virtuous John, oblivious to her advances, has rejected her. Pontius promises not to reveal his tryst with her, swearing that he will be as "silent as a
closed box underwater” (28). If the biblical Pilate is situated as a puppet, then his puppet master must be God. In this respect, the Village Idiot plays God to Pontius in Ruhl's play. Furthermore, the insertion of the Village Idiot into the play as Eve, the female member of the primal couple, reinforces the concept that all people are fools as descendents of a foolish Eve.

In the second part of the play, Ruhl utilizes Violet to introduce narratives that run counter to that of the Oberammergau Passion. Two of these narratives are in the form of fairy tales, and the third is a rewriting of Jesus's words during the Last Supper. When the Visiting Englishman encounters Violet in the street, she asks him to tell her the story of Little Red Riding Hood. He tells a version symbolic of the future Allies' complacency towards Hitler's rise to power, in which the little girl and the wolf become good friends and live happily ever after (59). At the conclusion of this part, Eric, who plays Jesus and is now enlisted in the army, comes to capture Violet in the forest to have her interred in a concentration camp. He sets the record straight in regards to Little Red Riding Hood, noting that the wolf eats the little girl in the end (111).

Violet disrupts a rehearsal of this virulently anti-Semitic version of the Passion by reciting the story of Hansel and Gretel, dwelling on the part in which the witch threatens to push Hansel into her oven in a reference to the gas chambers and crematoria of the concentration camps (75-6). Ruhl again draws on the fairytale at the conclusion of Part 2 when Violet, lost in the forest, feeds bread crumbs to a hungry bird rather than even attempt to use them to mark her way back out. This act
of kindness and the resulting disorientation underscores her hopeless situation as a Jew in Nazi Germany, and implies a rewritten ending of Hansel and Gretel consistent with that of Little Red Riding Hood, one in which the children succumb to an overpowering force.

During a rehearsal of the Last Supper scene, Violet feeds lines to the forgetful Eric, altering them to counter the anti-Semitic intent of the production:

I will forgive sinners
but it's probably best not to sin
in the first place.
   You have to admit, some
pretty strange things will
be done in my name.
   In time,
you will crawl around like
pigs snorting in the mud
looking for the answer to
this fundamental question:
Is there a God?...
   And if you decide that there
is no God, will you need someone
with vision, someone stronger,
to tell you what to do?
Resist,
I say unto you!
   And finally, I want everyone
at this table,
eating my blood and my body,
to remember that
I am a Jew. (87-8)

Her speech includes an admonition to beware the false prophet, Hitler, and a reminder of Jesus's Semitic origins, but her warning goes unheeded. For this transgression, the Director orders that she be locked in a basket without food for a week, a rather extreme punishment given the crime, but one that foreshadows an
even bleaker destiny for the girl. The visiting Englishman once again exhibits his passivity by taking pictures of Violet being put into the box, but failing to intervene (88).

In the final part, Violet is the daughter of Mary 1 and ranges in age from five to twelve years (113). Her paternity is uncertain; her father is either Mary 1's husband, P, or his brother, J. She seems to retain some memory related to the Violet of the second part, in that she is obsessed with drawing birds and remembers dying in a war (149). When P returns from the Vietnam War as her father, she is initially frightened by his strange behavior, but she quickly overcomes this fear and they form a bond. She shares in his visions of the tall ships flying in the wind (148) and tries to "pluck the wars out of his head with her fingers" (150). Her role is reduced in comparison to the first two parts; here she serves, not as a wise fool, but rather as an innocent with a metaphysical link to the past.

**F. Foundational Imagery**

Ruhl establishes a rich set of images in the first part upon which she draws in the second and third; much of this imagery is derived from biblical and Christian symbology, and some of it is associated with Revelation and Apocalypse. These images include fish, water, the moon, the red sky, birds and air. The fish is an important Christian symbol. In the early church, the Greek word for fish (*ichthus*) was taken to be an acrostic for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior" (*Iesous Christos Theou Huios Soter*) (Speake 54), and early Christians secretly identified themselves
to one another by drawing the symbol of a fish (55). A number of Jesus's followers were fishermen, including the apostle John (Matthew 4.21), as is the character of the same name in the first part of Passion Play. Jesus urges Peter and Andrew to become "fishers of men" (Matthew 4.19) in the sense that they should become savers of souls, and Matthew uses an analogy of the sorting of fish for judgment day, in which the unworthy will be cast into a furnace as into hell (Matthew 13.47-50). Jesus performs a number of miracles involving fish. On one occasion he feeds five thousand people with two fish and five loaves of bread (Mark 6.38-44; Matthew 15.17-21; Luke 9.12-17; John 6.5-13), and on another he feeds four thousand with a few fish and seven loaves (Matthew 15.34-39). After the disciples have had an unsuccessful night of fishing, the resurrected, disguised Jesus instructs them to cast the net on the right side of the boat, upon which they draw in 153 fish (John 21.1-14). Matthew compares the internment and resurrection of Jesus to the time spent by Jonah in the belly of the whale followed by his release (Matthew 12.40), with "whale" appearing as "fish" in early versions of the Bible (Roop 124).

Lois Drewer analyzes the occurrences of what she terms "fish ponds" in early Christian art in "Fisherman and Fish Pond: From the Sea of Sin to the Living Waters" (1981). She notes that, "The fish are usually recognized as symbols of Christian souls, while the fisherman is an image of Christ or the apostles who bring them into a state of salvation" (533). Water holds contradictory connotations in

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2 The intersection of the circles of the mandorla, as discussed in conjunction with Melancholy Play, was known as the vesica piscis, or "fish bladder", and "was an early symbol of Christ in glory" ("Mandorla").
these images as derived from early Christian writings:

Patristic writers hold simultaneously two contradictory views of the qualities associated with the image of the sea and its waters. In a positive sense the sea is viewed as the "living water" in which Christian souls flourish. Tertullian writes in De Baptismo: "We little fish, after the image of our Ichthys Jesus Christ, are born in the water, nor otherwise than swimming in the water are we safe." At the same time, the waters have purely negative connotations either as the sea of this world, or as the bitter sea of sin. (534)

The Christian soul is rescued from the sea of sin by the fisherman, but also finds eternal life in the living water of baptism. The fish-soul experiences a death to the world, that is the sea of sin, and then a resurrection through the effect of the living waters. Birds sometimes appear in early Christian art alongside fish and other sea creatures (540-2). Both fish and birds came into being on the fifth day of creation, according to Genesis (1.20-21), and Tertullian associates birds with "the martyrs which essay to mount up to heaven" (qtd. in Drewer 545). In The Dent Dictionary of Symbols in Christian Art (1994), Jennifer Speake notes that, "In general, birds may sometimes be symbolic of souls, which inhabit both the physical and the spiritual world as birds inhabit the earth and air" (19). Thus both fish and birds may represent the soul. The dove specifically symbolizes the descending Holy Spirit (45).

Another biblical image employed by Ruhl is that of the red sky. When asked by the Pharisees and Sadducees for a sign from heaven, Jesus replies:

When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening." Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? (Matthew 16.2-3)
In Acts 2.20, it is prophesized that a sign of the second coming will be the sun going dark and the moon "turning into blood." In Revelation also, the moon becomes "like blood" (6.12). Whereas in Matthew, a red sky is simply an indicator of the weather, it takes on greater significance in Acts and Revelation as a harbinger of the apocalypse. The moon appears as drenched in blood in these visions; elsewhere in Revelation the moon is associated with a pregnant figure:

A great sign appeared in heaven: A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth.

(Revelation 12.1-2)

Deriving from this vision in Revelation, the crescent moon is associated with Mary in early Christian art according to F. R. Webber in Church Symbolism (180-1), published in 1938. Webber indicates that the rose also is associated with Mary (179). Although the moon is not mentioned, the Gospels note that the sky turned dark during three hours of Jesus's crucifixion, from the sixth hour to the ninth hour (Matthew 27.45; Mark 15.33; Luke 23.44), which is equivalent to the span from 12:00 noon until 3:00 p.m. (Dake 54).

1. Fish of the Sea

Ruhl associates the Pontius of the first part with fish, those that swim in the sea of the world rather than the living water of grace. He guts fish for a living and therefore reeks of them. Additionally, the odor emanates from inside of him: "You can stick your finger way into my belly button, and when you pull it out it smells like gangrene, like fish" (21). His more attractive cousin, John, who plays the
Christ, spends his days upon the clean, living waters. Pontius compares their professions:

    I gut the fish. My cousin -- he catches 'em. He don't have to see their innards. He don't have to talk to dead fish all day. He can talk to the sea. Me -- I close my nose and I smell the stench of dead fish. I close my eyes and see dead fish coming at me in a parade. (21)

He equates the stench of fish with his own unworthiness, particularly in regards to Mary 1: "Hush -- Mary walks. The smell of the moon follows her. And her eyes follow my cousin. Would she kiss a poor fish-monger? Would she wrap her arms around the stench" (26)? Mary 1 offers rose water as an antidote. Through association with the Virgin Mary, the rose connotes purity, and therefore rose water would have a cleansing effect. In the New Testament, Pilate washes his hands of Jesus's blood before releasing him to be crucified (Matthew 27.24). When Mary 1 approaches Ruhl's Pontius to tell him that she is pregnant by him, he washes his hands, but he does so in a bucket of fish (35). He is so immersed in the waters of sin that he lacks any means of washing the smell off of him. He begs of Mary 1 that she run off with him to bear her child, couching his plea in terms of the Passion with himself in the role of the Christ:

    Run away with me, Mary. We'll be a Trinity. You, me, the baby. You can nail me to a cross, Mary, I'm yours, yours forever. You can scourge me every night and still I'm yours forever. (35)

Pontius flounders in a state of generalized primal sin, rather than claiming any sin in particular. He expresses joy rather than remorse over Mary 1's out-of-wedlock pregnancy (36). According to the principles of physiognomy, his appearance has
recommended him to play the villain in the Passion Play, and so through this appearance and his association with the role of Pilate, he assumes a certain degree of sinfulness. As is the case with Pilate, his washing of his hands fails to wash away the sin.

An incident that Pontius relates from his workday allows for numerous symbolic associations:

I gutted a fish today--I thought it was dead--I slit open its belly--and five live fishes squirmed out. They stunk of death. They wriggled and wraggle in the guts of their mother and they died one by one. The last one to go was a real wriggler. He watched everyone go before him--he swam around in their fishy guts—and then I slammed the knife down on his back. I couldn’t stand to see one so alone and so alive, so I killed the poor devil to put it out of its misery. (26)

The image of the lone survivor swimming around in "fishy guts" symbolizes, in a general sense, the lost soul floundering in the waters of sin. It may also be read in turn, specifically, as Mary 1, her unborn child, Pontius himself, the historical/biblical Pilate, Christ, and Pontius's cousin John. Pontius may be seen to have killed Mary 1 by impregnating her, causing her to be trapped in a set of circumstances from which she could imagine no exit except through the act of suicide, which causes the death of her unborn child as well. As Pontius kills himself with a knife specifically while grieving over Mary 1's body, the fish may also represent himself. His actual suicide is set up in advance while rehearsing the play, at which time he stabs himself with a stage knife, miming puncturing his eyes and slitting open his belly as one might a fish (40). Although the New Testament does not narrate Pilate's death, speculations may be found in various sources. In Pontius
Pilate (1999), Anne Wroe chronicles some of these, including a version related in the medieval Golden Legend in which Pontius preempts a death sentence by committing suicide (Wroe 364). Wroe states that, in the Rome of his time, "suicide was often a sacrifice that was performed for the sake of others;" in the case of death by this manner, the wishes of the deceased would be honored and the family's reputation salvaged (365). Also according to the Golden Legend, the emperor ordered Pilate's body to be thrown into the Tiber, but the river rejected it through the agency of devils that "made the air and water seethe" and attacked the city with storm and flood. Next the body was thrown into Vesuvius, which erupted, and thence into the Rhone, which also became troubled by devils. According to local legend, he was finally thrown into "a flaming pit somewhere in the Alps" where the demons were happy to claim their own (Wroe 368-9). The "wriggling and wragging" of the fish in their mother's guts brings to mind the seething of the waters of the rivers into which the body of Pilate was thrown, reinforcing the identification of the last remaining fish with Pontius.

The fish stabbed by Pontius also represents the Christ, the son of God who has descended upon the earth to swim in the sea of sin and whose death is ordered by Pilate. In this symbolic murder Pontius comes as close as he ever does to fulfilling his wish to kill his cousin, as expressed in his opening monologue. It is not his wish merely to kill him, he wants to take his place on the cross, to play the role of Christ:
All my life I've wanted to play Christ... if only, I thought, they'd nail me to a cross, I would feel holy, I would walk upright. And every year my cousin plays the Savior.

I want to kill my cousin. No -- I want -- when he is on the cross -- and if I left him on just the slightest bit too long -- and if the pretend nails were real... then they would nail me to the cross, and I would follow him to glory.

My cousin is a good man.... (10)

He imagines that crucifixion would straighten his twisted spine and make him holy. It would function as a baptism, a dip in the living waters that causes the sinner to be reborn. His way to the cross would be through his cousin's crucifixion, his own holiness bestowed through punishment for the crime of murder. In the Coptic account of Pilate, he is scourged and crucified in order to pay for the sin of ordering Christ's death. The soldiers even hang him from the crucifix used for Christ.

However, he is perceived to be unworthy to follow in the Savior's path and his blood is seen to defile the Savior's crucifix (Wroe 355-6). Ruhl's Pontius's yearning to follow his cousin on the cross finds precedent in this tale which, however, ends poorly for Pilate. Since, according to Christian theology, Christ died on the cross to bear the burden of all men's sin, Pontius's following him to atone for his own sin is redundant and even heretical.

Ruhl provides a counter-narrative to the Christian doctrine of salvation.

Huge fish puppets appear to Pontius twice like pagan gods. In the first instance, he has just expressed envy for his cousin:

He closes his eyes and huge puppet fish walk towards him as if in a parade. They surround him and undress him. They leave to the beating of drums. He turns to the audience. He blinks. The sound of the sea gurgles. (21)
They hint at fulfilling his wish for crucifixion by stripping him as Jesus was stripped before being scourged. The fish are his allies and he belongs to them, as not only does he spend his day among them but also his insides smell like them. They reappear to carry him off after his suicide: "He stabs himself with a knife. He closes his eyes. Drums. Big beautiful fish puppets surround him, lift him up, and carry him off stage. The sky turns blue" (54). These beautiful fish do not signify lost souls swimming in the sinful waters of the world, nor are they saved souls swimming in the living water of salvation. As an unrepentant suicide, Pontius's soul leaves the earth in an unclean state, undeserving of Christian grace. The grace that the fish bestow upon Pontius emanates from some other source. Their presence cleanses as signified by the sky turning from red to blue while they carry him off like a king. The fish challenge the primacy of Christ as the unifying symbol. They inhabit Frye's disintegrating element, the medium of water, associated as it is with death and the passage to the underworld. Yet they are creatures able to navigate this element, and for them it represents life, not the passage into death. They bear Pontius away as if to ready him for the next act and foreshadow, through association, his ability, as P in Part Three, to navigate currents, albeit those of the air.

Prior to his death, Pontius reports, speaking to Mary 1's corpse, that the fish drink his cousin's tears:

No more bloody play, Mary. You needn't have drowned yourself, dear. My cousin is beside himself. He's out in the boat fishing. The fish drink up his salty tears. (54)
The author of Psalm 80 refers to the drinking of tears while pleading with God to answer the prayers of the Israelites and restore them to good fortune:

O Lord God of hosts,
How long will You be angry with the prayer of Your people?
You have fed them with the bread of tears,
And You have made them to drink tears in large measure.  (Psalm 80.5-6)

Drinkers of tears, in this biblical sense, are those who have fallen out of fortune and whose prayers go unanswered. Earlier in the play, encountering Mary 1 wandering alone at night and oblivious to her sexual feelings toward him, John traps some air in a jar for her, presumably to help her mother get over an illness. Sensing a sadness in her, he wishes that he could drink her sorrow (24). This instance falls in line with his affinity for the Christ, in his wishing to assume Mary 1’s troubles. The trope is reversed, however, at the conclusion of the first part, as the fish drink John's tears, absorbing his sorrow.³ In the final scene of the first part, John appears "fishing on the other side of the stage" across from Pontius and Mary 1’s body "as if in a dream" (54), silhouetted against the lit backdrop and casting a net, as staged in the Goodman Theater production. The waterlogged corpse of Mary 1 represents one fish that he was unable to catch; Pontius's self-immolated body, another. It is left to the fish to absorb the Christ-figure's sorrow and to honor the sacrifice of Pontius. They appear as if out of a myth more generic than the representation of fish in Christianity, suggesting figures emerging from a Jungian collective

³ The drinking of tears occurs also in Melancholy Play. There it is associated with death and the transmission of melancholy, resulting in the almond state. In Passion Play it is specifically related to sorrow and grieving.
unconscious. The fish remove Pontius's body to the beating of drums as if honoring him in an ancient ceremony, giving him the respect he wished to earn by having himself crucified. The central symbol of the One Man is thus displaced by a school of fish.

2. "The Smell of the Moon"

Mary 1 tells Mary 2 that she dreams of giving birth to a fish, "a huge, ugly, dead fish with a gaping mouth" (31). The type of animal indicates an affinity to the father, Pontius, and its inanimate state foreshadows that the child will not be carried to term. The dream imagery also figures in a second coming heralded by the reddening of the sky. As noted above, the moon was symbolic of the Virgin Mary in early Christian art. In contrast to his own fishy smell, Pontius notes that "the smell of the moon follows" Mary 1 (26). In a poetic speech, John links the moon to Mary 1:

Sometimes -- tonight -- a feeling of grace comes and I feel peaceful and easy and ready to die but still aware of the moon's beauty, like silver fish scales shedding. Skin covers the world -- luminous moonskin -- and I must step softly and slowly on it -- the cobbled streets have fish-skin, the trees have human skin -- and it is not fearsome, only slow and lovely and soft, but I must be careful not to prick you and make you bleed. (22)

His expression of a readiness to die coupled with an aversion to breaking skin conjures up Jesus on the night before his crucifixion, anticipating scourging and the nails that will attach him to the cross. The moonskin, however, is also associated with Mary 1, whose assumed virginity John cautions himself against breaching.
The moonlight in which he walks heralds the arrival of Mary 1, who appears immediately at the conclusion of the above speech.

Pontius expresses a complex relationship to the moon:

Last night the moon threw its head back, laughing at me--a white wedge--a laughing pitchfork--and tonight the moon sank down on his haunches--his face turned full at me--he looked bewildered and afraid. Had the fat white face of a dunce. You think I'm a bloody fool to speak of the moon, but who else will be a witness to my grief? (21)

The "white wedge" of the moon on the previous night suggests that it was in crescent form, representative of the Virgin Mary and by association Mary 1. That Pontius would experience it laughing at him is consistent with his unfulfilled desire for Mary 1 and conviction that she will spurn his advances. The sudden transformation of the moon into its full phase foreshadows Mary 1's pregnancy, as the moon becomes as round and full as an expectant mother's belly. Suddenly the moon is no longer laughing; he looks "bewildered and afraid," projecting the mood change in Mary 1 that will follow the discovery that she is with child. Only Mary 1 will witness Pontius's grief as the mother of his child who rejects his entreaties to run away with her and publicly avows that the child has no earthly father. As discussed above, the moon with its "fat white face of a dunce" also refers to the Village Idiot, who metaphorically manipulates Pontius like a puppet.

Pontius makes one last reference to the moon before committing suicide: "The moon is cradled by the night--the curved white slipper of the moon, reclining,
rocked back into the night, will rock me to sleep" (54). The moon is once again in crescent form, symbolic of the Virgin. It is "cradled by the night" as Mary 1 is cradled in death. The unborn child is evoked through the mention of a rocking cradle, and Pontius assumes the role of child as well, with the prospect of death softened by thoughts of his lover/mother. He vows to follow her into the afterlife: "There is nothing left for me, Mary, but to find you. I will swim to you, arms outstretched" (54). This image brings to mind Ruhl's Eurydice, and one wonders if Pontius will manage to navigate the river Lethe with memory intact. Within the ongoing narrative of Ruhl's cycle, he does succeed in finding her once more in the third part, thereby resisting the disintegrative tendencies of water:

On one occasion, the moon appears to Pontius in red, as if bathed in blood:

The sky is red tonight! Blood between the legs of a woman -- dirty, warm, clean.... oh! The moon has turned into a bloody pearl! Red shadows eat out its white belly! I must go home and hide from the moon. (24)

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4 This image brings to mind a lullaby from Late: A Cowboy Song:
   Who will cradle the mouse to sleep?
      The cat will.
   Who will cradle the sun to sleep?
      The moon will.
   Who will cradle the moon to sleep?
      The sky will.
   Who will cradle the sky to sleep?
      The cowboys will.
   Oh, who will cradle the sky to sleep?
      The cowboys will.
      The cowboys will. (164)

One of the qualities of the crescent moon as a symbol of the Virgin Mother in Christian art is that it reflects the light of the "Sun of Righteousness, Jesus Christ" (Webber 181). The lullaby takes on a quirky theological meaning when read in this respect. The cat lying with the mouse substitutes for the lion with the lamb, suggesting an atmosphere of Edenic calm. The Virgin Mother cradles her son to sleep; she herself rests in the infinity of the open sky, suggestive of God the Father. The cowboy is absurdly apotheosized as the Father-of-the-Father.
He relates the redness to menstrual blood, which he describes as both dirty and clean. This blood represents his own sexual desire for Mary 1, which is dirty in the sense that it would be considered sinful, and clean in a sense that he envisions the consummation of this desire as somehow redemptive. Menstrual blood thus takes on the dual characteristics of water in early Christian art, as emblematic of both earthly sin and heavenly redemption. The flow of this blood ceases when Mary 1 becomes pregnant, as does her sexual availability. The red shadows that eat out the white belly of the moon portend the tragic termination of the pregnancy; Pontius must run and hide from this ominous sign, even though he does not yet understand what it means. This ambiguous attitude towards blood may be extended to that exhibited through the work as a whole towards the blood of Christ. The body and blood of Christ are taken in the sacrament as symbols of union with the One Man; Ruhl's play both stages the Passion and undermines it, elevating the Christ only to question his absolute dominion.

3. Red Sky

As noted above, in both Revelation and Acts the moon appears as though drenched in blood as a harbinger of the second coming of the messiah. The sky turns red in the first part of Passion Play on several occasions, functioning as an omen. Although in some instances the Village Idiot appears to be causing the change, at other times the agent is unclear. Pontius takes note of it first, in the opening scene: "Today the sky turned red, sky turned red, and we should all kneel down and take notice but everyone's too busy eating their bloody porridge!" The
Visiting Friar immediately observes, "And then -- the sky turned red! At two in the afternoon! If shivers didn't crawl up and down my spine like worms..." (10). Two o'clock in the afternoon falls into the time span of the darkened sky during Jesus's crucifixion, which occurred between 12 noon and 3:00 p.m. The Village Idiot causes the next occurrence when the director ties her to a stump to prevent her from disrupting the rehearsal:

The Village Idiot: Ahhhh! JACK! SAVE ME! I’m lost, tied...it is dark and I am in the box...I’ll close my eyes and make the sky turn red...now...now....

**The sky turns red. The heavenly choir stops singing. The heavenly choir looks up.**

The Village Idiot: See that, Jack! Did you see? (15)

She functions as God the Father in turning the sky red, and as God the Son in being trapped in a dark box, symbolic of Christ in his moment of despair on the cross.

The positioning of God the Father as a wise fool transgresses Erasmus's formulation, lowering a being considered to be both omnipotent and omnipresent to the level of mere humanity. The next change in sky color appears to be a sort of criticism of the paternalistic structure of the Holy Trinity as well.

After Mary 2 confesses her dreams of embracing women to the Visiting Friar, and asks him why those dreams are wrong, he defers her question to a higher power: "Ask God, Mary. Only God can explain, only God -- the Father" (19). At this juncture the sky turns red once again, this time seemingly as a touch of the playwright's whimsy, as some unseen force protests a patriarchal god that

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5 The formatting of stage directions is inconsistent in the working manuscript of *Passion Play*. Sometimes they are in italics, at other times in bold. The formatting as it appears in the manuscript is reproduced when cited in this chapter.
disapproves of lesbianism. Later, Pontius once again notes the color of the sky, this
time at night, after he observes John escorting Mary 1 off of the stage, associating
the redness with menstrual blood (24). While rehearsing the annunciation scene,
The Village Idiot speaks the Angel Gabriel's lines along with the actor portraying
him, substituting the name Jack for all proper names:

    Hail, thou that art
    highly favored,
    the Lord is with thee, JACK,
    Blessed art thou among
    women.
    ...
    Behold, Jack, thou shalt
    bring forth a son
    and shalt call his name
    JACK. (33-4)

At this juncture, the sky turns red and Carpenter 1, who is suspended from a harness
as the Angel Gabriel, comes crashing to the ground. Mary 1 knows herself to be
pregnant at this time, and the state of her non-virgin pregnancy appears to be
impinging upon the enactment of immaculate conception. The Village Idiot's
substitution of the name Jack for the Biblical names, including that of Jesus, is
somewhat blasphemous as well, deserving, if not the wrath, then perhaps at least the
ire of a vengeful God. In Frye's system of apocalyptic archetypes, Christ serves as
the unifying symbol, the One Man who represents and unifies all of humankind.
The Village Idiot disrupts the semiotic system by substituting the name Jack for
Christ. Jack refers to the Jack-in- the-box, but it is also a nickname for John, which
designates both the character playing Christ and one of Christ's apostles. It refers to
Pontius as well through his association with the Jack-in-the-box. The name Jack, through its many associations, signifies an everyman as opposed to the One Man, Christ. The substitution of the name of Jack in the annunciation scene has the effect of secularizing the Biblical story which in turn lends credence to Carpenter 2's assertion that the Virgin Mary was simply a young pregnant woman who concocted the immaculate conception in an attempt to mislead her husband. Although the Village Idiot does appear to cause the sky to turn red on an earlier occasion, she does not seem to be the agent in this case. At the least, the omen indicates that the time is "out of joint" in the Elizabethan sense in which the macrocosm reflects the disorder of the societal microcosm of the village and of England at large, with its religious tensions between Protestantism and Catholicism.

Ruhl undercuts the Passion Play by offering an alternative version of immaculate conception, one in which a pregnant young woman attempts to conceal the actual source of pregnancy. Carpenter 2 directly challenges the Biblical account of immaculate conception, painting a picture of domestic strife and a cunning young bride:

I never believed the tale in the Good Book anyhow. Mary was probably some young wench knocked up by another bloke, couldn't stand to tell her husband to be -- afraid he'd beat her pulpy. Any girl who can persuade the multitudes that God's the father of her bastard child.... (42)

In his version, the genius of Mary lies in her ability to fool the general populace into believing her outrageous story. Such a public-relations feat may be likened to Queen Elizabeth's dissemination of her own image as closely allied to that of the
Virgin Mary. Unlike the Queen, Mary 1 lacks the wherewithal to sustain her story and succumbs to her own sense of guilt.

The sky and moon portend a second coming, one that is aborted. The sky turns blue again when the beautiful fish gods carry Pontius away, but Mary 1 fails to give birth to the new fish messiah. Pontius's fish salvation fails to transcend earthly life, as he must return in the following two parts of the cycle in order to reenact the Passion Play. In both of those parts, he desires to escape from it, finally succeeding at the end. P laments, "Why do we keep doing it and doing it?... I don't want to be in the play anymore" (183), and he escapes in a ship that sails into the sky (185). He transforms from a fish immersed in the waters of sin to a bird-like Tertullian martyr ascending to heaven, a martyr in the sense that he has sacrificed his mental well-being for his country through his involvement in the Vietnam War. The repetitive nature of Ruhl's Passion Cycle, with actors playing the same parts in successive sections, suggests reincarnation rather than redemption, which is philosophically consistent with Hinduism or Buddhism rather than Christianity. P's plea to be excused from the play brings to mind the cry of the weary soul, in Eastern philosophy, for release from the cycle of death and rebirth with its inevitable, and endlessly repeated, suffering. His escape in a ship, staged as a vertical ascent in the Goodman Theatre production, suggests enlightenment as defined as a release from the earthly, karmic cycle although, as will be explored below, his flight from the earth is not as completely liberating as it may seem.
4. Earthbound Birds

Ruhl reemploys images from the first part in the second, but uses them more sparingly. She sets aside both fish and air imagery for the time being, only to readopt them in the third part. Characters mention the moon only twice in the second part. In the first instance, it is discussed by Eric and the Footsoldier:

A large orange moon appears in the sky. Eric looks at the moon. 
The German officer looks on, unobserved. 
The footsoldier comes behind Eric, putting his hands over Eric's eyes. 
FOOTSOLDIER: What do you see? 
ERIC: The moon is huge -- orange and bloody -- a laughing judge -- presiding over an orange trial. 
The footsoldier takes his hands away. 
FOOTSOLDIER: Now look. The moon is gold. (96)

The moon functions as a judge in this scene, symbolic of the German officer who is observing, and disapproving of, their homosexual flirtatiousness, but also projecting the eventual judgment of the Nazi regime during the Nuremberg trials. When the Footsoldier removes his hands from Eric's eyes, the moon appears in gold, reflecting a Germanic optimism for a better future under the leadership of Hitler. Within the apocalyptic model of crisis-judgment-reward, the orange moon represents judgment, and the gold reward, one that is never forthcoming. The moon is mentioned one more time as Eric rehearses his lines for the play:

Many shall come in my name, saying "I am Christ" and shall deceive the multitudes... For false Christs and false prophets shall rise. The sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light... Take heed. (101)

These warnings against false prophets are taken from Matthew 24, and their placement in Ruhl's play functions as a reference to Hitler. Revelation refers to a
false prophet who is in league with the devil in three separate verses (16.13, 19.20, 20.10). Hitler referred to the Third Reich as a thousand year reign in a secularized version of the millennium. This formulation implies that Hitler himself assumes the position of messiah. However, as he is referred to as the false prophet in the service of evil, his reign is envisioned as an inverted millennium celebrating the triumph of sin.

Images of birds and the red sky figure prominently in the second part. Birds are associated specifically with Violet. After she disrupts rehearsals, the director imprisons her in the basket that was used to house the doves that are released during a rehearsal of the temple scene in the play (88). In Christian symbology, a dove, particularly one that is descending, represents the Holy Spirit. The dove is also generally recognized as a symbol of peace. The peaceable Violet takes the place of the doves in the basket, foreshadowing her eventual internment in a concentration camp as the only Jew in Oberammergau. When Eric expresses a desire to join the army in order to see the world, his sister, Mary 2, relates a story from their childhood having to do with a bird:

Do you remember when you were little -- you stayed home sick from school one day. You were supposed to feed my bird. I said, no matter what, don't let my bird fly outside. You played with the bird. It flew like crazy around the kitchen. You are afraid the bird would fly into the garden so you slammed the kitchen door as the bird was flying out and you killed it. I came home from school and you had the strangest look on your face. And all of a sudden you started crying. I killed your bird, you said. And now no one will ever love me. (83)
This speech foreshadows the final scene of Part One in which Eric, now a soldier, takes Violet prisoner rather than looking after her well-being. He played with the bird, and also plays with Violet. They play a word game in which they challenge each other with horrible dilemmas. The first poses the choice between cruelty to two innocents, the second between self-interest and self-sacrifice. As he plays the game with Violet in the forest, Eric chooses to kill a dog rather than kick a baby, and to poke someone in the eardrum rather than become deaf since, as he explains, "It would be terrible to be deaf. I love music" (110). Although he played the role of Christ in the Passion Play, he fails to take on a Christlike sense of self-sacrifice.

Violet disrupts a rehearsal by telling the story of "Hansel and Gretel," a fairy tale in which birds play an important role, that of eating the bread crumbs that would lead the two children out of the forest. Even though Violet expresses a mistrust of breadcrumbs as a means of marking a trail when speaking to the Visiting Englishman (60), she finds herself in the position, later on, of using them for that purpose. When a giant bird appears in the forest, she kindly feeds him all of the crumbs, explaining that she will remember her way home. She asks the bird to watch over her while she sleeps, but it leaves as soon as she closes her eyes. The stage directions specify that the bird is played by, "[C]arpenter 1, dressed in his angel wings from Act I" (108). In Part One, the Carpenter 1 is playing the angel Gabriel during the Annunciation scene. He is afraid of the flying mechanism and crashes to the stage when the sky turns red. Nevertheless, the depiction of the bird in the second part, played by the same character, represents a diminution of sorts,
from an angelic figure to a mute bird that leaves Violet stranded in the forest. Furthermore, the bird is too big to fly, and therefore unable to carry Violet away to the Rapture in order to escape the Tribulation. Facing confinement and likely death in a concentration camp, Violet is unable to ascend to the heavens in order to escape the coming horrors.

The red sky, which portends the death of Mary 1 and an aborted second coming in the first part, reappears here within a context that suggests a sky turned red by gunfire and explosions, or burning red with the light from concentration camp crematoria. Violet claims to be turning the sky this color, as does her counterpart in the first part, but the playwright leaves it ambiguous as to whether or not she succeeds. Violet tells the visiting Englishman that, "I've been making the sky turn red but no one notices" (59). When the Director locks her in the birdcage, she threatens, "If you lock me up, I'll make the sky turn red. Now, now!" Ruhl follows this with the noncommittal stage direction, "She closes her eyes. Does the sky turn red? Or does it only appear to?" and indicates that no one notices (88). The Village Idiot of the first part inhabits a superstitious society in which omens are more likely to be noticed and taken seriously. She demonstrates an ability to turn the sky red and make everyone notice. In the second part, Violet possesses less power. Even though, from her perspective, she is able to change the color of the sky, her society is not receptive to her influence.

The sky is red when Eric comes to fetch Violet in the forest. Violet carries with her a white ribbon that, as she has explained to the visiting Englishman, she
considers to represent "the white drool of a snake" (58). Through its association with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the ribbon would seem to represent evil or sin. In Nazi Germany, Jews were forced to wear the Star of David and homosexuals a pink triangle as forms of identification; Violet's ribbon serves, not to identify anything about herself, but rather as an indicator of the immorality of the society that surrounds her. Whereas in the first part the sky turns from red to blue at the conclusion, when Pontius is carried away by the giant fish, in the second part it shifts from red to gray as the cast members look out to the audience to the sound of a train "speeding across tracks" (112) suggestive of Violet's journey to Dachau. The color of the sky reinforces the bleak mood with which the second part concludes, evoking the smoke from concentration camp crematoria.

G. Rapture Deferred

Ruhl carries over into the third part imagery of fish, water, birds, the red sky, and especially the wind. Violet in this part is the daughter of Mary 1 rather than being an orphan. She retains some memory of being involved in a war and is obsessed with drawing birds. This succession represents a fixation on the failed rapture of the second part and an anxiety over the possibility of an impending apocalypse. Early on in part three the imagery of a bird is involved in a frightening encounter with P upon his return from Vietnam. The three-year-old presents him with a picture of a bird at which point he observes that it is so good that he thinks it could even fly, a concept that frightens her. His behavior scares her further when he insists on sleeping outdoors in order to be able to hear if anyone menacing is
coming, and then bids her goodnight by telling her to "sleep with the angels," a farewell with connotations of death (144-8). Later, when she is in the sixth grade and P comes to visit, he compliments her on the bird pictures that she has been sending him and she conveys her fascination with the "architecture of feathers" (179). Eventually she goes away to college to become a painter and, as P reports, her pictures become more and more abstract (184). The Violet of the third part retains some of the fear associated with birds from that of the second, eventually transcending that fear and transforming the traumatic into art.

P searches for the water that can wash off the guilt brought on by his actions in Vietnam, particularly his company's accidental attack on civilians resulting in the death of a girl the age of Violet. He holds the girl's head as she is dying and his hands become literally stained with her blood. Unlike Pilate, he has no water available with which to wash it off, as he reports to his wife:

There were no showers, you know -- we were in country on February 28 -- I didn't shower until May 10. I washed my hands without water.  
*He rubs his hands together.*
  
  Pontius Pilate -- with no water. (166)

During a rehearsal, he hallucinates that the water with which his character is to wash his hands is blood (154-5). Like Pontius of the first part, who washes his hands in a bucket of fish, he hallucinates attempting to wash himself off with the very substance that has polluted him. Finally he journeys to Washington to ask President Reagan to wash his hands and thereby absolve him of his guilt, but when Reagan insists on using religious terminology, P refuses as he has lost his faith (172-3).
Although he finds himself unable to cleanse himself with water, the "big beautiful fish puppets" nevertheless come to his assistance. In a battle scene set in Vietnam, he "drags a huge, bloody fish across the stage, holding a smoking gun." He announces to the audience that he has killed a fish and then exclaims, "My head" (133)! As Pontius from the first part experiences pain in his head and feels as if he is being manipulated like a puppet so P, in killing the fish/soldier, operates as a puppet of the state. Queen Elizabeth asynchronously intervenes and orders him carried off the battlefield, a command that the big fish obey, recalling their intervention at the conclusion of the first part after Pontius's suicide.

Jesus performed a miracle in which he tamed both sea and air as described in Matthew 9.23-27, Mark 4.35-41 and Luke 8.22-25. The disciples and Jesus were crossing the water in a ship when a storm struck. The frightened disciples woke up the sleeping Jesus, at which, "he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm" (Mark 4.39). A symbol related to ships which occurs in early Christian art is that of the anchor, with the meaning that Christ is the "anchor of the soul" in reference to Hebrews 6.19 (Webber 81). In contrast, P finds solace in his ability to control the wind rather than abate it. He rejects the anchoring power of Jesus and prefers to take matters into his own hands. Even before his tour in Vietnam, he is obsessed with the wind, making audiotapes of it to give to his brother and wife as parting gifts, claiming that the sound will help them sleep (115A; 131). After Vietnam, he takes solace in the wind. As he explains to Violet, he was the pilot of a ship, one that he imagines to
have been wind-powered, and Ruhl stages his vision of controlling Elizabethan
ships, back in South Dakota, by harnessing the power of the wind: "The chorus
enters with wind machines/ and Elizabethan boats./ P steers the boats through the
wind" (148). In the Goodman Theatre production, the boats were mounted on poles
that the chorus carried to striking effect. He also collects the wind in jars to give to
his wife, as John and Pontius in the first part collect the night air for Mary 1. As
Mary 1 fears the wind, however, this proves to be an ineffective method of
strengthening their relationship. When P’s brother J seduces his wife, J explains
that he is "just the guy who came over to stop the wind" (132). J stops the wind as
does Jesus, the character he plays; P stirs it up.

P envisions a giant wind machine to push the "bad air out into the
atmosphere" in the case of a nuclear holocaust (179A). This represents a comic
version of the Apocalypse in that human agency is able to alter its destructive
course. His affinity for the wind and his steering of the Elizabethan sailing ships
coincides with Violet's obsession with birds. Both of them have learned to navigate
the rough winds of life rather than resist them. They have acquired this skill over
the span of all three parts of the play through the continuity of characters portrayed
by a single actor. The ability to navigate unpredictable winds requires flexibility to
improvise, and this lies at the heart of P's rejection of the play. He no longer wishes
to recite learned lines. This rejection of the play extends to his rejection of religion,
which he has found inadequate as he searches for meaning and absolution.
The red sky appears in the third part as well as in the first two. President Reagan associates it with war when he states, "Armageddon is coming -- with metal horses and tanks and a red sky./ I intend to stop it. God has a plan for me" (113A). The association of a red sky with war is reinforced in P's scene in Vietnam in which he is dragging the giant fish. Finally, though, he uses a red sky as an indicator of the weather, stripping it of its Biblical significance as an omen of great events:

Red sky at night, sailors delight...
They're coming through the fog to the shore, the tall ships, and I'm making sure they get here safe... real safe... I feel a gale of wind coming from the north but I counter it with a gale from the south... I pour wind into their sails, and it's important they get here by morning.... (148)

As a former pilot, P has good reason to take delight in signs of good weather. The sky is red later as he assembles jars of wind on the mountaintop. P relates the saying from Matthew 16.2-3: "Red sky, at night, sailor's delight./ Red sky at morning, sailors take warning." The sky does, finally, change colors for P at the conclusion of part three. As the wind machines, boats, and fish puppets appear, and P ascends in a boat, the sky turns white. At the conclusion of each part, the sky turns a different color: blue in the first, gray in the second, and white in the third. These colors may be associated with three of the Greek elements, with the red sky symbolic of the fourth. Blue is associated with water, the environment of the fish that carry Pontius away. Gray represents the earth in the sense of ashen, burnt bodies in concentration camp crematoria. The color of clouds and sails, white is associated with the sky into which P flies. The color red, of course, is associated with fire and its destructive properties. The Greeks held that the elements were
transmutable. In the first part the giant fish transform the fire of destruction, which has burned away the lives of Pontius and Mary 1, into soothing blue waters. In the second, the fires of war leave a residue of ash representative of its casualties. In the last, red once again represents the fires of war, in this particular case the Vietnam War; P at least partially recovers from the trauma by teaching himself how to manipulate the wind and inhabit the air. In Frye's analysis, man must pass through trials of fire and water when traveling to other realms. Pontius/P, however, rather than passing through these elements, learns to navigate the currents of air and water, not quite ascending in a rapture, which would entail passing through fire, nor sinking below the water in death. 6 The cosmology of the play resists not only a universal eschatology, but the demise of the individual as well. Pontius/P learns to inhabit what should be transitory states, the passages through water unto death and through air and thence fire unto the heavens. In this way Ruhl once again undermines the Passion, situated as it is in a teleological theology with a definitive endpoint for both the individual and the cosmos. Pontius/P's navigational abilities indefinitely defer the second coming and judgment day.

H. "Queen, Fuehrer, President"

Ruhl incorporates a leader from each time period into the three parts of her play. Queen Elizabeth intercedes during the first to call a halt to the performance of the Passion Play, Hitler arrives in the second to praise the play for its anti-Semitic

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6 See the chapter on Eurydice for a discussion of the four elements in that work.
bias, and Reagan in the third attends the Spearfish production in order to campaign for a second term in addition to interacting with P in Washington, D.C. Elizabeth and Hitler asynchronously appear in the third part as well. Through these figures, Ruhl explores issues such as a leader's responsibility to his or her people, the relationship between performance and politics, and the intersection between religion and politics.

The Village Idiot has a dream that presages the Queen's cancellation of the Passion Play. In it, Elizabeth appears naked and pregnant in the sky and is thereby linked to the symbolism of the moon, associated as it is with pregnancy and the Virgin Mary in the first part of Passion Play. In Elizabeth I (1988), Christopher Haigh reports that Elizabeth was sometimes represented in poetry and portraiture as "the moon-goddess" or as a virginal figure (19), having encouraged the growth of a cult of virginity about herself. She was considered a special virgin, approaching the status of the Virgin Mary, and was also considered in a certain sense married to all of her subjects or to the kingdom itself (20). Elizabeth never bore an heir and resisted naming one for the sake of her own security, fearful that followers of whomever she might designate would attempt to depose her (19). She also considered herself to have been appointed by God (21). Her pregnant appearance in the Village Idiot's dream conflates her with the Virgin Mary. The Village Idiot's description of her "privates" as "always covered up with drapes and curtains like a stage" (29) emphasizes the theatrical nature of her leadership and the political use to which she put the image of herself as the Virgin Queen. Elizabeth plays the role of
the Virgin in her political life as Mary 1 does in the Passion Play. Whereas
Elizabeth utilizes the role to solidify her power, Mary 1 self-destructs when she
finds herself unable to live up to the part.

As foreseen in the Village Idiot's dream, the Queen arrives to put a halt to
the Passion Play. As Ruhl observes in the "Playwright's Note," Elizabeth ordered
the cessation of Passion plays in 1575 "in order to control religious representation"
as part of measures taken to reduce the influence of Catholicism (2). When she
appears to the village, she makes the point that she wears layers of white paint in
order not to appear to "become old or ugly," but demands that her subjects not
impersonate Christ (50). She reserves for herself the right of performance.

In the second part, Ruhl includes a speech that Hitler made at a dinner
praising the Oberammergau Passion Play for its anti-Semitic content (Ruhl,
"Playwright's Note" 2). She prefaces this with a monologue that she has written for
the character. In it, he refers to his past as a painter, foreseeing that he will be
regarded in black and white and comments on the beauty of his eyes, which he
claims that women found irresistible, just as the people "fell in love with" his voice.
He observes that he loves public speaking and he expresses his pleasure at the
cheers that greet him wherever he goes. The speech quickly establishes him as a
character obsessed with, and proud of, the effect that he is able to have on crowds,
as one who takes great pleasure in his own persuasive abilities. He then
demonstrates his highly theatrical rhetorical style by delivering the historical
speech, working himself "up into a public rage" (103).
Ronald Reagan opens part three with a prologue, beginning with the phrase, "It's morning in America," which figured in his television advertising campaign for reelection in 1984 (Raine). He spews a disjointed series of slogans and anecdotes:

- It's morning in America. A simple time. People help each other, up and down the block. To borrow eggs or sugar to bake.
- Armageddon is coming -- with metal horse and tanks and a red sky. I intend to stop it. God has a plan for me.
- There are great forces of history moving. (113A)

He follows with a story of replacing Gorbachev's son's dead goldfish and credits the incident with causing the fall of the Soviet Union:

- You think history is conducted by great wheels set in motion. Well it is. But it's also conducted by small acts of generosity. I replaced a little boy's goldfish and a wall came crumbling down.
- Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall! How's that sound? (113A)

He is a character who expresses himself in sound bites tailored for the evening news, and one who is highly aware of his delivery. He next brags that his first job was announcing baseball games long-distance, without even being present at the games. His task was to, "tell the story of the game, make it exciting, make the folks feel like they were there! That's what a leader does. You don't even need to be at the game" (113A).

In Ronald Reagan: The Great Communicator (1992), Kurt Ritter and David Henry analyze the apocalyptic element in Reagan's rhetoric. Reagan particularly relied on this trope during his speeches in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in his duties as a representative of General Electric. Ritter and Henry classify his apocalyptic rhetoric as a secular one that included three features:
[A] general pattern of lamentation -- bemoaning America's difficulties and a warning that the future could hold far worse; the portrayal of a cosmic struggle between good and evil; and a warning of an impending political Armageddon and even the possibility of a dark millennium. (15)

The forces of evil included the communist threat both at home and abroad as well as big government at home. The Soviet Union threatened America with Armageddon, and Reagan identified Karl Marx as the Antichrist who had set himself up as the Messiah of "a Godless religion" (qtd. in Ritter and Henry 18). He replaced the utopian vision of a millennium of peace on Earth with that of an extended tribulation lasting 1000 years (19). He maintained, however, that the Apocalypse could be averted through the action of the people at the ballot box, by voting Republican (26-7). His vision of the Apocalypse is thus a comic one in that it may be averted through human action. Reagan functioned in prophetic mode at this stage of his career, positioning himself in opposition to the political status quo and calling for change. Later, particularly in the role of president, he would function as priest in order to solidify the status quo with himself as the head of the country. Ritter and Henry note that, "as president, Reagan functioned as a sort of secular pastor to the nation, promulgating value-laden themes in which manner and matter fused in emotionally appealing messages" (61).

In Passion Play, Ruhl depicts Reagan as being somewhat absent both mentally and physically. A contrast is made between Elizabeth, who made speeches to her soldiers on the battlefield (Hammer 4), and Reagan, who never served in the military (Ruhl, Passion Play 170-1). Elizabeth appears in Spearfish to bless P the
day before he begins his military service stating that she is "resolved to live or die amongst" her people (118). Later, when she appears to P during battle in Vietnam, she expresses bewilderment over his willingness to engage in battle in the absence of a leader who will join him on the battlefield (133). Of course, Reagan was not president during the Vietnam War, and therefore her indictment may be directed at modern leaders in general. As Reagan dedicates the Vietnam War Memorial and says a few words over the tomb of the unknown soldier, he appears to be more concerned with the effectiveness of his speech than the import of the memorial and tomb. He states that although he never served in the military, he made training films for soldiers during the war and learned how to salute at that time. Insensitive to the pain and suffering of P, who has come to him for absolution, he remembers that, "It was one of the happiest times in my life" (170-1). Considering Ruhl's disparaging comments aimed at President George W. Bush in the "Playwright's Notes," and her assertion that she wrote Part Three "before the 2004 election, with a great sense of urgency" (3), it is quite clear that she had in mind Bush, and the military intervention in Iraq, while writing Reagan into the work. The absence of the leader in the battlefield may more widely be interpreted as a lack of concern for the welfare of the soldiers, and an eagerness to engage in war without adequately weighing the human toll.

P comes to Reagan seeking absolution; Reagan assumes a priestly stance in insisting on employing the "language of God" in administering his blessing (173). When P declines Reagan's terms, the President absent-mindedly and insensitively
drinks the water with which he was going to bless the veteran. Reagan's insistence on calling upon the Holy Trinity may be seen as an abrogation of his own personal responsibility. The character boasts in the prologue that, "God has a plan for me" (113A); this claim of divine inspiration shifts responsibility off of the president. P seeks for a means by which to shift responsibility for the death of the girl in Vietnam off of himself, and refuses Reagan's offer to shift it onto God. Although the historical Elizabeth also believed herself to be an instrument of God (Haigh 21), Ruhl depicts a leader more intimately involved with, and concerned about, the lives of her subjects than the American president.

I. A Canadian Passion

Denys Arcand's French Canadian film Jesus of Montreal (1989) explores the same thematic territory as Ruhl's cycle, examining the effect that staging the Passion Play has on the actors so engaged, particularly on the character playing Jesus. The events in the film mirror those of the New Testament. Daniel, who plays Jesus, gathers actors around him as if they were disciples; he destroys camera equipment at an audition for a beer commercial in a scene that brings to mind the destruction of the moneylenders at the Temple; and he dies of a concussion suffered while acting the crucifixion when the cross accidentally falls over on top of him. His resurrection occurs through the donation of his organs: with his heart, he gives a dying man new life and his eyes bestow sight upon a blind woman. Hired by a Roman Catholic priest to update the version of the Passion that has been staged at his church for 35 years, Daniel pushes his interpretation into heresy, raising doubts
as to the divine origins of Jesus by suggesting that he may have been the illegitimate
son of a Roman soldier. He portrays Jesus's Palestine as a highly superstitious
world in which magicians were common, including the Savior in that group. The
priest, Father Leclerc, is outraged and, at the insistence of his superiors, calls for the
production to be shut down. The actors persevere in performing one last time,
during which performance the fatal accident with the cross occurs.

Although all of the members of Daniel's troupe change to some extent, the
focus is on the protagonist's transformation. He becomes increasingly Christ-like as
he immerses himself in the role. He watches over Mireille, the Mary Magdalene
figure, accompanying her to the audition for the beer commercial at which he
destroys the equipment. He comes into ever greater conflict with the priest who
functions as the bastion of religious tradition, paralleling the Pharisees and
Sadducees of the New Testament. After the cross falls on Daniel, paramedics rush
him to an overcrowded public hospital. He regains consciousness in the waiting
room and the actresses playing both Mary's escort him away from the chaotic
emergency room with relief. However, clearly Daniel has sustained some damage.
He sorrowfully imparts wisdom to his companions as they descend onto the subway
platform where he moves from passenger to passenger, gently touching them and
warning them of the coming judgment. He tells them to beware of false prophets
and his final line is, "You know not when... the Judgment... watch!" He collapses at
this point and dies later on in the evening in another hospital.
The film contrasts this saintly figure with those who would take advantage of him: talk show hosts, agents, and a slick lawyer who tempts him with wealth as the devil tempted Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He forms a tight community with the actors in his company but they remained besieged, as it were, by the outside world. The film also portrays the plight of the artist struggling to survive in a material world through the actors who support their fondness for alternative theater with jobs acting in commercials, modeling, and doing voiceovers for porn films and planetarium shows.

In Ruhl's cycle, the effect of performing the Passion is spread out over various characters rather than singularly focused on the Jesus figure. In the first part, for example, John is a saintly man from the beginning to the end; in the second, Eric is but one of the characters who changes and the focus is as much on Violet, who does not even have a part in the play, as on any other character. In the final section, the journey of P assumes greater importance than that of J. Furthermore, the characters are just as likely to diverge from the role that they are playing as to merge with it. The interactions of the characters in this part are more Shakespearean than biblical. Pontius's unsuccessfully attempting to wash his hands of sin brings to mind Lady Macbeth, as does P's later mistaking of water for blood. The suicidal drowning of Mary 1, if not scorned, then at least sexually overlooked by the man she loves, suggests Ophelia, and the suicide of Pontius over her lifeless body, Romeo. Whereas the plot of the film is linear and climactic, building to the
sacrifice of the Lamb, that of the play is more episodic, and the focus is diffused over several characters rather than tightly concentrated on the One Man.

Whereas Arcand has undertaken a modern retelling of New Testament events, Ruhl uses the Passion as a springboard to explore issues of community, leadership, and religion. In her work, the mounting of the play operates in priestly mode, reinforcing the religious status quo; threats of Apocalypse come from outside of the staging. In the film, the play challenges the status quo without actually venturing into prophetic territory. Only at the end, immediately before his death, does Daniel prophecy a second coming, but his message falls on deaf ears as the waiting passengers board the next train. By implication the false prophet triumphs, as in the final scene the satanic figure of the lawyer discusses with the remaining actors establishing a theater in Daniel's name, one that will remain true to his principles while at the same time, the lawyer promises, turning a profit. It seems that the Whore of Babylon, as discussed in Revelation, has triumphed at least temporarily, and a second coming will be required to vanquish her. The narrative of the film thus mimics the Passion and the prophecy of Apocalypse, in contrast to Ruhl's play which offers an alternative, non-biblical conclusion, and challenges the biblical system of images.

J. Millennium Deferred

Ruhl began work on the third part of Passion Play when the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. asked her to write a play about America. She found this "a daunting task" until she realized that "little is more American than the nexus of
religious rhetoric, politics, and theatricality" (Ruhl, "Playwright's Note" 3); in light of this, continuing her Passion Cycle seemed like the obvious choice. Tony Kushner's Angels in America deals with these issues as well. The Reagan administration sets the backdrop for this complex work that explores, among other things, the narrative of Apocalypse, which it does in highly theatrical fashion through its presentation of the Angel. In comparing these epic works of Ruhl and Kushner, it would be wise, first of all, to delineate the ways in which they are profoundly different. Kushner is centrally concerned with the AIDS epidemic and gay identity in the 1980s, and his cast of characters encompasses a range of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds as well as political beliefs: Jewish, Mormon, WASP, black, as well as liberal and conservative, in various configurations. Exclusive of the second part, which presents a Nazi/Jewish binary, Ruhl's characters might be racially and ethnically homogeneous and keep their political views to themselves. Although several of her characters are gay, the exploration of gay identity is not a concern: they are presented as if their homosexuality were simply one aspect of their personality rather than a defining feature.

The broad historical scope of each of these works is presented differently, as well. David Savran, among others, has noted the influence that Walter Benjamin's explication of Paul Klee's painting, "Angelus Novus," had on the formulation of Angels in America (Savran, "Ambivalence" 16-7). According to Benjamin, Klee's angel, blown relentlessly forward by a storm from Paradise, looks back helplessly upon the rubble of history (Benjamin 257-8). Kushner establishes this history in
various ways: Rabbi Isadore Chemelwitz speaks of the hard life that Louis's grandmother fled in Eastern Europe (1.9-11); Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov laments the failure of Soviet communism (2.13-5); Prior's ancestors refer to earlier plagues (1.85-9); and Ethel Rosenberg returns to haunt her nemesis, Roy Cohn. The purpose of this background is to pinpoint the present moment, the approaching millennium heralded by angelic visitation, raising the question as to whether or not the millennium will redeem the catastrophic course of history. In contrast, Ruhl's work is a triptych bound together by the common theme of the presentation of the Passion Play. She takes snapshots of these various time periods without building historical momentum towards millennium. She approaches the very concept of millennium more subtly than Kushner, introducing the notion of a second coming through biblical imagery rather than staging it by having an angel spectacularly crash through a bedroom ceiling. Another significant difference between the two works is that Ruhl's is essentially a backstage drama in which the actors' lives are played out in counterpoint to the Passion; although Kushner's play includes two former drag queens, it is not by any means focused upon a shared theatrical endeavor.

One area in which the two works ultimately converge is in their conceptualization of the millennium, taken here, as it is employed in Kushner, to mean the endpoint of history. Prior resists the Angel’s call for stasis, which would put an end to history, and demands "more life," a demand that, once met, defers the end of time indefinitely. This deferral switches the apocalypse from tragic into
comic mode. As discussed by Stanton B. Garner, Jr. in "Angels in America: The Millennium and Postmodern Memory" (1997), this deferred millennium may also be considered a postmodern one. Garner contends that, "postmodernism is deeply informed by the rhetoric and psychosocial preoccupations of Cold War millenarianism, with its utopian imaginings and its even stronger apprehension of catastrophe" (175). Nevertheless, postmodern theorists display an uneasiness with millennialism, practicing "what Jameson calls an ‘inverted millenarianism,’ problematizing the ideas of finitude and conclusion even as they advance them" (Garner 175). Even as Kushner establishes the "urgency of apocalypse" he continually undermines it with "currents of indeterminacy and persistence" (178). The epilogue of the play, set in 1990, four years after the previous scene, provides ample evidence of this as four friends, including AIDS survivor Prior, gather before the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. Prior has, so far, escaped death and his visions of Angel and apocalypse have apparently been relegated to the past.

Similarly, apocalypse is deferred inPassion Play. Although characters undergo personal trials, Judgment Day fails to arrive. In Kushner, the threat of millennium has torn apart some relationships, and sutured others together. Nevertheless, as Savran observes in "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism" (1997), in the dialectic of communitarianism/individualism, the former is "read as being preferable" (22). Prior confronts the Angel terrified and alone in

7 Garner's usage of the term "millenarianism" differs from the definition presented earlier in this chapter, which refers specifically to a utopian outcome. His usage may be equated with millennialism, with either positive or negative possible outcomes.
his apartment, abandoned by his lover; one reward for undergoing this trial is to be reunited with some sort of community. In Ruhl, inversely, individualism is valued over communitarianism. In the first part, Pontius resents the role that he has been given in the Passion, wishes to kill his virtuous cousin, and transgresses societal norms in seducing Mary 1. The death of Pontius and Mary 1 is a tragedy brought about by the inability to conform on both their parts. In the second segment, German society in support of the Third Reich is corrupt and conformity is portrayed as a sin, in particular Eric's show of military obedience as he takes Violet into custody. A soldier is featured in the third part as well, and he comes to question his blind obedience to the state as well as the wisdom of continuing to stage the Passion. His mental illness isolates him from his community, and eventually he learns to survive on his own by navigating the currents of life, a transient drifting from town to town. He comes to embody the American ideal of rugged individualism, an ideal that Ruhl parodies in Late: A Cowboy Song, as exemplified by the Marlboro Man. As he strives for self-definition, P rejects the leadership of Ronald Reagan and the notion of One Nation under God. Ironically, Reagan projected the image of himself as the rugged individual, the cowboy riding horses and chopping wood on his ranch, and the lone sentry warning of the coming apocalypse. Ultimately however, as president, he becomes a figurehead for his own particular brand of conservatism and the unifying symbol of a political community.

In the last part of Passion Play, the production of the play moves away from its roots in community theater and becomes professionalized. Thus the community
constructed around mounting the Passion disintegrates under the pressures of modern life. Here again, the individualism of P is offered in place of religious community and the iteration of religious representation on the stage. Instead of taking over her mother's role, as would have traditionally been expected, Violet turns to the visual arts and ever more abstract depictions of birds, aligning herself with her presumed father's fantasies of flight. This, however, is a freewheeling aerial dance, not a rapturous ascension at the end of time through the realm of fire to meet the maker. Navigation replaces transfiguration. In both Kushner and Ruhl, the millennium is deferred indefinitely; in the former, a communal future is envisioned, in the latter, the individual learns to make his own way.
Conclusion

A. A Light Touch

In the preceding pages, Ruhl's light touch with heavy topics has been examined. Like Perseus, the conqueror of Medusa, she walks on the wind and clouds as she approaches her horrible foe, who is often Death himself. She leverages whimsy and humor in order to subtract weight from her burdensome subjects, and allows her imagination to lead her into realms of the fantastic even as her stories, most often, remain grounded in some version of everyday reality. Her keen intelligence shapes dramas intricate with networks of symbols that are rife with unexpected correspondences, and she shapes each line of dialogue, and every stage direction, with the care of a poet. Although her dramatic structure is, to great extent, traditional, her work exhibits a postmodern intertextuality and a playful sense of time. She tells linear stories while allowing her characters time to breathe and to slip into magical realms.

The weight of her father's death is felt most keenly in her earlier work. As time passes, death still appears in her plays but is dealt with ever more lightly. This progression is clearly discernible in Passion Play, the first two parts of which were composed sometime before the third. The first two end in catastrophe: a drowning and suicide in the first, imprisonment in a concentration camp in the second. The third ends hopefully, with the Vietnam veteran P levitating into the sky. The trend is readily apparent in her works as a whole: the sorrowful longing of Eurydice makes way to the manic gyrations of Dead Man's Cell Phone. Throughout, Ruhl
points to human relationship as the focal point of meaning in a universe that spins
out of control, in her works, in unexpected ways. Even in her earlier, heavier works
such as *Eurydice*, whimsy and humor lighten the load.

Ruhl plays freely with genre. The fantastic is always close at hand,
sometimes taking the form of magic realism; at other times, as in *Dead Man's Cell
Phone*, she remains steadfastly in the realm of fantasy. Oftentimes, multiple genres
will be combined within a single work. The intertextuality that this manifests is
typical of postmodernity. Ruhl finds transformation attractive, and the switching of
genres is a formal transformation that takes a work through various phases and leads
the spectator through a stylistic wonderland of sorts. The changes in tone that
accompany this switching provide a means of alternating between heaviness and
lightness. Ruhl stages the fantastic not in order to provide escapism, but rather to
present a subjective experience of life. She does not pretend to objectivity, but
rather reaches for metaphor through which to convey an inner experience of the
world.

**B. Ruhl's Place in American Drama**

It is no doubt too early to definitively assign Ruhl a place within American
drama. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern affinities with previous American
playwrights and further illuminate her *oeuvre* through comparison with their efforts.
Accordingly, Ruhl’s lineage may be traced back through Tony Kushner to John
Guare, and further back to Thornton Wilder. Each of these playwrights resists the
trend of realism that has dominated the twentieth, and, so far, twenty-first century,
relying upon theatrical devices to break the fourth wall and engage the audience as accomplices rather than passive eavesdroppers. The theories of Bertolt Brecht serve as a useful touchstone when discussing these dramatists. Brecht espouses revealing the theatrical means of production in order to denaturalize events occurring on stage, in contrast to realists, who by definition strive to present the illusion of everyday life (Worthen 725-6). Techniques used in the service of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or the alienation effect, include direct address, "songs, scenic titles, projected slides and an almost completely bare stage" (Helmetag 66-7).

Wilder would almost certainly have been familiar with Brecht's practice and writings, and goes to great lengths in his own works to destroy theatrical illusion, as is discussed by Charles H. Helmetag in "Mother Courage and Her American Cousins in *The Skin of Our Teeth*" (1978). Unlike Brecht, however, Wilder does not utilize these techniques with political aims in mind, but rather in service of the archetypes that he is attempting to bring to the stage. Kushner, the most political of the American playwrights under discussion, acknowledges a great debt to Brecht, as the title of his interview with Carl Weber, "I Always Go Back to Brecht" (1994), indicates. He has called for an American form of Brechtianism (Weber 113), and if anyone has achieved this, it has been Kushner in his *Angels in America*, with its political content, its focus on the AIDS crisis in the United States, its incorporation of the American religion of Mormonism, and even in its staging of the angel during
which, Kushner instructs, "it's OK if the wires show" (Kushner, Angels in America 1.5).¹

Guare’s application of Brechtian techniques such as song and direct address shows more of an affinity with Wilder than with Kushner, as his concerns lie with the archetype of the little man pursuing the American dream rather than with any political agenda. He paints on a smaller canvas than does Wilder, focusing on the angst and neuroses of his characters rather than drawing attention to the cosmos at large. Ruhl has utilized all of the Brechtian techniques listed above in various combinations in her plays. She sketches the bigger picture, often inclusive of an afterlife, while at the same time conveying an intimate sense of character. Even in a work that incorporates political figures, such as Passion Play, Ruhl produces an impression that is more personal and metaphysical than political. Unfettered by the conventions of realism, these playwrights are free to venture into metaphysical geographies, something that Ruhl, as well as Wilder and Kushner, does frequently and with enthusiasm. Freed from the constraints of writing naturalistic dialogue, these playwrights, with the exception of Kushner, often infuse their characters' speech with a sense of poetry, wringing new connotations out of words and arranging them in startling juxtapositions. Although Kushner certainly writes commanding dialogue, it is typically in a conversational rather than poetic mode.

¹ Naomi Wallace has patented her own brand of American Brechtianism, with her brittle political dramas built on American themes.
1. Wilder's Town

Fittingly, John Guare provides the introduction to *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder, Volume I* (1997). In it, Guare discusses Wilder's attempt to make language new, to rescue words from the weight of a literary tradition that burdens them with an accretion of meaning. Wilder drew inspiration in this endeavor from Gertrude Stein, whom he met when she lectured at the University of Chicago in 1935, at his invitation, and with whom he formed a close friendship (Burbank 82). Stein exhorted the artist to re-instill the "excitingness of pure being" into what had become "stale literary words" (Stein qtd. in Guare, "Introduction" xxii), and Wilder took this advice to heart. According to Guare, she "validated his gift of capturing the poetry of common speech," and Guare gives as an example this line from the Wilder short play "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden" (1931): "Goodness, smell that air, will you! It's got the whole ocean in it. -- Elmer, drive careful over that bridge" (qtd. in Guare, "Introduction" xxii). Although Guare refrains from analyzing this line, it clearly operates as poetry in its employment of both image and juxtaposition. In terms of imagery, the air contains the "whole ocean"; in terms of juxtaposition, the character abruptly switches from marveling at the salt air and the vastness that it evokes to monitoring her husband's driving. This quick shift of focus from the vast to the mundane conforms to one of Wilder's overarching goals as a playwright, which is to situate the banalities of everyday American life within the greater patterns of the cosmos.
Further examples of Wilder's gift for the poetry of prosaic speech may be found in the dialogue of the Stage Manager in *Our Town* (1938). Early in the first act, as he is introducing the setting, he laconically states, "There's some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery" (6). The repetition of the word "scenery" both emphasizes that word and provides a rhythm to the line. He heralds the first intermission with another poetic repetition, this time of the word "smoke": "That's the end of the first act, friends. You can go and smoke now, those that smoke" (29). As the next act begins, he alludes to the theme of death in the final act in a folksy manner: "The First Act was called the Daily Life. This act is called Love and Marriage. There's another act coming after this: I reckon you can guess what that's about" (31). Wilder has carefully chosen his words, paying close attention to the rhythm of the line while striking a conversational tone.

Ruhl likewise arranges her words in such a way as to keep their meanings fresh. Like Wilder, she utilizes juxtaposition to do so, as in Matilde's characterization of the perfect joke as existing, "somewhere between an angel and a fart" (Ruhl, *Clean House* 24). In another example, the Other Woman exhorts Jean to become comfortable with putting on makeup in public:

Jean: I've always been embarrassed to put lipstick on in public.
Other Woman: That's crap. Here -- You have beautiful lips.
(Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell* 15)

The proximity of the word "crap" to the phrase "beautiful lips" creates a humorous effect. A more prevalent tendency in Ruhl's writing, which may even be characterized as a hallmark of her style, is the evocation of unusual and even
startling imagery tending towards the whimsical. Instances abound in Eurydice: the Nasty Interesting Man scoffs at Orpheus's "long fingers that would tremble to pet a bull or pluck a bee from a hive," fingers which in his opinion compare unfavorably to his own "big stupid hands like potatoes" (355); the Loud Stone employs an odd simile to convey the quietness of the language of the dead: "Like if the pores in your face/ opened up and talked" (359); and, as discussed in an earlier chapter, Orpheus dreams Eurydice's hair as little faucets streaming water (371-2). Both Ruhl and Wilder keep their dialogue fresh, in keeping with Stein's manifesto, through the application of poetic technique.

The characters in Our Town are archetypal American small-town residents. Wilder once again drew support from Gertrude Stein in his belief that America and its inhabitants occupied a special place in history through an identification with world destiny (Burbank 83). The American thus stands, in certain of Wilder's works such as Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth (1942), for humanity as a (limited) whole. In these two works, he attempts to place the archetypal American in relation to the cosmos, albeit with a rueful sense of irony. In Our Town, he brings Emily back from the dead so that she is able to witness the beauty contained in even the most banal moments, and to come to understand that the living fail to appreciate such beauty. In The Skin of Our Teeth, Wilder paints on a broader canvas, confronting Antrobus and his family with natural catastrophe and human destructiveness, positioning his protagonist as an everyman. He incorporates biblical mythology as well, modeling family dynamics on Adam, Eve, and Cain. By
Wilder's own admission, the play was strongly influenced by James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, a work itself greatly concerned with archetype (Castronovo 106-7). A controversy erupted in 1942 a month after *The Skin of Our Teeth* opened on Broadway when two Joyce scholars accused Wilder, in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, of plagiarizing *Finnegan's Wake*. Wilder's borrowings from Joyce, which in actuality fall far short of plagiarism, are outlined by David Castronova in *Thornton Wilder* (1986) as "conflation of time, mixing of images, cyclical patterning, and finding correspondences between the lives of ancient and modern man" (21).

Ruhl is also greatly concerned with archetype, although in a different way. Wilder can perhaps best be categorized as a Christian humanist, and the cosmos in which he situates his American characters is one with biblical qualities. Although raised Catholic, Ruhl does not claim any particular religious affinity, and the worlds that she creates in her dramatic works do not reflect the philosophy of any specific faith or denomination. She modernizes and alters Greek myth in *Eurydice* in order to create a personalized portrait of the process of bereavement. She rewrites Orpheus, a god of music, into a goofy, shy, love-struck teenager, and introduces new characters into the myth, such as Eurydice's father, in order to suit her needs. In *Demeter in the City*, commissioned by Cornerstone Theater, she utilizes Greek myth to tie together stories of 20-year-olds living in Los Angeles, focusing on drug-addicted mothers who have had their children taken away from them. As she describes in the program notes, she brought the myth of Demeter to these women
and they identified with "her anger, her sense of powerlessness before fate and before the judging eyes of Zeus" (Ruhl, Demeter 4). She thus used the myth as a template on which to structure the play, which grew out of her encounters with young Los Angelenos.

Whereas Wilder writes the play to serve the myth, Ruhl draws on the myth to write the play, which is to say that whereas Wilder sets out to demonstrate a relationship between character/archetype and cosmos, Ruhl shapes the myth to suit her purpose. Ruhl's purpose does, however, relate to the myth, which underlies key issues in her story, such as the process of bereavement in Eurydice or that of the loss of one's child in Demeter. With Passion Play, Ruhl draws on the story of Christ while producing a work that is neither pro- nor anti-Christian. Rather, the biblical characters of the Passion Play stand as archetypal models of behavior, and the consequences of either emulating the behavior of the character that the "actor" is portraying, or fighting against it, are examined. Whereas the Antrobus's are made to conform to the pattern of the original biblical family, the "actors" in Passion Play respond to the archetype rather than exemplifying it.

The non-realist and archetypal approach of both playwrights lends itself to depictions of the afterlife. For both, the land of the dead exists in a continuum with that of the living as part of the overall pattern of existence. In Our Town, Wilder has borrowed his vision of the afterlife from Dante's Purgatory in order to "find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life" (Wilder, "Preface" xi). The cemetery, home to the dead and Emily's resting place, functions architecturally.
as part of the greater structure of the town and cosmos. In Ruhl, however, encounters with the afterlife serve as events of personal transition. Like Emily, Eurydice comes to prefer the land of the dead to that of the living, however she does so because of the presence there of her father. In The Clean House and Dead Man's Cell Phone, the dead push the living back into life. Matilde's parents cease to haunt her once she comes to terms with having lost them, and Jean's quick visit to hell convinces her that she is in love with the wrong man.

2. Degrees of Separation

John Guare shares with Ruhl and Wilder a non-realist approach and a poetic touch. Thematically, he frequently deals with isolation in modern society. Many of his characters pursue celebrity and/or the American dream, and in doing so are drawn away from living in the present moment; their obsessions prevent them from establishing meaningful relationships and thus result in alienation. Although it would be absurd to categorize Guare along with Wilder as a Christian humanist, a statement he once made about plot indicates some affinity to Christian values, or at least a particular interpretation of them:

Who was it that said there are only two plots, Cinderella and Jack and the Beanstalk? It's the message of Christ, in the best sense. You, the little man, now have value. The Christian ideal is, "You have value and can topple the empire." (qtd. in Savran 98)

Indeed, the Guare protagonist is generally the "little man" struggling to achieve his dreams. In his introduction to the above-cited interview presented in In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights (1988), David Savran observes that, in
Guare's plays: "Events never turn out as planned, his characters never get what they want and yet, almost inevitably, they turn their losses into unexpected gain" (85). The same may be said of Ruhl's works, which almost always end on a hopeful note. In Melancholy Play, the characters transform into almonds and yet find unexpected community within the "almond state." Jean in Dead Man's Cell Phone experiences disappointment with Gordon in the afterlife, yet ends up in his brother's arms among the living. At the conclusion of The Clean House, marked by the death of Ana, Matilde finds hope in her vision of heaven and makes peace with her parents. Even in Eurydice, the title character and her father may be seen to have attained a state of peaceful rest.

Savran compares Guare's plot construction to that of Chekhov in the sense that both force their characters to constantly adapt:

Guare stands out among his contemporaries for his intricately plot-driven playwriting, filled with both the major reversals and the little ironic surprises -- so common in Chekhov -- that force characters incessantly to reevaluate their situations. (85)

Ruhl's works follow the same pattern; her protagonists constantly adapt to shifts in the environment that are often ironic. Jean of Dead Man's Cell Phone is a prime example of this, overcoming, as she does, even a trip to the underworld to wind up in the arms of Dwight, the one whom she discovers she loves best.

Like Wilder and Ruhl, Guare has a gift for reinvigorating language through the employment of poetic dialogue and, as does Ruhl, he tends towards the quirky

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2 That Guare's plays share some characteristics with Chekhov's is not surprising, as Chekhov was Guare's favorite playwright when he was younger (Plunka, Black Comedy 14).
and whimsical turn of phrase, the effect of which often depends on incongruity. In *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year* (1966), one of his earlier plays, a character named simply He warns of some dangerous pigeons: "All those pigeons had foam --...

... Were foaming at the mouths.... at the *beaks*? Pigeons were foaming at the beaks - - all of them" (21). One of numerous vainglorious, overachieving characters in *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* (1977) builds a strange metaphor involving a punctuation mark and weaponry: "Hear the exclamation points I'm talking in. My mind makes spears out of exclamation points and nails me right onto the world of Art" (45).

Even in a work with a more serious tone, the dialogue typically has a rhythmic, poetic quality. In *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990), Paul claims that Flan is his father and fabricates stories about him as he talks to the young couple he meets in Central Park. His words flow in a stream of consciousness:

> He went down South as a freedom marcher, to register black voters -- his friends were killed. Met my mother. Registered her and married her in a fit of sentimental righteousness and knocked her up with me and came back here and abandoned her. Went to Harvard. He's now a fancy art dealer. Lives up there. Count six windows over. Won't see me. (47)

Guare is a master at constructing not just quirky phrases, but quirky situations as well. The first act of *Bosoms and Neglect* (1979) follows a prologue between Scooper and his mother, Henny. It consists of a conversation between Deirdre and Scooper who, although they have just met, share the same analyst. The act is set in the apartment of Deirdre, a book dealer, the living room of which is filled with her inventory of first editions. The act builds to a climax as Scooper, spurned by his lover over the phone, takes to destroying Deirdre's books. In retaliation, she stabs
him repeatedly with a letter opener. They pause when they spot their therapist leaving his office, which is across the street, lament his leaving on vacation, and express remorse for attacking each other. Nevertheless, in despair over their lack of progress in psychoanalysis, they quickly resume their struggle: "They punch each other. They stab each other. They are weeping and hitting and attacking each other" (39). The curtain falls on this battle, which combines pathos and humor.

Ruhl also specializes in quirky scenarios: the chorus of stones in the underworld whose lord is a petulant child who grows to be ten feet tall, the housekeeper who hates to clean, the shy woman who commandeers a dead man's cell phone, and the spurned lover whom melancholy transforms into an almond, to name a few. And yet there is a qualitative difference between the quirkiness, and indeed the overall tone, of the two playwrights. In Guare, the characters tend to talk past each other, wrapped up as they are in their own fantasies. In Ruhl, the characters ultimately succeed in connecting with one another. Eurydice defies the Stones and reestablishes her relationship with her father, Matilde moves in with Ana and all four women come together as Ana's health declines, Jean ultimately unites with the gentler brother, and the characters in Melancholy Play celebrate becoming almonds together. Guare's world is colder and has sharper edges. When, at the conclusion of Landscape of the Body (1977), Betty goes to the detective who has interrogated her over the death of her son, it is an act of desperation in a life that has been emptied of meaning. Her sister has died in an accident, her gentleman caller proven to be insane, and her son murdered and decapitated by his best friend who
has evaded all suspicion. In contrast, when Eurydice joins her father, they reestablish a warm and meaningful relationship even as they approach, finally, oblivion and forgetfulness. Whereas Ruhl's characters love and sometimes lose, Guare's oftentimes never truly love.

Guare frequently employs techniques that break the theatrical illusion. He explains this predilection in an interview with Steven Drukman, drawing on Wilder as inspiration:

Naturalism kills; it's deadly to the theater.... I remember the revelation when, as a boy, I read Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." The Stage Manager says: "See that boy. He will be killed in the war." And there's no boy onstage, of course. So I realized you are not bound by four walls. (Drukman)

In this vein, many of his plays include songs performed by the characters and, at times, his characters speak directly to the audience, as Flan and Ouisa do in Six Degrees of Separation. His perhaps most non-naturalistic work is Four Baboons Adoring the Sun (1992), in which two archaeologists, Philip and Penny, have left their spouses for one another. Their children come to join them in Italy for the summer, a vacation that the Greek god Eros fashions into a tragedy. Singing all of his lines, and directing them to the audience, Eros lures the couple's two oldest children into a sexual liaison with a fatal outcome, and in the process makes a mockery of Philip and Penny's vows of love to one another. Guare's use of the god as directing but outside of the action differs markedly from Ruhl's deployment of Greek myth in Eurydice and Demeter in the City. In Ruhl, myth serves as a template to be inhabited by mortals lacking the powers of the gods. Guare, in
contrast, manifests the god as an embodiment of the force of sexual attraction, and then allows him to toy with the mortals.

Ruhl claims that she is more of a Jungian than a Freudian:

I don't love everything Jung said but in terms of universality as opposed to individual neurosis, in explaining things, I'm more interested in that onstage. Our theater has been in the post-Freudian world for so long, with our theater being about explaining why individuals are wounded and bizarre because of secrets they carry with them. I'm more interested in the Jungian sense of commonality. (qtd. in Royce)

This inclination is a strong factor in the difference between her style and Guare's. The analysis of joke as incantation in the chapter on *The Clean House*, with its invocation of shamanism, indicates a Jungian bias. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Jean's voyage to the underworld to encounter Gordon may be read as the kind and courteous protagonist's encounter with her own animus or male aspect, or dark side, from which she emerges whole and free to couple with Dwight. The reliance on archetype, so common in Ruhl's plays, is another indication of a Jungian disposition.

Even when incorporating myth, Guare's work discloses a Freudian influence. In *Four Baboons*, figures from Greek myth represent the sex and death drives, Eros obviously the former and Icarus the latter. A male adolescent dies by jumping off of a cliff, believing that he can fly as Icarus did, and indeed plummets to the earth following his model's example. In *Bosoms and Neglect*, Guare features the Freudian, wounded individual that Ruhl finds unappealing, stating in regards to this play:

A lot of times "the answer" is right there under our noses, but we're so obsessed with our own needs that we don't see it. I hope the play makes
people ask themselves, "What secrets are there lurking in our lives that we're not noticing?" (Guare qtd. in Plunka, "Freud" 93)

Gene A. Plunka pursues a psychoanalytic approach in "Freud and the Psychology of Neurosis: John Guare's Bosoms and Neglect" (2000). Plunka makes the case that the characters in this play are unable to connect to one another because they, themselves, have been wounded. Deirdre and Scooper come together through their analyst, and Scooper's poor relationship with his mother taints his relationships with women in general. The breast of Scooper's mother, Henny, is rotten with cancer, and this decay symbolizes the failed bond between mother and son (97). The characters neglect one another because they are self-absorbed and riddled with neuroses. As another example, Six Degrees of Separation lends itself to an Oedipal interpretation, since Paul insinuates himself with mother figure Ouisa while enraged the father figure Flan. Although Guare and Ruhl's styles are similar in a number of ways, the difference in underlying psychological model is one distinguishing factor.

Guare depicts the supernatural with much less frequency than either Ruhl or Wilder. One play in which he does so is Landscape of the Body in the person of Betty's deceased sister Rosalie, who performs songs indicating some of the themes of the work and comments on the action, functioning not unlike a Greek chorus in this respect. In stark contrast to Wilder's Emily, who witnesses the beauty of life from beyond the grave, Rosalie expresses relief over her state: "The earth is small. We're gone. We're dead. We're safe" (57). Her own state of relief highlights the
difficulties Betty has faced and continues to face among the living. As discussed above, Ruhl summons the afterlife for quite a different purpose, that of achieving completion and closure.

3. Uneasy Angel

As do Guare, Ruhl, and Wilder, Kushner creates non-realistic theater and incorporates realms beyond the ordinary. His work is the most overtly political of the four playwrights under discussion. He employs various Brechtian techniques, such as song in Hydriotaphia (1997) and projected images in A Bright Room Called Day (1987). His notes to Angels in America (1993) reveal his preference for exposing the theatrical means of production:

The play benefits from a pared-down style of presentation, with minimal scenery and scene shifts done rapidly (no blackouts!), employing the cast as well as stagehands -- which makes for an actor-driven event, as this must be. The moments of magic... are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful theatrical illusion -- which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing. (Kushner, Angels in America 1.5)

This theatricalism serves the biblical and mythical elements in his work. Like Wilder, he situates the everyday in relation to a greater cosmos. A ravenous Death hovers around Browne's bed throughout the course of Hydriotaphia as the ill man's personified soul cringes behind the headboard, begging for release. The Devil makes an appearance in A Bright Room Called Day, chronicling how his job has changed over the years. Priscilla seeks out the grave of Cain as she searches for clues to her mother's disappearance in Homebody/Kabul (2001). However, in Kushner, in contrast to Wilder, the character as often as not is fighting against the
supernatural, rather than harmonizing with it. In *Angels in America*, Prior resists
the Angel's command to "stop moving," ascending even to heaven to return the book
of prophecy, a heaven that is in shambles because God has deserted it. The
intrusion of, or references to, the biblical and supernatural rarely comforts or
reassures, but rather threatens and unsettles. Kushner's employment of the celestial
realm serves as a reminder of the overriding importance of human agency,
functioning in a Brechtian sense as a prod for audience action in the political realm.

In contrast, Wilder paints an especially clear picture of an orderly universe
and humankind's place in it in "Pullman Car Hiawatha" (1931). The Stage Manager
orchestrates a parade of beautiful girls representing the hours who quote from
famous philosophers, followed by the planets, who whistle and hum the music of
the spheres. Then the Archangel Gabriel appears with his cohort to claim a soul.
Although mortal characters suffer in this scenario, they inhabit a world of purpose
and harmony. Ruhl's deployment of the supernatural differs from both of these
models. In her works, the afterworld is a place of reconnection and mourning as in
*Eurydice* or *The Clean House*, or a place in which illusions are set aside, as in *Dead
Man's Cell Phone*. It functions predominantly on a personal level, rather than an
overarching theological one as in Wilder, or in a political capacity as with Kushner.

4. American Dreams

It remains to discuss what makes each of these playwrights distinctly
American, and the similarities and differences between them in this regard. Wilder
grants the American a privileged position in the course of history and situates him in
the cosmos as a representative of the human race, although he does so with a sense of irony. Guare locates his characters in a celebrity-obsessed culture and chronicles their disappointment and tenacity as they struggle to achieve the American dream. Kushner protests American politics, finding the Reagan administration particularly abhorrent, as a reading of Angels in America confirms. Even A Bright Room Called Day, set in Nazi-era Berlin, may be read as a metaphor for the costs of political complacency in the United States during the 1980s. He also addresses the 1960s civil rights movement in Caroline, or Change. He ventures overseas with work such as Homebody/Kabul, Hydriotaphia, Slavs!, and his adaptation of Brundibar, yet even in these cases his eye is always on the American political system to a greater or lesser degree.

Ruhl usually sets her plays in America and deals with American concerns. Even in Eurydice, the father is a Midwesterner who equates the Mississippi with the River Lethe. Her characters frequently lament the fast pace of modern life and yearn for a slower, gentler past. Yet she does not grant Americans a privileged position in the cosmos as Wilder does. She contrasts American culture with that of Europe in Melancholy Play, and although Lorenzo, the European psychologist, is a rather ludicrous character, Ruhl also indicates that the cellist who underscores the action with haunting melodies should be "from a country other than the United States" (Ruhl, Melancholy Play 328). She counterpoints the vapid absurdity of one non-American with the poignant musicality of another. Furthermore, the work valorizes European melancholy over American depression as a mood to be savored rather
than medicated away. Overall, she contrasts cultures in order to gently point out the
virtues and foibles of each. Her work is less politicized than Kushner's. This may
be clearly seen by comparing the play by each that focuses on domestic servitude,
Kushner's musical *Caroline, or Change* against Ruhl's *The Clean House*. In
Kushner, Caroline is a victim of a racist system; however, she herself lacks the will
to fight that system. It is up to the next generation in the person of her daughter to
engage in the Civil Rights movement. In Ruhl, the immigrant housekeeper becomes
integrated into a community of women across nationalistic and cultural boundaries.
The characters change, but political change is not on the agenda.

Although Ruhl's characters do not pursue the American dream with the same
ferocity as Guare's, nevertheless some do aspire to it and find it lacking. The
seemingly perfect marriage of two successful doctors residing in a "metaphysical
Connecticut" falls apart in *The Clean House*, a veteran returns home a broken man
after serving his country in Vietnam in *Passion Play*, and in *Demeter in the City*
some of the less fortunate inhabitants of Los Angeles struggle to improve their lives.
The American dream is not alive and well in these works and the characters do not
pursue that broken dream with the maniacal obsessiveness found in Guare. In
*Bosoms and Neglect*, Deirdre quotes E. M. Forster's directive to, "Connect. Only
connect" (Guare, *Bosoms* 33). In this regard, Guare's characters usually fail; Ruhl's,
on the other hand, typically succeed.
C. Closing Thoughts

An effort will be made in this final section to address questions that might arise for a reader of Ruhl: Do her works read better than they play on the stage? Does she overload her plays metaphorically and thematically? What type of audience would best appreciate her work? Does she call for a new scenic approach to staging? What is her writing process? Does it include extensive research?

Ruhl's plays do indeed read well on the page. She explains that, as someone who wrote poetry before attempting drama, she takes special care with even the stage directions. Indeed, in The Clean House, some of the stage directions are to be projected as subtitles:

I wanted the stage directions to feel like part of the world of the play. And I think in this play [The Clean House], in particular, I was interested in giving little love notes to the actors, like saying, "Oh, this is something between you and me, actor, that I'll share with you that maybe no one else will know, like you have a deep impulse to order the universe now, or right now are you going to fall in love very suddenly." And then later, I don't know when, someone said they're so much a part of the world, you really ought to use them as subtitles. (Ruhl qtd. in "A Conversation")

Her meticulous attention to detail may be found in the care that she takes even with punctuation:

Sometimes I'll change something very small, and to me that's an enormous rewrite. I changed a period to a comma or something [while rehearsing The Clean House] at South Coast Repertory Theater. They said, "Sarah, we thought you were going to be doing rewrites." And I thought I did! (Ruhl qtd. in "A Conversation")

This concern over a punctuation mark demonstrates a poet's obsession with precision and economy, a striving to wring the most meaning possible out of the
fewest number of words. This poetic sensibility exists side-by-side with an innate sense of the theatrical. Through attending both her mother's rehearsals and the Piven Workshop, Ruhl had extensive experience with theater from an early age, and this background manifests in her work. As one director has noted, she has a gift for advancing plot even as she writes in a poetic vein. It should be added that she effectively develops character through her carefully chosen words as well. As a result, her works both read and play well. Their stageability is attested to by the large number of productions they have received, and continue to receive, in the United States and abroad.

Ruhl loads her dialogue with meaning, as may be found in the dense system of imagery in *Eurydice* or the network of early Christian symbols in *Passion Play*. It is waiting there in the script for the careful reader to discover, even if much of it slips by the audience member unnoticed. Even if an audience member fails to consciously note the network of meanings in one of Ruhl's plays, nevertheless it may produce a cumulative effect "like water running over your hand," as noted in the discussion of *The Clean House*. The actor may dig into the meaning hidden in the script as well and use the information gleaned to inform his or her performance. Her work would seemingly appeal most to an audience with a literary or poetic sensibility, one that will take pleasure in her economical and distinctive use of language. Her writing also demands a greater willingness to suspend disbelief than dramatic work in a more realistic vein; the viewer must be nimble enough to follow her quick changes of direction and willing to partake of her journeys into the
fantastic. Expectations of a realistic and straightforward unfolding of events will not be met. As Ruhl herself has stated, she is more a fan of Ovid than Aristotle, more interested in transformation than catharsis, fascinated with archetype and disinterested in Freudian-type neuroses. The audience member must appreciate, as well, Ruhl's quirky sense of humor and her penchant for the non-sequitur.

Ruhl's work is challenging on both the intellectual and emotional level. She values theater that elicits both thought and emotion, as she discusses in an interview with Paula Vogel:

[Ruhl]: I come into the theater wanting to feel and think at the same time, to have the thought affect the emotion and the emotion affect the thought. That is the pinnacle of a great night at the theater.

[Vogel]: The shift in your writing embraces the emotional vocabulary of theater, which a lot of plays avoid. We're kind of used to plays that build into their structure a kind of rational mousetrap, but you're exploring emotional resonance without embarrassment. There is an impulse to be ashamed of emotions in theater, which is rather odd because one would think that's why we have theater.

[Ruhl]: I love that term, rational mousetrap [italics are Vogel's]. Ten years ago, if you were writing, as e. e. cummings would say, about such trite themes as love and death, you were considered a hack. I felt that theater was actually a place where the voice could be attached to emotion. Theater is still a living tradition of speech and emotion. It's something that deeply attracts me. (Vogel, "Sarah Ruhl" 55-6)

Possessed of a "fierce intelligence," as a director of one of her plays has noted (Corley qtd. in Wren 32), or even an "epic intelligence," in the words of Vogel (qtd. in D. Smith), Ruhl meticulously crafts her lines and designs her plots to convey strong emotion. Eurydice and The Clean House serve as prime examples of this, dealing as they do with love and death with great wit and clarity. Her intelligence
comes through in her handling of the Brazilian language and culture in *The Clean House* which is so accomplished that, even though Ruhl speaks only the smattering of Portuguese that she picked up for the play, Brazilian actresses who auditioned were surprised to learn that Ruhl was not their compatriot (Simonson).

In addition to intelligence, Ruhl also brings a great deal of compassion to her writing. She describes feeling a great deal of anger towards the doctor who told the anecdote that served as the starting point for *The Clean House*, but then realized that the character based on the doctor "had to become more human to me if I was going to write about her" (Ruhl qtd. in Weckwerth 32). She handles all of her characters, even the unsavory ones, with a human touch. She grants Gordon, the organ-trader in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, a monologue that, even as it reveals the darker aspects of his personality, humanizes him by exposing his own desire for meaningful connection. She endows the Nasty Interesting Man in *Eurydice* with a certain degree of gentility that tempers his nastiness. Even Hitler in *Passion Play* is humanized as he talks about his past as an artist and the coloring of his eyes. The compassion in Ruhl's writing clearly shows in the way that her characters treat one another, with the group of women that take care of the terminally ill Ana in *The Clean House* serving as a prime example.

Although Ruhl allows her designers a great amount of leeway, she does not call for an entirely new way of staging. Ruhl has characterized her work as "a playground for designers" (Harrell 9). Her non-realistic style and emphasis on transformation call for flexible sets that can accommodate quick scene changes.
These may hark back to Elizabethan and Jacobean stagings, as in Melancholy Play, with its call for minimalist sets. Frequently her stage directions simply call for only one or two pieces of furniture, if any; she has joked with Paula Vogel about the lack of chairs in Eurydice (Vogel, "Sarah Ruhl" 57). The set for the 2007 world premiere of Dead Man's Cell Phone at Woolly Mammoth resembled a mostly-empty subway station. Indeed, the quick changes of locale, from a bar in the United States, to the airport in Johannesburg, to the afterlife, and then back to the Gottlieb's home in the United States, prohibit elaborate set designs and necessitate a minimalist approach. The theme of transformation in the plays invites transformation in the set. In the Les Waters productions of Eurydice, the back wall lights up at one point to reveal letters sent from the father in the underworld to the daughter in the overworld. In the Goodman Theatre production of The Clean House, the balcony cantilevered down out of a living room skylight (Goetschius 10).

Regarding her writing process, Ruhl draws inspiration from a variety of sources. Certainly her own life experience, inclusive of the losses that she has suffered, has informed a range of plays dealing with death and bereavement, including Dog Play, Melancholy Play, Eurydice, and The Clean House. She has drawn on literature in her adaptations of Woolf and Chekhov and a work of nonfiction, Anne Fausto-Sterling's Sexing the Body, has significantly influenced Late: A Cowboy Song. She has explored areas new to her through her commissions of Virtual Meditation #1 and Demeter in the City. In the former, she created a multimedia piece in which audience members interface with a computer, and in the
latter, built a play based upon interviews with members of various communities in
Los Angeles. The idea for Passion Play sprang from one of Ruhl's favorite
childhood books, Maud Hart Lovelace's Betsy and the Great World (1952). And
although The Clean House arose generally from the playwright's personal
experience of loss, it grew up specifically around an anecdote overheard at a party.
Ruhl is clearly open to drawing on a wide range of sources.

Ruhl prefers to contemplate an idea for some time before making a
commitment to it:

Something has to stick with me before I'll actually write a play about it. If
something sticks in your craw for [six] months or a year, then you know it's
got some staying power. I think Ibsen said he would think about a play for a
year, before he would write it, and I don't go that far in terms of gestation,
but if an image is lingering for [six] months, then it feels like it's demanding
out. (Ruhl qtd. in Kaplan)

She may take time off in the middle of a project in order to let it gestate. She
reports taking a year off between writing the first and second acts of both The Clean
House and Dead Man's Cell Phone: "It gives me breathing room. I'm not avoiding
it; I'm waiting to know what the rest of it is. Sometimes you have to live a little
longer to know how to finish a play" (qtd. in Vitello). Rather than starting with a
preconceived form, she attempts to find the form that best suits the material, and
prefers to let her ideas evolve organically rather than plotting them in advance. For
example, Eurydice began with the image of the protagonist calling out Orpheus's
name and causing him to turn around, with the notion of "language taking over
music," and from this image and idea Ruhl began to develop the world of the play,
including the raining elevator and the chorus of speaking stones. She claims that research into the myth only came later (Svich 36). Similarly, The Clean House grew around an overheard anecdote, and Dead Man's Cell Phone around "the image of a cell phone ringing and ringing and no one answering it" (Ruhl qtd. in Vitello). Ruhl's non-linear approach to writing seems to be particularly well-suited to her theatrical style, reflecting as it does her preference for episodic transformation over linear catharsis.

Ruhl clearly researches her play topics thoroughly. A convincing demonstration of this is provided in the "Playwright's Note" to Passion Play, in which Ruhl demonstrates a firm grasp of her subject. Yet the audience member need not possess an in-depth understanding of Ruhl's topic in order to appreciate her play. For example, one need not be aware that the only Jew in Oberammergau was sent to a concentration camp in order to commiserate with Violet's predicament. And one need not associate the large, flightless bird that Violet encounters in the forest with a failed Rapture in order to marvel at its strangeness and to draw one's own conclusions about its symbolic significance. Indeed, the association of this bird with the Rapture, as presented in the chapter on Passion Play, may or may not have been in the front of Ruhl's mind as she wrote the scene; the system of imagery that she has constructed allows for a range of interpretation. Certainly, one need not be familiar with psychological models of bereavement in order to understand Eurydice, and it is doubtful that Ruhl undertook such a course of study in order to write the play, drawing as she did upon her own personal experience. Likewise, although an
appreciation of humor theory might enhance one's understanding of *The Clean House*, most likely Ruhl did not pursue a course of study in this area before writing the play. She states that she worked with "the Platonic ideal of a joke" that could "transport you somehow," (qtd. in Weckwerth 32) and this approach resulted in a presentation amenable to the analysis presented earlier that equates Mathilde's joke-telling with shamanic incantation.

Ruhl is only 34 years old at the time of this writing, and perhaps her best work still lies ahead of her. *Eurydice* and *The Clean House* stand out as her strongest works to date for the way in which they combine her signature lightness and whimsy with a devastating emotional impact. The early, unpublished, short *Dog Play* surpasses both of these for raw, emotional power, although it lacks the play between lightness and darkness that characterizes the longer works. Although still considered by its author to be a work in progress, *Demeter in the City* is also one of her more powerful pieces, calling as it does on Greek myth to bring attention to current political and social issues. The highly ambitious *Passion Play* perhaps reads better than it plays; although it contains moments of stunning theatricality, particularly at the appearances of the giant puppet fish and sailing ships, it makes for a rather long evening of theater at 3-1/2 hours. Its sprawling system of images fails to sustain prolonged interest in this case, and the appearances of historical leaders, with the exception of Queen Elizabeth's visitation of P during battle in Vietnam, seem somewhat extraneous to the main action. *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is, on the other hand, an accomplished farce.
Ruhl envisions the upcoming In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play) as a sort of companion piece to Dead Man's Cell Phone, as "[b]oth involve technology and bodies, and how a small electronic device revolutionized intimacy, as it were" (Goetschius 11-2). Its subject matter invites a farcical treatment, and its setting at the turn of the 20th century accommodates the inclusion of nostalgic elements for which Ruhl has a predilection. She has apparently moved beyond writing plays of mourning, although one expects that the themes of love and death will continue to dominate her work. Her current works contain a larger measure of lightness than darkness. In his profile of Ruhl in The New Yorker, John Lahr reports on commenting on the "oddness" of the "ironic detachment" and "unabashed optimism" of Dead Man's Cell Phone to Mark Wing-Davey. The director replied, "Why shouldn't it be? [sic]... Right now Sarah's life is great -- a young child, newly married, the darling of the American theatre scene, her plays are done" (Lahr, "Surreal Life"). No matter what the tone, it may be expected that Ruhl will continue to draw on a wide range of subject matter and to create whimsical, intriguing works in her own unique voice.
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Appendix 1

Other Works

For the sake of completeness, Ruhl's works not discussed in the body of this study will be presented briefly below. These consist of the short Dog Play, a study of grief that is, in many respects, a precursor to Eurydice; a full-length adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel Orlando; one-act adaptations of two of Anton Chekhov's short stories; Virtual Meditation #1, a multimedia, interactive piece realized with the assistance of students from Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center; Demeter in the City, a Cornerstone Theater commission based on the lives of 20-year-olds living in Los Angeles, and structured around the Greek myth; Snowless, a one-act written to raise awareness of global warming; and the upcoming In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play).

A. Dog Play

In 1998, Ruhl's Dog Play received a reading at the Ten Minute Play Festival at Chicago Dramatists (Ruhl, Dog Play 1). Clearly derived from the exercise written for Vogel in 1994, the play explores the death of a father from the perspective of the family dog. It also lays the foundation for Eurydice, which would be composed later. Dog Play takes place immediately after the death of the father, compared to Eurydice in which the father has been inhabiting the underworld for some time. The dog is to be played by either a man or woman who initially wears a dog mask, and the set consists of a moon and a treehouse. As the lights come up, "a huge glowing puppet of a moon" occupies the stage as the sound of "a dog baying as
though his heart is breaking" is heard. The actor in a dog mask washes the dishes and describes the paramedics taking the father away (2). It turns out that the deceased father has been staying mostly in the moon. He converses with the dog, but no one else is able to see him, including the daughter, who desperately wishes to do so. The overall mood is dreamlike and, at times, nightmarish. A doctor looks into the daughter's mouth while she tells a sad story to see if she is crying inside. As the family fishes together, "someone catches something huge, and everyone screams in terror, turning in slow motion to the audience"; it turns out to be the family dog, who has been hooked in the mouth (14-5). As a group of mourners follows the moon, baying at it, subtitles relate a mundane conversation about funeral arrangements.

The play is stark, conveying the sense of shock and unreality that might be experienced immediately after the death of a loved one. Nevertheless, it contains humor as well. In one scene, a flashback, the grandfather and his new wife sit silently in a fishing boat while pre-recorded voices express their thoughts. The grandfather revels in the silence while his wife vents her frustration at the lack of conversation, and her hatred of fishing. When the grandfather asks out loud if she is happy, she replies, reassuringly, "Oh, yes" (7-8). Another scene demonstrates the inadequacy of ritual in the face of death, as the family stands over the grave discussing trivialities, concluding with the statement, said prayerfully, that, "There are no prayers to say over the dead" (13). The dog itself is growing old, and
expresses dismay at both its declining physical condition and the foolishness of the young, as exemplified by the new puppy that the family has brought home.

The father of this play resembles that of Eurydice, based as they both are upon Ruhl's own father. As in Eurydice, he tells stories of his own father's love of duck hunting, and how his father's wish to die in a duck pond came true. Other details as they occur in the father's stories of duck hunting in Eurydice appear first in Dog Story: the guide Old Frank's skill at calling the ducks; the ten duck limit; measures taken to deceive the warden; and the normally taciturn grandfather's loquaciousness when it came to hunting. The dog commiserates, as it was itself a participant in the hunt. Water figures in the duck hunting stories, the grandparents' fishing honeymoon, and the fishing nightmare; water as an element associated with death will play a major role in Eurydice. The moon functions differently in Dog Story from how it will in Eurydice. In the former, the dog bays mournfully at the moon, where the father is staying. In the latter, it is associated with Orpheus's artistic genius. Out-of-tune-singing, which functions as a bonding ritual between father and daughter in Eurydice as they attempt "I've Got Rhythm," occurs in Dog Story as the daughter sings "Blue Moon" to an empty chair. She intuits that the dog is barking at the father, but cannot see him herself. Later, at the conclusion, she does at last sense his presence, at which point the lights go down and the moon is brought on one last time (21). Certain aspects of this play will appear in Passion Play as well, including images of the moon and water. In the first part of Passion Play, water is associated with death and spiritual rebirth, and the moon is both
associated with the Virgin Mary and functions as a harbinger of the second coming. In *Dog Play*, a Renaissance Queen takes tea with the father on the moon (18); Queen Elizabeth makes several appearances in *Passion Play*. Large puppets are employed in both: to represent the moon in *Dog Play*, and giant fish in *Passion Play*.

Whereas in *Eurydice*, Ruhl captures the bereavement process in many of its stages, in *Dog Play* she focuses on the sense of shock and unreality that is likely to occur immediately after the loss. The play is rawer and more condensed than the later work. Ruhl demonstrates an early interest in theatricality and a disregard for the conventions of realism. Dog and human perspectives and ways of mourning are juxtaposed throughout, and the huge, puppet moon serves as a central symbol, linking the two modes of perception. Dogs bay at the moon on which the deceased father is now residing. Bereavement is conveyed on the animal level. Yet the dog also engages in civilized conversation with the father as they listen together to a jazz recording, complaining about the rude manners of other dogs:

> I don't like to play with other dogs anymore. They just can't seem to understand. I have my memories -- they don't. They exist in the eternal present and don't realize that the biting and sniffing of genitalia is vulgar. (20)

The dog assumes a humanness in its possession of memory, and the theme of the centrality of memory to human life will be expanded upon in *Eurydice*. In *Dog Play*, Ruhl tries out themes that will be developed at length in *Eurydice*; nevertheless, it does not read as an immature, undeveloped work, but stands strongly on its own merits.
B. Orlando

Ruhl's adaptation of the Virginia Woolf novel was commissioned by Joyce Piven, who directed it at the Piven Theater Workshop in 1998. Piven subsequently directed it at the Actor's Gang in Los Angeles in 2003 (Ruhl, Orlando 1; Hitchcock; Shteir). The novel, and play, follow Orlando as he progresses through three centuries, changing from a man into a woman at one point after a long sleep. The playwright who adapts a novel for the stage must, of necessity, be selective. Ruhl includes the protagonist's major love relationships, his brief encounter with Shakespeare, and his/her ongoing effort to write a poem about an oak tree. Orlando's musings upon the difference between being a man and a woman are included. In addition to Orlando and Sasha, who are to be played by women, the cast list includes a chorus, which is to fulfill all the other roles. The play is presented in a mixture of narrative and dialogue, with Orlando and the chorus sharing the role of narrator. Ruhl preserves the verbal playfulness that is found in the novel, a style that appears in Ruhl’s original works as well and which may indeed have been influenced by Woolf. In the play and in the novel, for example, when Orlando first sees, and instantly falls in love with, the Russian Princess Sasha, he calls out, in his astonishment, a seemingly unrelated list of objects: "melon, pineapple, olive tree, emerald, fox in the snow" (Ruhl, Orlando 25; Woolf 24). Ruhl also shares with Woolf a whimsicality that comes through in the adaptation, for example in the description of the great freeze in London as delivered by the Chorus:

Birds froze in mid-air
and fell like stones to the ground.

It was no uncommon sight to come upon
a whole herd of swine frozen immovable upon the road....
The ice went so deep and so clear that there could be seen, congealed at a
depth of a few thousand feet, here a porpoise, there a flounder!!! (24-5)

This sense of playfulness and whimsicality runs throughout both play and novel.

Elements present in this early adaptation will reappear in Ruhl's later plays.

Whereas a generic Renaissance Queen serves tea to the Father in *Dog Play*, which
had its first reading in the same year that *Orlando* premiered, in the latter, Queen
Elizabeth adopts the young protagonist as her consort. The English Queen will
show up in *Passion Play* as well. The Queen refuses to remain in her own time
period, appearing at the end of *Orlando* to remind the protagonist of her past, in *Dog
Play* to represent the long-dead, and in *Passion Play* to demonstrate that styles of
leadership have changed over the centuries. As a playwright, Ruhl is keenly aware
of the influence of the past, and utilizes an asynchronous Queen Elizabeth as a
concrete manifestation of that influence, just as she will stage Matilde's deceased
parents as a haunting presence in *The Clean House*. The focus on gender in *Orlando*
will reappear again in Ruhl's *Late: A Cowboy Song*, with its androgynous cowboy
and intersexual baby. Another significant theme in *Orlando* is that of the loss of a
loved one; the protagonist frequently longs for Sasha, the Russian princess who is
her first true love and who abandons her to return to her home country. Needless to
say, loss figures prominently in much of Ruhl's oeuvre. Although an adaptation,
*Orlando* nevertheless sets the tone and introduces much of the thematic material that
Ruhl will be working with for years to come.
C. Chekhov Adaptations

When pressed by interviewer Peter Gianopulos to sum up the thematic essence of her work, Ruhl responded with "love and death" (Gianopulos). In her two adaptations of Chekhov short stories, the focus is on love, and the lack of it, rather than death. As with Orlando, the adaptations were commissioned and produced by the Piven Theater Workshop and were directed by Joyce Piven. They were presented as part of the program Chekhov: The Stories in March 2000, with additional stories adapted by Piven rounding out the program (Ruhl, "The Lady" 1).

In these adaptations, as in Orlando, characters switch between representational and presentational modes, engaging in dialogue as well as narration. One of the adaptations includes a chorus, out of which various characters emerge, and the other contains two generic characters that fulfill a choric function.

"The Lady with the Lap Dog" chronicles an affair between Gurov, a middle-aged man, and Anna, a young woman, both of whom are married. In each other, they find an intimacy and excitement that is lacking in their otherwise unhappy and mundane lives. Both the play and story end ambiguously. Ruhl faithfully reproduces the paradoxical closing sentiment of Chekhov's story, having her characters speak as the narrator in the story:

Gurov: And it seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found, and that a new and glorious life would begin for them.
Anna: It was clear to both of them that the end was still far off, and the hardest and most complicated part was only just beginning.
(Ruhl, "The Lady" 39)
The second adaptation, "Anna around the Neck," also features a spring-autumn relationship, an unhappy marriage between 18-year-old Anna and 52-year-old Modest Alexeich. Anna has married for money, her mother having passed away and her alcoholic father barely able to provide for Anna and her two brothers. She finds herself intimidated by her husband, a dull and unappealing but well-off government official who keeps her in a state of virtual poverty by refusing her even pocket money. She comes into her own, however, when she is introduced into high society, which she dazzles with her beauty and grace, charming even His Excellency. After this coming-out, she is able to demand of her husband that all of her financial needs be met, as he recognizes both her newly found influence and power as well as the benefits of having such a charming and popular wife. Anna's transformation changes her relationship with her family as well. Although in the early stages of her marriage she dines with her father and brothers daily at their home, after she becomes active in society she ceases to visit them. At the conclusion of both play and story, as she passes her father and brothers on the street in a carriage, the embarrassed sons prevent the father from shouting out her name.

As with Orlando, these adaptations reflect Ruhl's ongoing concerns. In "The Lady with the Pet Dog," Chekhov imbues what would otherwise be a rather pedestrian love story with a sense of the mystery and beauty of life, particularly in one passage in which the lovers take a ride to the beach at Oreanda after their first

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1 The usage of "Pet Dog" or "Lap Dog" in the title is a matter of translation. For example, Penguin Classics has published a Chekhov short story anthology titled Lady with Lapdog and Other Stories.
tryst. The author conveys through his description of nature a paradoxical sense of both the insignificance and consequence of human endeavor:

The leaves did not stir on the trees, cicadas twanged, and the monotonous muffled sound of the sea that rose from below spoke of the peace, the eternal sleep awaiting us. So it rumbled below when there was no Yalta, no Oreanda here; so it rumbles now, and it will rumble as indifferently and as hollowly when we are no more. And in this constancy, and this complete indifference to the life and death of each of us, there lies, perhaps, a pledge of our eternal salvation, of the unceasing advance of life upon earth, of unceasing movement towards perfection. (419-20)

This passage is couched in the details of the story of the developing relationship, as the lovers strengthen their bond to one another and pursue each other from city to city. Like Chekhov, Ruhl keeps in mind the bigger picture, playing out her relationships before a larger backdrop. One example is the affair between Charles and Ana in The Clean House, preordained, so they claim, by destiny, and eventually overcome by questions of life and death when Ana succumbs to cancer.

The theme of fathers and daughters occurs in "Anna around the Neck," as it will in many of Ruhl's plays. In this instance, the daughter has lost her father to alcoholism rather than a fatal illness. Once she assumes her place in high society, she essentially abandons him; as in Dog Play, the connection between father and daughter is severed. In the later Eurydice and The Clean House, daughters will reunite with their deceased fathers, if only temporarily. The arc of a disempowered woman freeing herself from the oppression of a male partner will be traced by Ruhl once more in Dead Man's Cell Phone, as Jean escapes from her isolated existence.
and fully enters society through her liaison with Dwight only after she has broken free from her fantasy of Gordon.

D. Virtual Meditation #1

As with the Chekhov adaptations, love, not death, is the theme of Virtual Meditation #1. The Actors Theatre of Louisville commissioned and produced it as part of the Humana Festival of New American Plays in March of 2002. Students at Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center were enlisted to create the technical elements of the production (Ruhl, Virtual 1). The play was remounted at Carnegie Mellon University in April and May of the same year ("Virtual Meditation #1"). It begins as follows:

A theater lobby.
Two audience members, A and B, are randomly selected.
They need not be any particular age or gender or ethnicity.
They need not be in love with one another.
They need not be actors.
They will, however, be asked to hold hands during the performance.
Before the performance begins, the two participants are asked to put their heads into a vaudevillian contraption in which only their heads show through a cut-out hole.
Their pictures are taken.
They state their names.
Their names are recorded.
They are shown to a park bench.
They are asked to hold hands.
A device records the pressure of their hand-holding.
A monitor records the beating of their hearts. (2)

The play consists of three scenes. Throughout, "digital images of A and B's faces are projected onto the faces of mannequins" (3). These facial images have been programmed to represent various emotions that change according to stage directions
in the script. Actors have pre-recorded the dialogue between A and B. A screen behind the mannequins projects various images that are influenced by the volunteers' heartbeats and the pressure of their hand-holding. One of the mannequins holds a white helium balloon, the other a black umbrella.

The first scene is set in a park and rain is projected on the screen. The rate of rain varies depending upon the hand pressure of the volunteers, as does the color of the sky. Tulips appear on the screen with the constancy of the volunteers' heart rates. The names of the volunteers, recorded earlier, are inserted into the dialogue as the characters introduce themselves to each other. The second scene takes place in a museum against the backdrop of a Rothko painting. The saturation of the painting varies with the volunteers' combined heart rates, and the top and bottom of the painting move towards each other in relation to the hand pressure. The characters have known each other for a long time at this point. The last scene takes place by the sea, and the projection is the surface of a lake reflecting the full moon. The combined heart rates create slow ripples in the water, and the hand pressure alters the brightness of the moon. The characters argue about swimming and talk about having some kind of a marriage in the future.

The dialogue is simple throughout and the piece relies upon sophisticated computer programming. The water and moon imagery hark back to Dog Play. Rothko will reappear later in Ruhl's work as inspiration for the setting in Late: A Cowboy Song. As of the date of this writing, a brief documentary about the performance is available at the Carnegie Mellon University site for the project.
"Virtual Meditation #1"). It chronicles the arrival of the audience, the selecting of volunteers, the hooking up of the monitors, and shows clips from the performance. The last few minutes of the documentary focus on the interactions between various sets of volunteers (the performance was run numerous times), which appears to have constituted a significant facet of the play in performance as two people, possibly strangers, were brought into close proximity to one another and their reactions observed by the audience.

E. Demeter in the City

Cornerstone Theater commissioned Ruhl to write a play about 20-year-olds in Los Angeles; it was presented at REDCAT in June 2006 (W. Jones). Ruhl considers the script to still be a work in progress (Ruhl, "Re: Checking in"). In order to research the project, the playwright interviewed young people across the city, including "young mothers in a program called Shields Healthy Start in Compton.... ROTC students, young Republicans at UCLA, undergraduates at USC, activists in Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlá at Cal State Northridge, social workers, and young people recently emancipated from foster care." She found a common concern to be the separation between parents and children, and the struggle to define oneself after leaving home. Many of the young mothers at Shields Healthy Start had lost their children to foster care due to problems with drug addiction. At one session, Ruhl told them the myth of Demeter and Persephone, and it resonated with them (Ruhl, "Program Notes" 4-5). In the Greek myth, mother and daughter are separated when Hades steals Persephone away to the underworld; in her despair
Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, neglects the Earth's crops. In order to avert famine, Zeus intervenes and a compromise is reached wherein Persephone spends half her time on earth and half in the underworld, with these times corresponding to summer and winter ("Demeter").

The plot of Ruhl's play is structured around this myth. Demeter is a young mother whose child is taken into foster care after a social worker finds used heroin needles in her apartment. The judge fulfills the role of Zeus, and a Young Republican that of Hades who seduces a now 20-year-old Persephone at the beginning of the second act and whisks her away to the underworld. After 20 years, Demeter has recovered from her drug addiction and tracks down Zeus, now retired, in a gated community in Palm Springs. The central characters, including Hermes, who was the bailiff and is now Zeus's driver, come to realize that they are indeed Greek gods. Zeus works out the compromise and Persephone is reunited with her mother. The play draws attention to the plight of drug-addicted mothers who have lost their children, indicting the foster care system without exonerating the mothers. It focuses on the human toll caused by the separation of parent and child. The work is Brechtian in nature, highlighting political and social issues, and incorporating songs that comment on the action. The use of a Greek chorus, consisting of "at least three mothers, all different ethnicities" (Ruhl, Demeter 2), contributes to the alienation effect. Whereas Ruhl adapts Greek myth in Eurydice in order to stage personal grief, in Demeter in the City, myth is utilized for a more overtly political purpose.
F. Snowless

Snowless, a one-act play, first appeared at the Chicago Humanities Festival in 2007, then at the New York University Humanities Festival in April 2008, in both instances on bills of plays having to do with global warming (Robertson, "Nine Writers" 7). The Chicago Humanities Festival took place in November of 2007 ("Chicago Humanities Festival"). The first of two scenes, set "sometime in the future," consists of a conversation between two groups of three characters each, one composed of "older, one might even say, ancient" characters, the other of children (1). As the title suggests, snow no longer occurs. The older characters attempt to describe snow and its effects to the children. As the scene progresses, water rises from the characters' toes to their chins.

At the beginning of the second scene, an older couple sits over breakfast as the Woman reads aloud an article concerning climate change from the New York Times. The article includes the statistic that the honeybee population has declined by 70%. The Man fails to respond to his wife's growing sense of alarm, apparently absorbed in his own reading, until a bee buzzes through the window and stings him on the arm. At this point the Woman calls on their Belgian, beekeeping neighbor, Maurice, for advice about bees. Maurice quotes at length from Maurice Maeterlinck's The Life of the Bee. In a sudden plot twist characteristic of Ruhl, Maurice and the Woman lie down together in the garden and, before long, start kissing. Snow begins to fall. Three grandchildren appear in the garden and the voices of the three ancients from the first scene once again relate memories of snow.
In unison, and in what appears to be an homage to the children's book Goodnight Moon, a work that Ruhl reports having read to her daughter ("A Promising Playwright's Summer Reading"), all of the characters wish good-night to a long list of things, including snow, bees, elephants, and trees. The sound of the bees grows louder, then falls silent, as a blackout ends the play.

The play is unusual for its inclusion of long passages from a work of nonfiction. These passages from Maeterlinck serve to educate the audience about bees and provide instructions for how to best proceed in the face of global warming:

> Just as it is written on the tongue, the stomach, and the mouth of the bee that it must make honey, so it is written in our eyes, our ears, our nerves, our marrow, that we must make this -- how do you call it -- cerebral substance -- ... nor must we know the purpose the substance shall serve. (Maeterlinck qtd. in Ruhl, Snowless 14)

In a touch of magic realism, the kissing of the Woman and Maurice produces snow in May, in reference to which the woman claims that she is making honey for her grandchildren and their descendents (15). The play thus suggests that human activity, inclusive of romantic interaction and the type of intellectual exploration demonstrated in the excerpts from Maeterlinck, may somehow prove adequate to counteract the damaging effects of global warming.

**G. In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)**

Berkeley Repertory Theatre has commissioned In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play) and will mount its world premiere in January 2009 ("Berkeley Rep to End"). Les Waters, who staged three productions of Eurydice, will direct. The
work is inspired by historian Rachel P. Maines’s *The Technology of Orgasm*.

Explains Ruhl:

> Before the vibrator was invented, male doctors would give women paroxysms manually to cure hysteria.... It wasn't seen as a sexual thing but as clinical. Then, at the dawn of the electrical age, they said: "I'm so happy about the new device. It used to take hours to get results. Now it only takes three minutes." (qtd. in D. Smith)

Described as a play of "love and longing," it is summarized in Berkeley Repertory Theatre's announcement of its 2008-2009 season:

> The Vibrator Play [the shorter, earlier version of the title] illuminates the lives of six lonely people seeking relief from a local doctor -- but, despite his expertise with a strange new technology, all they really need is intimacy. It’s a tender tale that takes place in the twilight of the Victorian age, an elegant comedy lit by unexpected sparks from the approaching era of electricity, equality, science, and sexuality. ("Berkeley Rep Picks" 4)

It appears to continue to develop the theme introduced in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, that of human intimacy as either hindered by or facilitated through technology.
## Appendix 2

**Ruhl Play Chronology: Premieres**

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<td>Orlando</td>
<td>1998</td>
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