

CSULB Theatre Arts Department & California Repertory present

THE CLEAN HOUSE

by Sarah Ruhl

Directed by Joanne Gordon
February 13 - March 7, 2015



CALIFORNIA REPERTORY COMPANY

THE ROYAL THEATER ABOARD THE QUEEN MARY

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CHARACTER LIST

LANE – A doctor, a woman in her early fifties. She wears white.

MATILDE – Lane’s cleaning lady, a woman in her late twenties. She wears black. She is Brazilian. She has a refined sense of deadpan.

VIRGINIA – Lane’s sister, a woman in her late fifties.

CHARLES – Lane’s husband, a man in his fifties. A compassionate surgeon. He is childlike underneath his white coat. In Act 1, Charles plays Matilde’s father.

ANA – An Argentinean woman. She is impossibly charismatic. In Act 1, she plays Matilde’s mother. She is older than lane.

Note: Everyone in this play should be able to tell a really good joke.

ABOUT THE PLAY AND PLAYWRIGHT

Synopsis

Sarah Ruhl’s play takes place in a world of jokes, imagination, and lush, beautiful images in what the author describes as "metaphysical Connecticut,"

The play takes place mostly in the home of a married couple, Lane and Charles, who are both doctors. They have hired a housekeeper named Matilde, an aspiring comedian from Brazil who's more interested in coming up with the perfect joke than in house-cleaning. Lane has an eccentric sister named Virginia who's just nuts about house-cleaning. She and Matilde become fast friends, and Virginia takes over the cleaning while Matilde works on her jokes. Trouble comes when Lane's husband Charles reveals that he has found his soul mate, or "bashert" in a cancer patient named Anna. Lane also finds out about Virginia’s “arrangement” with Matilde and fires her.

After we meet Ana, she hires Matilde as a companion and joke-teller, and Matilde splits her time between the two houses. Eventually, we learn that Ana is dying and has refused any further treatment. When Charles announces he is going to Alaska to bring back a tree which will help slow the cancer, Lane goes to see Ana and tells her she accepts the love she and Charles share. She invites Ana to move into her house so that she can take care of her. Ana asks Matilde to kill her with the perfect joke.

The actors who play Charles and Anna also play Matilde's parents in a series of dream-like memories, as we learn the story about how they literally killed each other with laughter, giving new meaning to the phrase, "I almost died laughing."

Previous Productions

The Clean House was first premiered by Yale Repertory Theatre in 2004.

It had its West Coast premiere at South Coast Repertory in January, 2005 and had an extended Off-Broadway run at Lincoln Center in 2006.

Awards

2004 Winner of the Susan Smith Blackburn prize awarded to the best English-language play written by a woman.

2005 Pulitzer Prize for Drama Finalist

2007 Outer Critics Circle Award Nomination
Outstanding Featured Actress in a Play

About the Playwright

Sarah Ruhl's Plays include *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* (Pulitzer Prize finalist, Tony Award nominee for best new play), *The Clean House* (Pulitzer Prize Finalist, 2005; The Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, 2004); *Passion Play, a cycle* (Pen American award, The Fourth Freedom Forum Playwriting Award from The Kennedy Center); *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (Helen Hayes award); *Melancholy Play*; *Eurydice*; *Orlando*, *Demeter in the City* (NAACP nomination), *Late: a cowboy song*, *Three Sisters*, and most recently, *Stage Kiss* and *Dear Elizabeth*.

Her plays have been produced on Broadway at the Lyceum by Lincoln Center Theater, off-Broadway at Playwrights' Horizons, Second Stage, and at Lincoln Center's Mitzi Newhouse Theater, and downtown at Clubbed Thumb and Classic Stage Company. Her plays have been produced regionally all over the country, with premieres at Yale Repertory Theater, the Goodman Theater, Berkeley Repertory Theater, Arena Stage, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Madison Repertory Theater, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, Cornerstone Theater, and the Piven Theatre Workshop in Chicago.

Her plays have also been produced internationally in London, Germany, Australia, Canada and Israel, and have been translated into Polish, Russian, Spanish, Norwegian, Korean, German and Arabic.

Originally from Chicago, Ms. Ruhl received her M.F.A. from Brown University where she studied with Paula Vogel. In 2003, she was the recipient of the Helen Merrill Emerging Playwrights Award and the Whiting Writers' Award. She was a member of 13P and of New Dramatists and won the MacArthur Fellowship in 2006. She was recently the recipient of the PEN Center Award for a mid-career playwright, the Feminist Press' *Forty under Forty* award, and the 2010 Lilly Award. She is currently on the faculty at Yale School of Drama and lives in Brooklyn with her family. [sarahruhlplaywright.com]

Interview with the director, Joanne Gordon

RS: How would you describe Sarah Ruhl's work and what drew you to directing *The Clean House*?

JG: There are a number of reasons I am absolutely charmed by Sara Ruhl. First of all, the voice of the woman in American drama is small. One celebrates the birth of any recognized [playwright], and Sara Ruhl has been extremely successful being accepted into the mainstream. She presents a female perspective with wit, with humor, with subtlety, and the element which I enjoy so much about her work... it possess that kind of Latin magic-realism. For me, theatre that is confined strictly in the four walls of a realist tradition is theatre I no longer want to see. I feel that film and television, even they have transformed way beyond the sort of 1950 idea of what theatre should be which was a duplication of reality. And Ruhl with such wit and such humor takes flights of fancy that lead us into a deeper truth through magic-realism.

RS: What resonates with you in the piece? Is there a particular moment or idea?

JG: To start with the romantic heroine is the oldest woman on stage and let's start with that for an inversion. In this town that we live in, Hollywood, if you hit thirty you're dead. Sarah Ruhl has the temerity of making the oldest woman [the romantic heroine, and] I think the theme of age is very significant. Age and beauty and love are connected in a very different way than traditionally thought of. So, from its very title, what is a clean house? And the definition of house, and home, and love, and cleanliness, and passion, and health, and illness all are examined in this play.

RS: What do you hope the audience comes away with?

JG: I hope they take away a deep and abiding respect for the notion of love and love that should not be the clichéd sentimentality that they see so often in television and film. A new definition and respect for true love.

RS: How do you see the importance of humor?

JG: [Humor is] absolutely essential. It's a play about death and dying and cancer and mastectomies and if we don't laugh, all the time, then I have failed. It's got to be funny.

Life is the cosmic joke that we all laugh at and see in any perspective. Looking at life, life is ridiculous. I mean, if you think objectively about anything; giving birth, making love, going to the bathroom, it's ridiculous. And the only way to cope with that totally ludicrous helplessness of life is to laugh. To laugh ourselves to death as Matilde's mother did.

Monologue and Soliloquy

Monologues and soliloquies are extended speeches delivered by one person. The person or people to whom the speech is addressed determine which:

- A monologue is any speech addressed by a character to a second person on stage
- A soliloquy is speech in which a character addresses an audience or speaks thoughts

The audience can learn a lot about a character in a play's monologues and soliloquies. A character's feelings about others and about her world are often expressed. Her word choice and tone can tell us about her background and occasionally we can find out about other characters in her speeches.

The first four scenes in *The Clean House* each involve a single character speaking. What can you learn about each character in their opening scene? Fill out the table below as you read each soliloquy. [goodmantheatre.org]

	Who is speaking?	What do they say?	What do we learn about the speaker?	What do we learn about other characters?
Scene 1				
Scene 2				
Scene 3				
Scene 4				

ACT ONE

1. Matilde

*Matilde tells a long joke in Portuguese to the audience.
We can tell she is telling a joke even though we might not understand the language.
She finishes the joke.
She exits.*

2. Lane

Lane, to the audience.

It has been such a hard month.
My cleaning lady—from Brazil—decided that she was depressed one day and stopped cleaning my house.
I was like: clean my house!
And she wouldn't!
We took her to the hospital and I had her medicated and she Still Wouldn't Clean.
And—in the meantime—I've been cleaning my house!
I'm sorry, but I did not go to medical school to clean my own house.

3. Virginia

Virginia, to the audience.

People who give up the privilege of cleaning their own houses—they're insane people.
If you do not clean: how do you know if you've made any progress in life? I love dust. The dust always makes progress. Then I remove the dust. That is progress.
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.
Ha ha ha ha ha ha just kidding.
I'm not a morbid person. That just popped out!
My sister is a wonderful person. She's a doctor. At an important hospital. I've always wondered how one hospital can be more important than another hospital. They are places for human waste. Places to put dead bodies.
I'm sorry. I'm being morbid again.
My sister has given up the privilege of cleaning her own house.
Something deeply personal—she has given up. She does not know how long it takes the dust to accumulate under her bed. She does not know if her husband is sleeping with a prostitute because she does not smell his dirty underwear. All of these things, she fails to know.
I know when there is dust on the mirror. Don't misunderstand me—I'm an educated woman. But if I were to die at any moment during the day, no one would have to clean my kitchen.

4. Matilde

Matilde, to the audience.

MATILDE. The story of my parents is this. It was said that my father was the funniest man in his village. He did not marry until he was sixty-three because he did not want to marry a woman who was not funny. He said he would wait until he met his match in wit.

And then one day he met my mother. He used to say: your mother—and he would take a long pause—(*Matilde takes a long pause*)—is funnier than I am. We have never been apart since the day we met, because I always wanted to know the next joke.

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. My mother was old for a mother. She refused many proposals.

It would kill her, she said, to have to spend her days laughing at jokes that were not funny.

Pause

I wear black because I am in mourning. My mother died last year.

Have you ever heard the expression 'I almost died laughing?' Well that's what she did. The doctors couldn't explain it. They argued, they said she choked on her own spit, but they don't really know.

She was laughing at one of my father's jokes. A joke he took one year to make up, for the anniversary of their marriage. When my mother died laughing, my father shot himself. And so I came here, to clean this house.

Writing Style

Sarah Ruhl's unique writing style is not easily categorized, but it has been linked to a literary movement called **Magic Realism**. Magic Realism is a literature of transformation: mundane objects are transformed into mystical ones, supernatural happenings become commonplace, and the usual constraints of time and space are obsolete.

Every time you see a play, you have to suspend disbelief. Similarly, when you watch television shows like *South Park* or *The Family Guy*, you experience magic realism. For the most part the cartoon characters and their worlds follow the same rules we do, but at least one thing in each episode is beyond our belief. For example; Brian, the dog in *The Family Guy* talks and drinks martinis and other character respond as though it is not unusual. As viewers, we too accept this as an everyday occurrence and suspend our disbelief to accept the show's magic realism. [goodmantheatre.org]

Characteristics of Magical Realism

Hybridity: Magical realism is illustrated in such opposites as urban and rural and Western and indigenous. The plots of magical realist works involve issues of borders, mixing, and change. Authors establish these plots to reveal a crucial purpose of magical realism: a more deep and true reality than conventional realist techniques would illustrate.

Irony Regarding Author's Perspective: The writer must have ironic distance from the magical world view for the realism not to be compromised. Simultaneously, the writer must strongly respect the magic, or else the magic dissolves into simple folk belief or complete fantasy, split from the real instead of synchronized with it. The term "magic" relates to the fact that the point of view that the text depicts explicitly is not adopted according to the implied world view of the author.

Authorial Reticence: Authorial reticence refers to the lack of clear opinions about the accuracy of events and the credibility of the world views expressed by the characters in the text. This technique promotes acceptance in magical realism. In magical realism, the simple act of explaining the supernatural would eradicate its position of equality regarding a person's conventional view of reality. Because it would then be less valid, the supernatural world would be discarded as false testimony.

The Supernatural and Natural: In magical realism, the supernatural is not displayed as questionable. While the reader realizes that the rational and irrational are opposite and conflicting polarities, they are not disconcerted because the supernatural is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictional world.

Can you die from laughter?

By Diane Mapes 2011

Be careful how hard you laugh at some of this summer's blockbuster comedies. "Bridesmaids," "Horrible Bosses" or "The Hangover" sequel could just be the death of you.

"Years ago, I went to see 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' with a friend and I thought I was going to die laughing," says Jim Dailakis, a 41-year-old comedian from Queens, N.Y. "We had this brutal karate instructor who looked just like this little golden head that Harrison Ford holds up at one point. I saw that head and started howling like a girl. And then I couldn't catch my breath and had to think of something else so I wouldn't pass out."

Dailakis, who says he's usually goaded into uncontrollable laughing fits by his buddies, says he's actually blacked out laughing over the years.

"The first time it happened, I thought I was going to die," he says. "I was on my knees laughing, and then suddenly I couldn't breathe. It was scary and freaky but I couldn't stop laughing. And then I began to weep uncontrollably and I thought that was so hilarious, I went into another manic fit of laughter. My friend was laughing so hard, he had to leave the room."

After that, Dailakis saw stars -- then passed out.

"The next thing I knew, I was lying down and looking up," he says. "And I could still hear my friend laughing in the next room."

According to Dr. Martin Samuels, professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School, blacking out while laughing may be related to over-breathing, and is probably not too dangerous.

"This is most likely benign and unlikely that it would lead to death," he says.

But that doesn't mean death doesn't sometimes wear a smile. In the third century B.C., the Greek philosopher Chrysippus was said to have died laughing after getting his donkey drunk on wine. More recently, a Danish audiologist died laughing in 1989 while watching "A Fish Called Wanda." (It's also the subject of an old Monty Python sketch, in which a writer pens the "funniest joke in the world" -- and immediately dies.)

"Happy news is just as dangerous as sad news with regard to the risk of sudden death," he says. "I have cases of people who died after hitting holes in one, after bowling perfect 300 games and upon hearing the words 'Not Guilty.' Death during sexual activity is also well known. Ecstasy, happiness and good news are definitely risky."

Why would good news or happy circumstances put us at risk? It's all about that old fight-or-flight response, he says.

"Extreme excitement, whether that be sadness or happiness activates the part of the brain that's responsible for the flight or fight response to threats in the wild," he says. "This releases a natural chemical -- adrenaline -- which in large animals can be toxic to various organs, in particular the heart."

As a result, extremely strong emotional states -- whether positive or negative -- can be harmful to the heart, on rare occasions causing an abnormal rhythm which can be lethal.

Dailakis says his laughter blackouts used to bother him, but now that he knows what to expect, he's not worried.

"Afterward, I feel exhausted but so alive," he says. "I wouldn't change it for the world. Why should I go to a doctor? It's obviously a natural thing. It would be like telling the doctor, 'I get turned on really easily. Can you stop that?'"

Think About It

1. Throughout the show, Matilde is in search of the perfect joke. In a line from the play, she describes what this means to her:

Matilde: 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.

Do you agree with Matilde's description of the perfect joke? Why or why not? How do you imagine jokes differ from culture to culture? Define the "perfect joke" in your own words, and provide examples.

2. Lane and Virginia are sisters. At one point in the show Lane asks Virginia for help, though it is difficult for her to admit that she needs it. What are some reasons why people may have a hard time asking for help? Talk about what responsibilities (emotional, financial, etc.) you think family members owe one another.

3. Charles leaves his wife Lane because he has found his "bashert" in Ana. Bashert is a Yiddish word that means "destiny". It is often used in the context of one's divinely predestined spouse or soulmate. Do you believe in destiny? Do you think each person has one true love?