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**“IF MORE WOMEN KNEW MORE JOKES...”
THE COMIC DRAMATURGY OF SARAH RUHL AND SHEILA CALLAGHAN**

by

JENNIFER ANN GOFF

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2015

MAJOR: THEATRE

Approved by:

Advisor

Date

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DEDICATION

For my nieces, Anya and Ella: two of the funniest chicks I know!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“If more women knew more jokes,” muses the Brazilian maid/comedienne character in Sarah Ruhl’s Pulitzer Prize nominated play *The Clean House*, “there would be more justice in the world” (26). In one line, Ruhl simultaneously identifies the power of wielding comedy, while also referencing women’s customary lack of access to that particular source of power. As Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner note, “women writers have been consistently underrepresented in or excluded from anthologies of humor and also underrated or relegated to the footnotes in scholarly studies of American humor” (xv-xvi). Comedy has traditionally been a boys’ club, “implicitly defined as a male realm” (Sheppard 36) and delineated by expectations that tend to ignore and subordinate women. It is the project of this dissertation, then, to invite two contemporary American women playwrights into the discussion of humor and the comic, making the (sadly) “bold” assumption that their comic voices deserve not only to be heard and appreciated, but also and quite simply to be recognized as comic.

Drawing on comic, dramatic and feminist theory resources, I proceed through my study giving two remarkable playwrights – Sarah Ruhl and Sheila Callaghan – a chapter dedicated to illuminating each of their respective comic universes, and acknowledging its place in an increasingly complex network of what this contemporary moment may accept as comic. Building on close reading, interplay with established theory, and my personal experiences interviewing one playwright and producing the work of the other, I examine the comic devices at work in their plays, and the ways in which they follow or differ from the rules that have historically excluded these writers from this sort of recognition.

Sarah Ruhl and Sheila Callaghan have a lot in common at first blush – both in their 30s, both members of New Dramatists¹ and 13P,² both recipients of prominent awards and fellowships. In terms of their work, Ruhl and Callaghan exist on a lyrical/dramaturgical continuum together: both playwrights work in highly poetic and stylized worlds, testing the bounds of reality and exploding stage conventions.³ But while Ruhl’s worlds fall on the end of the spectrum that finds beauty and magic in the tests and explosions, Callaghan’s worlds have a much harsher, messier tone. As an example: both playwrights deal extensively with death in their plays, but in markedly different ways. In *The Clean House*, Ruhl allows a charismatic cancer patient Ana (who also happens to be “the other woman”) to choose euthanasia by means of “the perfect joke”: “*Matilde whispers a joke in Ana’s ear. We don’t hear it. We hear sublime music instead. A subtitle projects: The Funniest Joke in the World. Ana laughs and laughs. Ana collapses. Matilde kneels beside her. Matilde wails*” (*Clean House* 105-106). In Callaghan’s play *Roadkill Confidential*, on the other hand, death comes in a different form to Melanie, this play’s “other woman”: “*TREVOR pulls the tarp from the final piece of art [which is a giant amalgamation of animals Trevor has hit with her car – some of which are still clinging to life]. MELANIE is strapped to the metal, dying*” (*Roadkill* 225). There is something otherworldly, poetic, and ultimately comic about both of these approaches to death, but they are indicative of a root difference between the two writers: where Ruhl’s play represents death in poetic,

¹ New Dramatists is an organization that accepts playwrights to seven year residencies in which the playwrights receive support in the process of writing, workshopping and producing their plays.

² 13P was a fascinating collaboration of 13 self-described “midcareer playwrights concerned about what the trend of endless readings and new play development programs was doing to the texture and ambition of new American plays.” (13P) They produced one play by each writer and disbanded in 2012 after the final production – Sarah Ruhl’s *Melancholy Play*.

³ I would actually include Sarah Kane as being on this continuum as well, with Sheila Callaghan occupying a middle ground between Kane and Ruhl. But for the purposes of this study, Kane’s extremity takes her outside the realm of the comic that is my prime concern, and I will therefore leave her out of my analysis.

picturesque terms, Callaghan prefers the disturbing and grotesque. This navigation of sublime and grotesque is present in all the plays I will examine, and the exceptional poetry of each woman's writing as well as each woman's nimble wit makes them fitting companions for this study.

In his landmark essay on Comedy, George Meredith noted, "Comedy, we have to admit, was never one of the most honored of the Muses" (5). Over a century later, in her collection of essays, *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*, Sarah Ruhl takes up Meredith's challenge and invites the sort of questions I am posing, as she muses:

comedy seems to be more philosophically virginal terrain [than tragedy]. Comedy isn't, as we all know, serious. Or is it? I had a dream last night in which I was giving a radio address on the ethics of comedy. What did I say? I cannot remember. (*100 Essays 137*)

This study picks up Ruhl's call to splash around in this philosophically virginal terrain, admiring, defending and exploding the serious work of comedy by women.

WOMEN, COMEDY AND THE CANON

Yael Kohen opens her 2012 oral history of women in comedy – *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* – with a line that permeates an alarming amount of pop culture discussions of women in comedy: “women aren't funny.” From there Kohen goes on to list a who's who of male celebrities who have made this claim over the years, from Jerry Lewis and Johnny Carson to Christopher Hitchens (4). Before her, Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave's introduction to *Women in Comedy* gives a detailed account of common remarks involving women's relative lack of humor dating from 1901 to the book's 1986 publication (13-32). And a post by Gabrielle Moss on *Bitch Magazine's* website goes back to 1695 for documentation of the “women aren't funny” trope (“A Brief History”). Though there is certainly no shortage of

commercially successful funny women at work today (Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Sarah Silverman, Tig Notaro, Garfunkel & Oates...and on and on and on), it remains downright trendy to continue to question the relative capabilities of women in comedy. The very fact that books and films and internet slideshows are still constantly being made identifying funny women is evidence of this continued bias: if women in comedy were seen as being on even footing, there would be no need to list women in comedy separately from their male counterparts.⁴ The year 2013 saw the release of Showtime's documentary, *Why We Laugh: Funny Women* in which, according to Gawker writer Rich Juzwiak's description, "Female comedians respond to and disprove that pesky 'Women Aren't Funny' claim" (Juzwiak). The 2013 independent documentary (or self-dubbed "cockumentary") *Women Aren't Funny* sets out to laugh at the entire discussion, as director (and stand-up comic in her own right) Bonnie MacFarlane notes that "The topic is annoying... it seems so obvious to me that women are funny that to take it seriously would give credence to the argument that maybe we're not as funny as men" (McFarlane and Vos). And yet, as irrelevant as the debate may seem when considered in light of the prominent success of so many women in contemporary popular comedy, MacFarlane notes her own surprise in the process of making the film: "When I started the film, I kind of thought that people thinking women aren't funny was the actual myth – and then, at some point during the making of the movie, I realized, 'Oh my god, there are people who *actually* think women aren't funny!'" ("It's Never Been a Better Time"). Despite ample evidence to the contrary, even writers and

⁴ It struck me as I flipped through a recent slideshow on Huffington Post of 55 Funny Women You Should Know that there were plenty of stand-ups, actors, and TV writers, but not a single woman on the list was there for being a playwright.

filmmakers who are believers in women's comedy continually foreground their explorations of that comedy with the persistent myth that it does not, in fact, exist.⁵

In mainstream pop culture, when people write about women and comedy, it tends to be from one of three directions, building on prejudices that stretch back through decades and even centuries. Some choose to explain why women aren't funny – as in Christopher Hitchens's infamous 2007 *Vanity Fair* column in which he claims that “men, taken on average and as a whole, [are] funnier than women [...because] Women have no corresponding need to appeal to men in this way.” Some elevate the token women who display a sense of humor that appeals to men (seemingly the only appropriate audience for comedy): of Kristen Wiig's 2011 Oscar-nominated comedy hit, A.O. Scott declares pointedly, “*Bridesmaids* Allows Women To Be Funny,” and Yael Kohen quips that the success of Wiig's film “proved that women could pull off a good fart joke as well as the next guy” (4). High praise, indeed. Still others maintain that comedy by women is deeply essentialized to encompass, as Deanne Stillman suggests in her 1976 anthology of humor by women, only “things which women in general find interesting” (4). Bonnie McFarlane made a similar comment on the “Didn't Listen; Too Long” podcast while promoting a forthcoming panel on women in comedy:

the male perspective includes everything - politics, life, you know, parenting, it includes literally everything, and then they're like, oh, now we need the female perspective and there's like - okay, let's get her talking about her boobs and her period and then we're good, then we got everything we need. (McGlynn)

Andrew Stott confirms Stillman and McFarlane's observation:

A product of this is the perceived ghettoization of women's comedy and the belief that female comedians only discuss 'women's' themes – relationships, shopping, and

⁵ As a matter of fact, I am falling into the same trap at this very moment!

menstruation, for example – whereas male topics are thought to be unbounded and therefore to have universal appeal. (Stott 99)

Along these lines, in the new introduction to the 2013 re-release of her 1991 book *They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I Drifted*, Regina Barreca also invokes *Bridesmaids*, noting that the film “gathers together a lot of so-called women’s issues: it deals with friendship, family, the intricacies of romance, and getting really drunk on a plane” (xxxv). But she goes on to describe the famous scene in which one of the women “takes a crap in the middle of the highway,” a scene which she suggests was added by producer Judd Apatow rather than Kristen Wiig as a “guys’ comedy” reward for those men being forced to sit through all this comedy about things women find funny (xxxv).

As evidenced by these examples of patriarchal American culture, women writers – especially women writers of comedy – are all too often subordinated, condescended to and ignored. Regina Barreca argues that “comedy written by women is perceived by many critics as trivial, silly and unworthy of serious attention” (*Last Laughs* 6).⁶ In the introduction to their anthology of humor by American women, Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner outline various reasons for the historical underrepresentation of women in the canon of comedy, noting:

the established tendency of male critics to define American humor in terms of traditionally male (rather than female) concerns, language, and style has set a standard of humor based on what men have promoted as funny and, consequently, has demoted women’s humorous writing to a lesser, minor class of literature when it has been considered at all. (xvi)

⁶ Cixous observes a broader exclusion of women beyond comedy: “until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural - hence political, typically masculine - economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening” (879).

Of course, it is not only in comedy that women writers have faced such circumstances, as I will discuss in a moment. Alicia Ostriker explains that “it has always been customary when praising women writers to say that they do not write like most other women” (1-2). Of course, women have made great strides toward equality in public fields from academia to politics to entertainment and literature over the last fifty years in particular. Remarking on the particular conditions of the early 21st century, Andi Zeisler writes,

[b]y the dawn of the new century, women were living in what could be called a deceptively postfeminist moment[...]We had a handful of female CEOs in major corporations, a sturdy bloc of senators, governors and congresswomen – even two women on the Supreme Court (121).

However, despite this apparent progress, there are still a number of discourses that remain resistant to including women, and comedy has continued to be one of them. As recently as 2009, Joan Rivers has insisted that “[c]omedy’s still a man’s game” (*Snow White* xv). And in her 2014 documentary *Women Aren’t Funny*, Bonnie McFarlane observes that “Women are soaring ahead in other areas, but in comedy the attitudes remain totally prehistoric.” In *Rolling Stone’s* 2013 list of “The 50 Funniest People Now,” twelve women made the cut (one as half of a male/female comedy duo).⁷ In the 2011 Collection *The 50 Funniest American Writers: An Anthology of Humor from Mark Twain to The Onion*, I was actually surprised to find that as many as ten women made the cut,⁸ though the first line of the book tells a more predictable story when the editor Andy Borowitz muses, “[d]oes being funny get you girls?” (xi). Even with the inclusion of a handful of women within the book, the first question is how comedy serves

⁷ Despite the general underrepresentation of women on this list, it is worth noting that there were four women in the top ten.

⁸ Mordecai Richler’s collection, *The Best of Modern Humor*, published almost 30 years earlier features eleven women out of 64 authors... it seems we haven’t come a long way, baby.

(heterosexual) men.⁹ The introduction to the book is a charming and self-deprecating account of the process of creating an anthology: "you might jump to the conclusion that this anthology is a little arbitrary. Well, here's a dirty little secret about anthologies: they're *all* arbitrary" (Borowitz xii). Here he provides a tongue-in-cheek, pocket-sized version of the debate over the canon: some works being included over others is not a value judgment, but mere caprice. But even when Borowitz notes some of the people he may have left out, men remain at the top of the list as he tells us that he "did find some great material in books written by standups, including George Carlin, Lenny Bruce and Bernie Mac" (xiv). On the other hand, Regina Barreca's 2004 anthology – *The Signet Book of American Humor* – features 54 men and 51 women, a much more even distribution. I read this disparity as evidence not only of the ample supply of humorous material by women, but of the relative unwillingness in the mainstream discourse to look to women for comedy.

In the western canon of dramatic literature – those plays commonly accepted as most indicative of the work of the time in which they were written (as interpreted by the time in which the anthologies are collected), and worthy of both study and continued recognition – women tend to be represented as tokens amidst their far more numerous male counterparts.¹⁰

⁹ Leslie Atkins Durham makes a similar argument in her study of Ruhl and her contemporaries: "Plays that assume that the story of the white male is the most central and important story of our culture are the plays most likely to be produced" (8).

¹⁰ "The canon" is notoriously difficult to satisfactorily define, as there is no central depository on which every theatre and literature scholar has agreed. For my purposes, the canon is the set of works – mostly American and British – that are consistently anthologized, and through that repeated representation, are most often taught, are most known by students and scholars, and receive an implied judgment of higher status and value relative to the whole of dramatic literature. It is worth noting that comedy is, broadly speaking, markedly less present in "canonical" anthologies than are works of tragedy or "serious" drama.

Anthology	Plays by Men	Plays by Women
Modern and Contemporary Drama (St. Martin's Press, 1994)	23	5
The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama, 3 rd ed. (Harcourt College Publishers, 2000)	23	7
The Broadview Anthology of Drama (Broadview Press, 2003)	24	7
The Longman Anthology of Drama and Theater: A Global Perspective (Longman, 2004)	26	10
The Norton Anthology of Drama: The Nineteenth Century to Present (W.W. Norton & Company, 2009)	30	5
The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook (Routledge, 2010)	21	6*
The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama, Revised Ed., Ed. 6 (Cengage Learning, 2010)	30	9
The Bedford Introduction to Drama, 7 th ed. (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012)	33	10

*Two of the women writers were part of teams, paired with men.

While Aphra Behn, Maria Irene Fornes, Caryl Churchill, Suzan-Lori Parks and their few widely anthologized sisters certainly deserve the recognition they receive, there are numerous others who rarely see the light of day.¹² As feminist scholars have attempted to open these boundaries in order to recognize the heretofore unrecognized, however, a problem remains. June Schleuter notes her discomfort in the introduction to the collection of essays on women playwrights she edited, *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon*: "Canon construction is a tricky business [...] My own contribution to the discourse rests in my appropriation of the term [...] I have no intention of proposing the body of dramatic literature discussed here [...] as *the* female canon" (11-12). Like Schleuter, my impulse in interacting with the canon of dramatic literature is to

¹¹ Based on an informal survey of the tables of contents of seven prominent anthologies. For each edition my count included plays from no earlier than the Renaissance (for anthologies that spanned back far enough).

¹² Four of the most commonly referenced playwrights in the anthology survey.

question its sense of completion, to explore and celebrate the value of those who have historically been excluded, but *not* to set up a new set of walls. Only about 11%-17% of plays produced each year in the United States are written by women (Jonas and Bennett 2002). This deficit in women's artistic representation is not, as a 2008 study by Princeton economics student Emily Glassberg Sands (as summarized in the *New York Times*) notes, indicative of reduced marketability of plays by women: "[p]lays and musicals by women sold 16 percent more tickets a week and were 18 percent more profitable over all" (P. Cohen). Since relative commercial success cannot be cited as a motivation for producing fewer plays by women (and fewer plays about women protagonists), the roots of this disparity appear to be more deeply connected to the problem Simone de Beauvoir identified in *The Second Sex*. She writes that:

Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man...She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other (de Beauvoir xxii).

In a discussion of de Beauvoir's work sixty years later, Julia Kristeva examines the continued resonance of women's battle for autonomy and transcendence of the limitations imposed upon "the female condition" – that of being the passive object – by a masculine society: "For it is from the transformation of this 'condition' that the author [de Beauvoir] awaits a potential individual autonomy and female creativity" (142). This potential can be realized only when the female "Other" has "the right or the opportunity to establish herself as Other in her own right," rather than having those parameters dictated by "the One [...] universal Man" (Kristeva 146). Women playwrights – in particular women comic playwrights – have suffered from this second sex syndrome of being defined not on their own merits, but on how they relate to masculine ideals. But more often than not, when women writers differ from mainstream expectations, it is

neither by genetic predisposition nor by accident, but by design. These writers exercise their “otherness” in exciting and important ways, engaging, expanding, questioning and overturning the patriarchal norms to which they have been subjected. Feminist art scholar Jo Anna Isaak claims that “using the subversive strategy of laughter, women began turning the culturally marginal position to which they had always been relegated into the new frontier” (4). This new frontier – this world in which comedy is not only at the disposal of but is shaped by women – is exactly where the playwrights at the center of my study live.

The most prominent writings on comedy theory have, by and large, been written by men. Three of the fundamental keystones of comic theory in use today – those based on comedy of superiority (comedy that devalues the subject of the joke in relation to the teller or laughter), relief (comedy that releases pent-up energy), and incongruity (comedy that finds amusement in contradiction of expectations) – came from great male thinkers of historically patriarchal societies, the likes of Plato and Hobbes, Freud, and Aristotle and Kant, respectively (“Philosophy of Humor”).¹³ *I Love Lucy* – a show built around a brilliant woman comic – had only one woman writer on the staff (Davis). And even today, successful comedians like Tina Fey still comment on the relative dearth of women writers. When, for example, Fey remarks on the makeup of the writing staff for *Saturday Night Live*, she characterizes them as “hyperintelligent Harvard Boys...I say Harvard Boys because they are almost always male...and because they are usually under twenty-five” (124). As John Morreall sets out to describe the different circumstances of humor, he points out that “Male joking, for instance, often involves

¹³ It is important to note here that, in a majority of the sources to which I refer, the terms “comedy” and “humor” are used interchangeably, and they will continue to be in this dissertation. As this conflation of terms permeates the literature, it is difficult to create a clear delineation between the two.

competition, humiliation, and the enjoyment of others' suffering, as first noted by Plato and Aristotle" (*Comic Relief* 71). However, even in this broad, philosophical overview, he makes no parallel observation of female joking – a phenomenon that either defies categorization, or simply doesn't exist. If the joke tellers, the audiences and the theorists have been the people in power – and the people in power have been predominantly male – then the way in which we understand comedy as a society has been based almost entirely on how men understand comedy. With women all-too-often on the margins of society for centuries, they were not regularly in a position to steer public discourse in a way that would allow them to interpret and define the comic, or their relation to it, so they were left to respond to the masculine definitions and guidelines.¹⁴ Laura Mulvey points out in her widely cited film studies article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," that the dominant "male gaze" dictates agency, desirability and general entertainment value in a way that assumes the experience of a male protagonist is universal. What is valued or beautiful or entertaining (or funny) to a man (particularly a white, heterosexual, middle- to upper-middle-class American man) should be so to any observer, since these reactions are based in the patriarchal world view that made the stories to which they are reacting. This observation is in line with de Beauvoir's in *The Second Sex*, as Mulvey argues that the assumption surrounding narrative is that a male protagonist is relatable to men and women, while a female protagonist would only be relatable to women: that is, the male is the central, universal identity, while the female experience is peripheral or

¹⁴ The role of women in public, artistic, and intellectual discourse over the years is by no means a monolithic history in which women have made no progress or impact. There have been women writers and thinkers who have been immensely well received at various times throughout history. Aphra Behn, Hannah Cowley, Anna Cora Mowatt, and Zona Gale, to name only a few prominent women writers for the theatre, all produced work that was popular in their lifetimes. The general tone of my reference, however, points to a persistent atmosphere that has forced women and their discourse to inhabit a status that is secondary to that of men.

secondary. Mulvey claims that this assumption of the universal is born out of “the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structure[s] ways of seeing and pleasure in looking” (834). Since the unconscious of the contemporary American society about which she is writing, she says, is assumed to be masculine, then so is the structure of cinematic narrative. In her book *Feminism and Pop Culture*, Andi Zeisler explains further: “What is the male gaze? Put simply, it's the idea that when we look at images in art or on screen, we're seeing them as a man might – even if we are women – because those images are constructed to be seen by men” (7). Zeisler furthers Mulvey’s discussion of the sexual implications of “active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 836), asserting that the male gaze affects the way audiences view a variety of narratives and entertainments.

Janet Bing confirms the gendered stratification of the public sphere and makes the connection to joke telling: “The frequent claim that males make more jokes than females can be at least partially explained by the unequal status of males and females in many situations, since in a public situation, jokes tend to reinforce the value of the group in power” (Bing 23). Those in power, then, are the ones whose delivery and assessment of comedy is most important. Frances Gray also agrees with me in extrapolating this gaze to include the comic, as she notes that, traditionally, “Comedy positions the woman not simply as the object of the male gaze but of the male laugh – not just to-be-looked-at but to-be-laughed-at.” (9)

The fact that women have historically been excluded from discussions of comedy is unsurprising based on the commonplace exclusion of women’s public contributions in what has been, for centuries, a patriarchally-leaning society:

That scholars have taken their time in coming around to the subject is not surprising. Given the cultural predisposition not to take women writers seriously when the tone of such writing is sober, it is easy to see how much less likely it is for scholars to take seriously what seemingly takes itself so lightly. (Berman 251)

There is an intersectional disadvantage, then, that confronts comedy by women, as both writing by women and comic writing tend to receive less serious critical attention than does writing by men or “serious” dramatic writing. Hierarchies of gender and genre have kept women’s comedy out of the literary spotlight. Conversely, claims Regina Barreca, feminist scholars have shied away from discussions of women and comedy as well: “perhaps in order to be accepted by conservative critics who found feminist theory comic in and of itself” (*Last Laughs* 4). In this sense, the forces that exclude women from comic prominence – even as more and more women fight their way into the spotlight – are coming from both sides of the gendered aisle. Domnica Radulescu remarks on resistance to her own research on women and comedy, with the snarky adage that “often men feel threatened by women's laughter because they unconsciously are afraid that the ultimate joke will be the size of their sexual apparatus” (35). Recognizing the power that comedy implies, Radulescu’s observation suggests that the dearth of critical attention directed at women’s comedy is because of a masculine resistance to recognizing women as wielders of comic power, for fear that that power might well be turned against them.

Christopher Hitchens famously explained that women do not need to be funny because humor is a central tool in appealing to a potential mate, and women “already appeal to men, if you catch my drift.” He cites research that he claims proves that women are slower to get jokes, and goes on to speculate that, “Precisely because humor is a sign of intelligence (and many women believe, or were taught by their mothers, that they become threatening to men if they

appear too bright), it could be that in some way men do not *want* women to be funny.” Comedian Adam Carolla complained that “they make you hire a certain number of chicks, and they’re always the least funny on the writing staff. The reason why you know more funny dudes than funny chicks is that dudes are funnier than chicks” (Carolla in Kenneally).

Theories of sexual intimidation and inherent lack of ability abound in discussions of why women are not considered funny, but I believe the more likely reason for this exclusion is that the comedy women are writing does not always bear a close enough resemblance to what is generally accepted as comic, or rather – to what men consider funny. Regina Barreca hints at this idea: “Although women authors have of course written comedies, some of the most important aspects of these comedies have been virtually ignored by critics who do not perceive the wide range of emotions raised by the texts” (*Last Laughs* 5). This observation is by no means a suggestion that women cannot or do not write comedy that appeals to men, or even comedy that plays by ostensibly masculine or mainstream rules. Rather, it is to say that much comedy by women – especially comedy that subverts, challenges or deconstructs those formulae – is thereby dismissed as failed comedy, “women’s comedy” (in its most diminutive sense), or lacking comic intention altogether.

Sheila Callaghan tends to write plays with a vicious, unyielding smirk, rather than a more acceptably delicate feminine giggle, and the violence of her comedy is often misread. Jim Rutter’s review of Flashpoint Theatre’s 2010 production of Sheila Callaghan’s *Crumble (Lay Me Down, Justin Timberlake)* claims that the play is essentially a response to the question “what would women do without men?” And he explains that the answer lies in the title: they crumble (Rutter). Rutter even goes so far as to accuse the play of presenting a “politically incorrect view

of a man's importance in a woman's life." Callaghan's play, he claims, is a rumination on the emptiness of women's lives in the absence of a man, and he wags his finger at the playwright for this politically incorrect view of women. But this is not a play about women falling to pieces in the wake of losing a man, it is a play about women who think they are supposed to fall to pieces, and it is a play about the ways in which they are lost and found. Though Rutter does label the play as darkly comic, he misses the fact that the comedy comes from their illusions, not from their politically incorrect need for a man. Perhaps it is Callaghan's inventive undermining of expectations that makes this play something other than it appears to Rutter. In an interview, Callaghan describes some of the responses to her incendiary comedy, *That Pretty Pretty; or, The Rape Play*: "we got people who didn't get the joke, who thought the play propagated the same ideas that in actuality it strove to critique" (Callaghan in Szymkowicz).

Ruhl's works, on the other hand, receive a great deal of attention as comedies, but the descriptions of her comedy are often hedged with the beauty and the poetry and the "whimsy" of her pieces, rather than recognizing them for their overarching comic acuity. Leslie Atkins Durham draws attention to this very consistency of critical responses to Ruhl's work as "fantastical, fanciful, hallucinatory, offbeat, quirky, and, most frequently, whimsical" (4). In her collection of essays, Ruhl takes issue with the words that are so often applied to her work – "quirky" and "whimsy" – complaining that they are diminutive words, demonstrating an overall discomfort with "a perceptible aesthetic" and reducing her work to "feminine and therefore trivial" (*100 Essays* 125). A google search of "Sarah-Ruhl-and-review-and-whimsy-or-quirky" turns up page after page of these reviews, assessing her comedy not simply as excellent comedy, but in terms that seem to make her work specifically women's comedy. Charles

Isherwood (describing Ruhl's "unmistakable voice" as "poetic and quirky" ("Intersection")) and Sylviane Gold (pointing out "the familiar combination of whimsy and metaphysics that made Ms. Ruhl a critic's darling ("Ringing Phone")) – excellent reviewers at *The New York Times* – both participate in this inadvertent diminishing or feminizing of Ruhl's work.

It is my project, therefore, to execute close readings of plays by these two noteworthy women playwrights who are actively producing work today – Sarah Ruhl and Sheila Callaghan – and to detail the important aspects that set these comedies apart from those mainstream rules that have traditionally defined the comic. Though comic theory has a distinctly masculine lineage, the theories that have been put forth by people like Bergson, Frye, Meredith, Kant and others provide context for what is generally expected of comedy, and as I bring those theories into dialogue with these plays, my analysis will illustrate where Ruhl and Callaghan adhere to or depart from those expectations.¹⁵ In this sense, I use a set of theories that has historically excluded women as the wedge to invite them into the discussion surrounding comedy. If these writers truly did not know or understand the existing theories, and were writing comedy differently out of ignorance or happenstance or genetic coding, then the exclusion of their work from being recognized as comic might well be deserved. It is their knowledge of, engagement with, and navigation around, over, and through the dominant comic theories that testifies to their skill as writers in general and as comic writers in particular. As I identify the comic elements appropriated, subverted, twisted and mocked within these plays, I provide insight into the comic dramaturgical construction, devices and universes unique to each of these

¹⁵ The use of comic theories that are fairly chronologically removed from the present day is backed by Salvatore Attardo: "consider the fact that most authors who write on humor still discuss Freud and Bergson, while nobody bothers reading the scores of books on humor published perhaps much less than 90 years ago" (*Linguistic Theories* 58).

writers, identifying them solidly as skilled 21st century comic playwrights who happen to be women. My project, then, is both analytical and consciousness-raising in nature – as I attempt to make more visible and valued the comic dexterity of these writers.

METHODS – Close Reading

I will engage in a close reading of the plays, examining the function of comic elements within as they relate to a variety of noteworthy comic theories, as well as the playwrights' respective oeuvres. Peter Barry explains that, "Close reading emphasises [sic] *differences* between literary language and that of the general speech community; it tends to isolate the literary text and see it as a purely aesthetic art object, or 'verbal icon', whose language operates according to rules of its own" (208). Treating each play as its own unique artifact allows me to observe and describe aspects of what Ruhl and Callaghan are doing with the comedy in their respective plays. This analysis then provides me with a more concrete data set against which I can compare expectations in comic theory. Sara Ahmed articulates the usefulness of close reading in the context of a dialogue between postmodern and feminist impulses. Since both Ruhl and Callaghan are distinctly postmodern playwrights, Ahmed's assertion that "a concern with what postmodernism is doing requires a commitment to close reading" (*Differences that Matter* 17) provides support for my approach. Postmodernism's refusal to wear any sort of simple definition allows its writers freedom and variety of form, content, and style, and requires its critics to assess each work's individual operation in careful detail. Ahmed's example is in addressing ethics as a site of feminist discourse, and though my investigation is not attempting to identify an overtly feminist metanarrative at work in these plays, close reading will be useful in problematizing assumptions surrounding comic devices as

they are applied by Ruhl and Callaghan. Women's literature scholar Nancy K. Miller describes her project in the introduction to her collection *Poetics of Gender* as "a model of 'overreading' the underread texts of women's writing" (xii), and it is just such an overreading that I hope to accomplish in my readings of these plays. This overreading, Miller claims (like Mulvey before her), works to interrogate the assumed universality of the dominant patriarchal narrative. She notes the "universal's claim of impartiality," and asserts that, by questioning everything in a piece of writing down to the grammar, a critic brings to light not only "the difference gender makes," but the fact that "there is nothing impartial" (xiii). There is always a point of view at work in a piece of literature. As a method of analysis, close reading takes the text to task from the perspective of gendered assumptions, much as James Thomas's formalist approach – which I will discuss in future sections – takes the dramatic text to task from a production perspective.

Patricia Kain provides a simple but useful set of instructions for executing a close reading, instructing the reader first to "look for patterns in the things you've noticed about the text – repetitions, contradictions, similarities," and then to "ask questions about the patterns you've noticed – especially how and why." Sophia McClennen provides further specifics on where to look for these patterns, listing word meaning, structure, sound and rhythm, syntax, textual context, irony, tone and narrative voice, imagery, rhetorical devices, themes and historical context as elements that may surface in a close reading (McClennen). Richard Hornby discusses these approaches specifically as they pertain to dramatic analysis, advising the reader to "1. Isolate the playscript. 2. Treat it as a space-time complex. 3. Analyze it in detail. 4. Allow for complexity and ambiguity. 5. Find a unifying principle. 6. Test the principle against the text" (Hornby 114). This Structuralist approach to the dramatic text "finds the essence of a work in

the relation between parts rather than in the parts themselves; these relations for patterns or ‘structures’ that define what the work truly is” (Hornby 10). The readings of each of the plays in this study will be first and foremost a thorough assessment and cataloging of the devices deployed in the texts themselves. For instance, the use of repetition in Ruhl’s *Passion Play* and Callaghan’s *That Pretty Pretty*; or joke structure in Ruhl’s *The Clean House*. I will discuss the usual functions of those elements while identifying and interpreting the specific patterns, devices and ideas in each play as they relate to and navigate around those expected functions and theories. According to Jasmina Lukic and Adelina Sanchez Espinosa, “deconstructionist practices of close reading with their emphasis on multiple, indeterminate meanings of the text are compatible with feminist approaches” (109).¹⁶ Close reading, then, provides a set of tools and questions designed to bring details to light, though it need not limit the discussion to the text itself. Rather, close reading as a process uses detailed observation of the text as a foundation for the larger theoretical context in which I will locate the plays.

METHODS – Dramaturgy

“Dramaturgy is a term that refers both to the *aesthetic architecture* of a piece of dramatic literature (its structure, themes, goals, and conventions) and the *practical philosophy* of theater practice employed to create a full performance” (Chemers 3). Dramaturgy can address the text and performance text as a whole, while also addressing the particular elements at work within the texts. Director Eugenio Barba describes dramaturgy as “similar to ‘anatomy’”. It was a practical way of working not only on the organism in its totality, but on its

¹⁶ It is worth noting that deconstruction itself is a radically inclusive and open-ended process, one that defies the imposition of an “ism” label.

different organs and layers” (9). In this sense, as I discuss the dramaturgy of these playwrights, I am referring to the devices at work in their scripts, the ways in which they are arranged by the playwrights, as well as the ways in which those elements of the scripts are or might be brought to bear in performance. My observations into the formal and stylistic construction of these plays will come from a number of sources, but they will all set out to illuminate the strategies at work within Ruhl and Callaghan’s plays.

Michael Mark Chemers includes Aristotle in his list of “protodramaturgs,” and his *Poetics*, a sort of “Ur-dramaturgy” which “remains the touchstone for literary drama, the measure against which the great playwrights of history have compared their own writing and the standards of their societies” (19). If this is true, then addressing these Western playwrights requires at least some reference to this “Ur-dramaturgy.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines poetics as “The creative principles informing any literary, social or cultural construction, or the theoretical study of these; a theory of form” (“Poetics”). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle develops his theory by observing the work of a handful of playwrights, describing the elements he sees at work in their plays, and assessing the relative effectiveness thereof, creating a framework for understanding form, content and even the effect the pieces may have on the audience. However, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, as Sue-Ellen Case points out in the final chapter of *Feminism and Theatre*, is a product of “traditional patriarchal values” (114). She poses the challenge of developing a “new poetics” that would

abandon the traditional patriarchal values embedded in prior notions of form, practice, and audience response in order to construct new critical models and methodologies for the drama that would accommodate the presence of women in the art, support their liberation from the cultural fictions of the female gender and deconstruct the valorization of the male gender. (114-115)

Therefore, in examining the work of innovative contemporary women playwrights, it is necessary to examine not only the ways in which they adhere to and demonstrate understanding of Aristotle's guidelines that provided the foundations for their predecessors, but the ways in which they interrogate and manipulate those very rules in service of their respective "new poetics" – or dramaturgy. Furthermore, in her introduction, Case notes her discomfort with traditional literary criticism, stating a preference for discussions of the performance text rather than the written text, inviting the sort of hybrid approach I propose: one that reads the written text in its own right as well as in its relation to its intended final outcome of performance.

Beyond Aristotle, a number of approaches to understanding the dramaturgical construction of these plays will be applied. My work in script analysis will employ the model for action analysis set forth in James Thomas's *Script Analysis*. Action analysis is "A reduced type of formalist analysis based primarily on the events in the plot" (1). Arranged around Aristotle's six elements of drama (Plot, Character, Idea, Dialogue, Tempo and Spectacle), Thomas's book provides a basis for understanding the structure and function of the plays on a mechanical level, helping "actors, directors, and designers understand and perform plays as logical and harmonious arrangements of actions" (xxi). While Thomas uses Aristotle as a guide, he is not bound by the hierarchy of elements as they were established in *Poetics*, noting that any piece of theatre necessarily deals with those six elements, though – according to his work in the classroom – not necessarily in the same order of importance. This recognition of the basic elements and their relative importance will also contribute to my analysis regarding the structure of the plays. My focus on Aristotelian dramatic theory is in no way intended to ignore

or downplay the importance of the myriad theorists who have contributed to theatre theory in the millennia since *Poetics*. However, the Aristotelian model of dramatic structure is still a dominant force in writing, education, and criticism; its tenets are central, as I have mentioned, to James Thomas's *Script Analysis* text that I employ heavily in Chapter five. Thomas argues that "The common sense conclusions he [Aristotle] arrived at continue to influence Western literature and drama to the present day, and his expressions and descriptions have become part of our critical heritage (Thomas xix). Aristotle's work on dramatic structure, though chronologically distant from the writers in my study, is still very present ideologically. Elinor Fuchs argues that

Aristotle's shorthand summary of plot in the *Poetics* offers a penetrating analysis of the organization and orchestration of dramatic texts, even those that are 'non-Aristotelian.' It is useful diagnostically, as an X-ray of dramatic form, and interpretatively, as a guide to the dynamics of staging. ("Waiting for Recognition" 533)

Even theorists the likes of Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud (whose influence on both Ruhl and Callaghan I touch on briefly), who have established undeniably creative and courageous approaches to theatre, still employ Aristotle's dramatic elements, though they certainly have enjoyed rearranging those elements in their proscribed order of importance. Furthermore, the linear, plot-based Aristotelian model for dramatic literature still retains significant dominance in the American theatre, and provides a reliable common context out of which Ruhl, Callaghan, and their contemporaries continue to produce work.

Another useful text is "EF's Visit to a Small Planet," a short essay by Elinor Fuchs proposing a handful of "questions to ask a play." Fuchs explicitly states that her questions are not intended to be their own independent dramaturgical tool, but rather a complement "designed to forestall the immediate (and crippling) leap to character and normative

psychology that underwrites much dramatic criticism...I often use it together with Aristotle's unparalleled insight into plot structure" ("Small Planet" 5). As I intend to treat each playwright as having her own dramaturgical universe, the metaphor of treating each play as its own planet is particularly useful. Fuchs begins her article with the premise that "A play is not a flat work of literature, not a description in poetry of another world, but is in itself another world passing before you in time and space" (6). From this point of departure, the questions listed in her article provide context to the each play's applications of Aristotle's dramatic elements, and – for my purposes – each play's dealings with comic elements as well. Using these questions to establish the rules and constructions unique to each play expands my discussion of the comic devices and how they work within each "planet."

While I do believe that these playwrights have much to say to one another, rather than attempting to create a universal analytical tool by which to measure them and their contemporaries, my project is to lay out the exceptional elements of each writer's work and to develop a set of useful questions with which to understand and value them. "Women artists, writers, and curators have never been able to masquerade in the Emperor's clothes of universal humanity" (Isaak 3). It is, in some respects, women artists' anti-universality and their refusal to remain bound by realistic playwriting conventions – established either by the patriarchy or by each other – that make them most interesting to me.

METHODS – Interview

In addition to my close readings and comic analysis, my chapter on Sheila Callaghan includes an interview I conducted with her.¹⁷ The fact that the playwrights at the center of this dissertation are both alive, well, and producing work makes the incorporation of their ideas about that work immensely relevant. Robert S. Weiss points to qualitative interviews of the type I propose as ideal for understanding “the processes by which an event occurs” (10); in this case, the process by which these plays are created. In speaking to Callaghan about her work, I had the opportunity to respond directly to her vocabulary. Rather than having to infer meanings from second-hand sources, interviews allow subjects to “share meaning with the researcher” more directly (Holloway and Jefferson 11). This interview is, in some ways, an “expert” interview, and yet in some ways it is more narrative. As Callaghan is not an expert on herself *per se*, she relates her own experiences in the context of her work. My intent is not to draw conclusions from the interview that are universally applicable to all contemporary women playwrights, or even to both Callaghan and Ruhl, but instead to gain insight into the individual processes and ideas of Callaghan’s work. This interview provides deeper insight into the comic devices she employs and the degree to which her subversion of conventions is intentional. This conversation rounds out my discussion of the plays, providing insight into the degree to which one of the playwrights is consciously engaging with and manipulating the comic elements I identify throughout. As a professional storyteller, the way that Callaghan expresses her insights about her work and processes is almost as telling as the insights themselves.¹⁸

¹⁷ My intention was to include interviews with both playwrights, but unfortunately, Ruhl’s agency has instated a policy of denying all academic requests for interviews.

¹⁸ The full text of Callaghan’s interview appears as an Appendix.

METHODS – From Page to Stage

Finally, in addition to the analysis devoted to each playwright, I include a chapter analyzing my process in directing Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* in September and October of 2013 at Wayne State University's Studio Theatre, as well as January and February of 2014 at Southwest Minnesota State University. This chapter is a confirmation and examination of the fact that dramatic literature is written to be performed, and though conventional literary analysis is a worthy endeavor, a script is not fully realized until it is on stage in front of an audience. Comedy scholar Eric Weitz remarks on how integral performance is to fully understanding a dramatic text:

although a printed dramatic text would appear to be something concrete and unchanging which can be held in the hands and scrutinized long after its original production, it cannot be fully considered without some acknowledgement of the enactment – or at least speaking aloud – for which it is conceived. (ix)

Dramatic literature like the plays that I address in this study, is intended to be brought to life in front of a live audience, and performance can greatly expand the way a text is understood. But my intention is not merely to observe a performance and relay the lessons communicated by its actors and production team. It is also to use the process of bringing the script to performance as a source of knowledge and understanding. According to painter and scholar Shaun McNiff,

Art-based research can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. (29)

Investing in artistic practice as its own intrinsically valid way of knowing, "There is no better way to understand a particular aspect of creative practice than to research it in this direct way" (McNiff 31). The application of practice as research in the arts has aided in validating artistic

creation as a source of knowledge and a way of knowing.¹⁹ Elliot Eisner explains that the arts “address the qualitative nuances of situations” and encourage us to “seek new ways with which to perceive and interpret the world, ways that make vivid realities that would otherwise go unknown” (11). Robin Nelson admits that “Numerous instabilities in the diversity and ephemerality of performing arts practices pose particular challenges to ideas of fixed, measurable and recordable 'knowledge.’” But she also argues that “At the same time, however, the concept of 'performance' has contributed a new conceptual map - and mode of knowing - to the academy and research” (4). Theatre, as a particular way of knowing, according to Mark Fleishman, is “close, active, immediate, on the move, embodied, sensual, fluid, interactional and affectively engaged” (30). Through analysis of the interactions between actors, designers and myself with the text, this chapter will illuminate the challenges and rewards of bringing Ruhl’s comic devices into practice on the stage. This approach incorporates me as both researcher and subject, making my own journey with the text a part of the knowledge gathered from the process. “In the context of arts-based research, it is the arts-based researcher's role to integrate herself into the community of participants as learners, and to initiate introspection, reflection, and representations that teach” (Finley 76). The relatively flexible and open-ended nature of artistic practice as research is a relatively new mode, one that is still attempting to make a case for itself as it goes. But I include this approach in this study because I believe it opens the texts in question up to the experiential level of rehearsal, performance, and viewing,

¹⁹ Practice as research in the arts goes beyond literary and dramaturgical discussions of the text, attempting to elevate artistic knowledge as a valid way of knowing, on a comparable plane with scientific knowledge. “Unlike scientific research, which is grounded in the discovery of universals, performance research is rooted in the personal, in the findings of individual actors and/or researchers in particular circumstances which are, in turn, applied in future situations.” (Watson 85)

without which a dramatic text is ultimately merely literary. As a woman, a theatre artist, and a comedian, my participation in the interpretation of these works will be significant to the insights that emerge from the process.

This chapter draws on my formalist analysis of the play as it pertains to my understanding of the comic devices at work. My guideline for this analysis is James Thomas's book *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers*, which has been my directorial guide in my time at Wayne State. Thomas defines formalist analysis as "the search for playable dramatic values that reveal a central unifying pattern which forms or shapes a play from the inside and coordinates all its parts" (xix). This definition fits neatly alongside my operational understanding of close readings, providing a systematic approach to uncovering and applying the observations made with the end goal not only of understanding but also of fully realizing the dramatic text. Art practice as research "introduces ambiguity, complexity, emotion, intuition, lived experience, and the celebration of personal interpretation or subjectivity" (Marshall and D'Adamo 12). In this sense, practice as research affords a constructive dialogue with the textual detail of close reading. Though the analysis of my artistic work may seem less formal than close reading, it is no less rigorous. As artifacts of my production, this chapter also includes reflections from my rehearsal journal, detailing the process of nightly discovery in uncovering the comic potential of Ruhl's world. In chronicling this process, I strive to illuminate the uniquely temporal elements of successful comic execution, allowing the shared presence and the *here-and-now-ness* of live rehearsal and performance to add to my insights into Ruhl's work.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Playwrights and Their Plays

The primary literature with which I will be working in this dissertation will be the plays written by Sarah Ruhl and Sheila Callaghan, and designated by the authors (or their rights-granting representatives) as comedies.²⁰ It is important to note that a project of this type is inherently problematic, as its aim is to question the sanctity of the canon and, by extension, the dramaturgies it traditionally admits, by inviting underrepresented voices into the conversation.²¹ The paradox is that, in doing so, I will, out of necessity, exclude any number of worthy playwrights. Gina Gionfriddo (matching Ruhl in Pulitzer Prize nominations as of April 2013), Liz Duffy Adams, Deborah Zoe Lauffer, Bekah Brunstetter, Annie Baker, Madeleine George, and Lisa Loomer are all women artists whose comic voices step beyond familiar expectations and formulae. And while a recent audit of the play database doollee.com revealed that “fewer women than men are writing professionally...[and] women playwrights were found to have written fewer scripts than their male colleagues” (Wilner and Jordan), a quick glance at the playwrights in residence at New Dramatists is strong evidence for both the quantity and quality of women playwrights active in the contemporary professional theatre. As of January 2015, the stable of New Dramatists playwrights includes 25 women out of the total 51 – an even showing with their male counterparts. In addition, blogger Adam Szymkowicz has

²⁰ Callaghan refers to *Women Laughing Alone with Salad* as a “comic drama,” and both *Passion Play* and *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* by Sarah Ruhl are listed on Samuel French as “dramatic comedies.” So even in the billing of the plays, there is ambiguity of genre.

²¹ As I mentioned in the previous chapter, “the canon” is a difficult concept to define. But, in terms of American/English comic theatre, playwrights such as Noel Coward, George Bernard Shaw, Neil Simon, Christopher Durang, Ken Ludwig, David Ives, and Nicky Silver are among those most readily called to mind. Based on my own anecdotal observation of theatre seasons and even auditions, plays by these writers are present in a way that plays by women do not seem to be, and it is prominent names like these that might be counted among the American comic canon.

published 690 interviews with contemporary playwrights, and 343 of them (nearly half) are women.²²

I have chosen Ruhl and Callaghan because they are both fairly prominent playwrights who are currently producing new work, and whose work is being produced and written about. I also have a personal interest in their plays, and – as I mentioned above – I believe there to be a common thread between their respective dramatic worlds of a certain distorted sense of reality.

My study begins by looking at the plays of Sarah Ruhl. Ruhl is the better known writer of the two; her two Pulitzer Prize nominations, MacArthur Fellowship and high-profile productions at theatres such as Lincoln Center already make her a likely contender for inclusion in the canon of contemporary American theatre. *The Clean House* (2004),²³ *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (2006), and *Passion Play* (2002)²⁴ are all excellent expressions of Ruhl's comic voice. I have deliberately left out her most recent plays *In the Next Room; or The Vibrator Play* (2009) and *Stage Kiss* (2012), because they are both far more realistic in style than her other plays, which, in my opinion, leads to slightly more traditional forms and treatments of comedy.²⁵ My primary interest in Ruhl's robust dramaturgy is in her plays that step outside of reality, and therefore outside of expectations, illustrating her virtuosity as a writer of original forms. Of all of these

²² As of 5 September 2014.

²³ Dates in text refer to first productions

²⁴ The revised version premiered in 2005

²⁵ This is not to say that Ruhl's more realistic plays are any less deserving of attention than those I have chosen to study herein. I exclude them because their treatment of structure in general and comic devices in particular is more traditional, making them less useful for a discussion of the ways in which she contradicts expectations. *In the Next Room*, for example, takes place in a realistic unit set with a linear and traditional time progression, whereas *The Clean House* takes place in many locations on one set from a living room to a seaside balcony to a trek across Alaska. Ruhl's realistic texts share with her non-realistic texts a concern for women's stories, a playful poeticism in the language, and a mixture of comic and dramatic elements, but the work of hers that most interests me is the work that deals in more magical worlds.

plays, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* receives a special treatment, as I directed two productions of that play in the fall of 2013 and winter 2014, allowing me the opportunity to analyze the play in its fully realized state as dramatic literature and, perhaps even more importantly, its journey on the way to production.

Ruhl has also published a collection of essays titled *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*,²⁶ which provides a useful foundation for understanding her approach to writing comedy for the theatre – particularly since I was unable to secure an interview with her. In a number of her essays she specifically deals with her beliefs as they pertain to theatre in general and to comedy in particular, and these ideas illuminate certain elements of the dramaturgy at work in the plays with which I am concerned. She plays with traditional structures of comedy titles, wonders about the ethical and philosophical dimension of comedy, and asks about the role of “dumb jokes” in the realm of “serious comedy.” At the root of her comic/philosophical noodling is a question of dramaturgical form: “Plays used to end in either marriage or death, and they were considered formal opposites, comedy and tragedy. But are they in fact opposites?” (*100 Essays*)²⁷ Ruhl is aware of, but not bound by, comedy’s historical and stylistic forebears. It is in this space between knowing and breaking the rules of comedy that much of my discussion lies.

As the most well-known of the playwrights in this study, there is also substantial critical attention from which to draw in reference to Ruhl’s work. Her high-profile productions yielded

²⁶ These essays were slated to be published numerous times, first under the title *75 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*, but the publication date was pushed back over and over again for at least two years, until the print edition finally came out in September of 2014, now with an additional 25 essays, rounding out the count to 100. At first, in order to access these essays, interested readers had to visit the essay section of her website where each visit posts a randomly selected essay from among the 75 that she did, in fact, have time to write. This sort of haphazard, individualized, and even playful interface with her theory speaks to the nonlinear, non-traditional approach Ruhl takes to expectations of theory and dramaturgy.

²⁷ This quote is actually from Essay #73 in the original 75 essay collection, but has been removed from the final published version of *100 Essays* in favor of a story about Buddhist butter sculpture and monkeys. Go figure.

a number of reviews from top critics like *The New York Times's* Charles Isherwood and David Colman, *The Washington Post's* Peter Marks, Backstage.com's Eric Marchese, and *The Chicago Reader's* Kerry Reid, to name a few, providing a wealth of discussions of her dramatic literature rendered in production. *The New Yorker's* John Lahr has written a couple of excellent interviews with and profiles on Ruhl over the last several years that provide useful background and personal insight. James Al-Shamma's *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays* focuses on the role of grief throughout her entire body of work as of 2011. Leslie Atkins Durham's excellent study *Women's Voices on American Stages in the Early Twenty-First Century: Sarah Ruhl and Her Contemporaries* examines Ruhl's significance in creating a set of expectations and opportunities for her contemporaries. Durham's comparative analysis provides precedent for the dialogue that my dissertation seeks to establish between the work of Ruhl and Callaghan, suggesting ways in which their plays may bounce off of, borrow from or entirely diverge from each other.

Callaghan, though not as widely known, is prolific, produced and recognized²⁸ in her own right, and adds a dark twist to my discussion of the comic.²⁹ Even the titles of Callaghan's plays set themselves apart from Ruhl's in their wry harshness: *That Pretty Pretty; or, The Rape Play* (2009), and *Women Laughing Alone With Salad* (2015),³⁰ *Crumble (Lay Me Down, Justin Timberlake)* (2004), and *Roadkill Confidential* (2010) (the two latter plays will not receive full

²⁸ Callaghan has received the Susan Smith Blackburn Award, a Cherry Lane Mentorship Fellowship, a Princess Grace Award for emerging artists, and several other awards and fellowships with less popular name recognition than the Pulitzer and the MacArthur.

²⁹ In looking at Callaghan's plays I am reminded of Maria Irene Fornes's *Fefu and Her Friends* when Fefu describes the two-sided nature of the world as a rock: "You see, that which is exposed to the exterior...is smooth and dry and clean. That which is not...underneath, is slimy and filled with fungus and crawling with worms" (Fornes 585). And while I would not suggest that Ruhl's worlds are as "smooth and dry and clean" (and boring) as the top of Fefu's stone, Callaghan's worlds are most certainly born from the slimy underside.

³⁰ The text I am working from is a first draft that was sent to me by Ms. Callaghan

treatment in this study). Spanning a little over a decade, these are, in my opinion, Callaghan's most skillful and shocking plays. They portray worlds that are similar to Ruhl's in their poetic manipulation of the bounds of reality, but they ultimately enlist comedy as a way to deal with a world that she sees as deeply flawed, ugly, and dangerous.

Callaghan has received less scholarly and critical attention than Ruhl, but this belies the fact that she has been highly successful with productions at off-Broadway and regional theaters such as *Clubbed Thumb*, Actors Theatre of Louisville, and Woolly Mammoth, to name a few. Thus, my primary resource for the discussion of her plays will be my own analysis. I will also use reviews from *The Washington Post's* Alex Baldinger, *The New York Times's* Erik Piepenburg, and *The Village Voice's* Alexis Soloski, as well as interviews and profiles by *Variety's* Addie Morfoot, *Marie Claire's* Sophie Moura, and playwright and blogger Adam Szymkowicz to enrich my discussion of Callaghan's relative position in contemporary theatre. While no books have yet been published about Callaghan, these reviews, interviews and profiles provide important insight into her work and its reception.

Dramatic and Theatrical Theory

It is important to note that the texts I am examining are pieces of dramatic literature, and therefore any understanding thereof is incomplete without at least thinking about the implications of the written text for the performed text, if not – in the most ideal circumstances – actually dealing with fully realized performances. James Thomas's book *Script Analysis* details his approach to in-depth formalist analysis with precisely this understanding, approaching the dramatic text not as a finished literary artifact, but as a blueprint for the theatre artist's

interpretation.³¹ He explains that “literature uses words to illuminate actions and events, while drama uses actions and events to illuminate words” (xxviii). In his treatise on *Post-dramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann draws on this same kind of circular understanding of the process of making meaning in dramatic texts. Lehmann points to the increased inter-connectedness and fluidity of contemporary written and performance texts, noting the potential in examining the texts on their own and in relation to others:

By regarding the theatre text as the stage uncoupled from the text as an independent poetic dimension and simultaneously considering the 'poetry' of the stage uncoupled from the text as an independent atmospheric poetry of space and light, a new theatrical disposition becomes possible. In it, the automatic unity of text and stage is superseded by their separation and subsequently in turn by their free (liberated) combination, and eventually the free combinatorics of all theatrical signs. (59)

In this postdramatic moment, Lehmann argues, the written text, performance text, and even the contextual atmosphere that produces them, can (and should) be read independently and in concert with each other. This interdependency of all the elements that make up theatre expands the potential for analysis of dramatic literature and performance. Lehmann’s theory informs my study, as his ideas regarding postdramatic theatre describe an art form that continues to reference earlier forms, but is not bound by them.³² It retains a relationship with the dramatic text, but “should be understood as the unfolding and blossoming of a potential of disintegration, dismantling and deconstruction within drama itself” (Lehmann 44). While I do

³¹ A precursor to New Criticism and Close Reading techniques, Formalist Analysis focuses on what is present in the text rather than the cultural contexts of the writer and the time, etc.: “The underlying assumption of formalist analysis is that the plays themselves ought to be studied instead of the abstract theories or external circumstances under which they were written” (Thomas xx).

³² Lehmann argues that the dramatic theatre is that which is “subordinated to the primacy of the text” (Lehmann21). Postdramatic theatre is a self-conscious and constantly changing approach to the art of theatre that accepts no truths or conventions as a priori conditions of its existence or worth. In *The Death of Character*, Elinor Fuchs makes a complementary argument about the postmodern “dispersed idea of the self” (Dead of Character 9) that has broken down traditional, concrete ideas of character and plot.

not argue that Ruhl or Callaghan's plays are fully postdramatic – as they still employ plot and character in fairly traditional ways – there is an overall dismantling and deconstruction of conventions and genre within these works that I believe lives within Lehmann's definition. He explains that “enclosed within postdramatic theatre is obviously the demand for an open and fragmenting perception in place of a unifying and closed perception” (82). Lehmann sees the postdramatic theatre as one based in contradiction and deconstruction; one that is not fixated on stylistic restrictions and boundaries. Again, I am far from suggesting that Ruhl and Callaghan are writing strictly postdramatic works, as they are still very much rooted in a conventional understanding of the dramatic text.³³ However, Lehmann's philosophy provides an apt atmosphere for analysis of playwrights like Ruhl and Callaghan, who are interested in manipulating theatrical conventions. The implied flexibility of style in the work of Ruhl and Callaghan loosens the restrictions on genre; which is to say that, just because a play might not function like a comedy is expected to, doesn't mean it isn't, or at the very least, that it doesn't heavily employ comic elements. Lehmann's theory provides a useful backdrop to the dissertation as a whole, as his theory helps to illustrate the contemporary theatrical context in which the two playwrights work.

Comic Theory

The comic theories that I employ in this process are necessarily broad, as there is no one accepted set of definitions for what makes something comic. In his book *Comedy After Postmodernism*, Kirby Olson agrees: “comedy is precisely *a certain freedom from definition*.”

³³ A colleague of mine from Munich recently commented that American theatre is, by and large, far behind the postdramatic turn that she is experiencing as a dramaturg working in Germany, where playwrights hand them 200 pages of text with a note at the top telling them it is up to them to sort out how they'd like to stage it and who should say what.

Whether it is through incongruity theories or theories of catharsis of repressed emotions with which we might attempt to define comedy, what defines it is in fact its very ability to resist definition" (6). My application of comic theory is individually tailored to each playwright and play, with no explicit attempt to force all plays to deal with all theories or vice versa. This approach is designed to honor the unique comic approach employed within each play without feeling the impulse to force them all into one particular comic voice. Therefore, before I detail the specific theories engaged, I want to mention a handful of particularly informative texts. Simon Critchley's *On Humour*, Andrew Stott's *Comedy*, and John Morreall's *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* are all excellent secondary resources on comic theory that I refer to often in my work, providing a number of definitions and overviews of established comic tropes and devices that will prove useful in laying overall foundations of accepted knowledge about comedy, its aims and structures. These texts provide contextual insight into the specific devices and theories necessary for my analysis, so that I may more clearly draw attention to what Ruhl and Callaghan are doing in response to the expectations that come with the comic devices they employ.

In looking at Sarah Ruhl's dramaturgy, I call upon a number of foundational texts on comedy in order to illustrate how her comic worlds work against long-established arguments about the comic. One bedrock piece of theory is Henri Bergson's essay "On Laughter," in which he examines comedy as a cold, intellectual exercise: "Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion" (63). This construction of the comic as existing in the realm of the intellect (in contrast to the tragic's dominion over the emotions) is tested over and over again by Ruhl's dramaturgy. The laughter she inspires in *The Clean House* and *Passion*

Play is both thoughtful and emotional, and I call attention to a number of times in these plays when she seems to be taking direct exception to Bergson's line of demarcation between comedy and emotion. Ruhl counters Bergson again in his assertion that comedy is born of the moment when "our attention is suddenly recalled from the soul to the body" (93). Tragedy, it seems, is the mode fit for the ethereal concerns of the soul, while comedy takes on the base concerns of the body. Ruhl, however, weaves the physical and ethereal worlds together in her plays, elevating the comic body and cutting the exalted soul down to size. Another key element to Bergson's view of comedy is illuminated in Andrew Stott's treatise on comedy, as he points out that Bergson "claims that humour is born in moments when the life force is momentarily usurped or eclipsed by an involuntary manifestation of automatism or reduction of the body to a lifeless machine" (27).³⁴ Writing at the turn of the 20th century, it is no wonder that Bergson's perspective on comedy should be influenced by metaphors of industrialization and mechanization. And though technology and world view have changed significantly since Bergson's time, the fascination with the implications of the intersection between human and machine remains at the forefront of the 21st century zeitgeist,³⁵ and is a subject of some of the comedy in *Dead Man's Cell Phone* and even *In the Next Room, or The Vibrator Play*. Ted Cohen's

³⁴ Ruhl and Callaghan's comedy depends heavily on irony, which is usually considered an intellectual experience. It is therefore worth considering whether Bergson intended to rule out the role of emotion in comedy completely or whether he simply wanted to call attention to the fact that the heart works in conjunction with the mind in comedy more than other genres. That said, Bergson is fairly explicit about the "anesthesia of the heart" – the moment in which the audience may "impos[e] silence on their emotions and [call] into play nothing but their intelligence" (Bergson 65). Attardo confirms this reading of Bergson: "Bergson begins from three points: laughter is a human phenomenon, it is social, and it requires an intellectual outlook from the participants rather than an emotional one. In other words, humor does not withstand (strong) emotions" (*Linguistic Theories* 58). While certainly emotion cannot be removed from the equation, his discussion is usually not geared toward a cooperation between mind and heart in comedy. It is partly the seeming extremity of his statement that interests me.

³⁵ Columnist Chuck Klosterman suggests that the 2010s fascination with zombie lore is a result of a similar interest in the hyper-automated, dehumanizing society of smart phones and media and tweets (oh my!): "Zombies are like the Internet and the media and every conversation we don't want to have. All of it comes at us endlessly (and thoughtlessly), and – if we surrender – we will be overtaken and absorbed."

book *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves's *Only Joking: What's So Funny About Making People Laugh?*, and Jim Holt's *Stop Me If You've Heard This: A History and Philosophy of Jokes* all lend excellent context to historical and philosophical treatment of the joke as a specific comic device – a discussion that is key in addressing the inversion of joke structure in Ruhl's *The Clean House*.

The recent work of University of Colorado, Boulder's Humor Research Laboratory (HuRL) on Benign Violation Theory is an emerging comic theory that has particular resonance with Sheila Callaghan's plays. According to researchers at the HuRL, "The benign-violation hypothesis suggests that anything that is threatening to one's sense of how the world 'ought to be' will be humorous as long as the threatening situation also seems benign" ("Benign Violations" 1142). Callaghan's plays, in conversation with this theory, deeply question the relationship between violation and comedy – in particular where the line of the benign actually lies. Also, John Limon provides an interesting use of Julia Kristeva's abjection theory in his book, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Kristeva is most known for her feminist interrogation of Freud's patently un-feminist psychoanalysis, in which she defines much of what is attached to woman as being "abject" – as dirty and separate from the self. Limon describes Kristeva's abject as "a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable...in Kristeva's term of art, [it] indicates what cannot be subject or object to you" (4). In his study, Limon takes Kristeva's theories of abjection and applies them to stand-up comedy, examining the link between pain and laughter: "laughter, like pain, is incorrigible...Pain is also...universe contracting, and so is laughter" (104). This intersection of the comic and the abject provides an interesting context for some of the messier comic elements employed, in

particular by Sheila Callaghan. From piles of roadkill to extreme sexual violence, abjection abounds in Callaghan's plays, and it is her clever manipulation of this abjection that creates their comic value.

These examples are intended to paint a picture of the ways in which I apply larger scale comic theory and more concrete conventional definitions of comic devices in ongoing dialogues with Ruhl and Callaghan's plays. These are smart writers who are certainly knowledgeable of their place in the history of dramatic literature, and the ways in which they confront and dodge expectations of established comic theory.

Consciousness Raising

By treating the playwrights as individuals and resisting the urge to essentialize, my approach begs the question: if I am not attempting to draw specific conclusions based on the sex of the playwrights, why single out women at all? In answer to this, it is important to note that my project seeks not only to analyze the plays as artifacts of women authors, but also to raise consciousness about the work of women – an approach that came to prominence among second-wave feminists. Consciousness raising was “a practice which named and placed under the spotlight knowledge that women already had from experience, but which required collective articulation, and the exposure and rejection of an internalized patriarchal ideology” (Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz 35). Women deserve a more consistent and autonomous place at the table of comic theory. If comedy by men can be examined without including women or drawing specifically gender-based conclusions, couldn't the same be done for comedy by women? Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier arranged their collection of essays around a consciousness-raising model, asserting that, “the consciousness-raising format

provides a model of the transformations involved in coming to feminist consciousness: becoming aware of inequalities, identifying our own part in them, and then taking steps to change them” (13-14). This attitude toward consciousness-raising works in direct conversation with the “women aren’t funny” arguments, challenging readers to approach comedy by women in its own right, rather than in the marginalized terms with which the prevailing cultural prejudices surround them. That said, while the sex of the writer is not the primary defining characteristic of a piece of literature, societal expectations surrounding sex (biology) and gender (sociology) do influence a writer’s world view. It is the examination of this influence that is a partial focus of this study.

In the field of comedy, there are a few useful – albeit dated – books that draw attention to the particular impulses and challenges of funny women. Nancy Walker (*A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture* and *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition*), Regina Barreca (*They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I Drifted: Women’s Strategic Use of Humor* and *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*) and Barbara Levy (*Ladies Laughing: Wit as Control in Contemporary American Women Writers*) are prominent voices in the relatively small pool of writers discussing women and comedy, and provide information regarding the position of women in relation to comedy and humor. Central to all of their arguments is the link between comedy and power, as they explore the ways in which power has been withheld from and commandeered by women writers over the years. Zoe Chevat points out that, even as “strong women” characters have become more present on the silver screen, they are still denied access to comedy, and therefore, true power:

Humor isn't just an essential method of survival in a hostile world that's out to blow you away in fifty different totally PG-13 rated ways, it denotes confidence and a command of the situation. If you can't take it, and whip up some of your own, then you're less powerful. (Chevat)

As the creators of most comic theory have been those who wield power, these overviews provide insight into the ways in which power has been questioned by women writers. Kathleen Rowe's text, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, "investigates the power of female grotesques and female laughter to challenge the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place" (3). Rowe sets up a prototype of the unruly woman as a powerful comic force working outside of traditionally accepted women's narrative roles, which is useful in assessing many of the women characters created in the plays of Ruhl and Callaghan. Many of the characters serve the playwrights' subversive purposes as they refuse to fill the traditional roles of women characters in comedy. Frances Gray's *Women and Laughter* is an attempt to "unearth the assumptions beneath the refusal to accept women as active participants in comedy" (4). As she equates attitudes toward gender and sexuality in general to attitudes toward women in comedy, she presents opportunities to understand the challenges that women writers have had to face.

Though I am not arguing that Ruhl and Callaghan have overtly feminist agendas in their work, the scholarship of certain feminist thinkers will provide an important lens through which to examine these plays. Helene Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa" is a noteworthy and influential essay that serves an important function in my analysis. Cixous calls women writers to action, insisting that "woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (875) – an idea very much in keeping with the spirit of consciousness-raising. She equates writing with power, proclaiming it, "precisely the *very possibility of change*,

the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought” (Cixous 879). Ian Blyth restates Cixous’s assertion of the power of *écriture féminine* in his 2004 essay when he writes: “one might say that *écriture féminine* acts like a kind of computer virus that infects and rewrites the Symbolic - the governing code/discourse of Patriarchy” (Blyth 34).³⁶ There is certainly ample room for the governing codes of comedy to be challenged in this way. While Cixous’s energy is invigorating, her message is complicated in her conclusion that there is an *écriture féminine* – a way in which women write – which is often interpreted as limiting in its essentialism. Jane Gallop, for example, cautions against “its effacement of the differences between women in view of some feminine essence” (154). For Gallop, the clarity and value of the individual woman writer is sacrificed in the blurry strokes that would paint all women as writing in some common, genetically dictated voice. Additionally, the kneejerk assumption that feminine is negative and outside of power, rather than an inroad to power haunts objections to Cixous’s theory. Anu Aneja suggests that “it is perhaps also time that we deconstruct our own complicity with patriarchal prejudices against the feminine and direct our attention to the ‘gift’ of potential” (25). The potential of exploring feminine subversion should not, in these terms, be overlooked merely on the grounds of its ostensible connection to the female. And though Cixous admits that it is all but impossible to define, and though she continues to assert that “a feminine practice of writing” does exist (“Medusa” 883), she also expands her understanding of that practice in her later writings, including her 1998 *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* and the 2010 re-

³⁶ *Écriture féminine* is a term associated with Hélène Cixous’s famous article “*Le Rire de la Méduse*” (“The Laugh of the Medusa”) in which she calls for “the emancipation of the marvelous text of [the woman writer] that she must urgently learn to speak” (“Medusa” 880). Her argument is that there is a distinctly feminine way to write – a way of expressing the female body in writing. She “refused to fix ‘*l’écriture féminine*’ by providing a definition, but argued that it produced alternative ways of seeing the other” (Lie 43). This is a way of writing and understanding that cannot be achieved by writing in the dominant masculine modes, and thus has been silenced.

release of “The Laugh of the Medusa.”³⁷ A landmark in the celebration of women’s literary voice, Cixous’s words float through the background as I proceed through this project. But I note their influence carefully, looking for tools for reading and understanding women’s writing in its historical and theoretical context, rather than evidence of some mysterious, common writerly impulse written in their double-X chromosomes.

³⁷ Her 2010 re-release has not, to my knowledge, been translated into English, so citations from this come via the contextual translations of other scholars.

CHAPTER 3: SARAH RUHL

METHODS – Impurity of Form

In a 2008 *New Yorker* interview, drama critic John Lahr and Sarah Ruhl both comment on her remarkable comic dramaturgy:

Ruhl, in her plays, contends with the pressing existential issues; her stoical comic posture is a means of killing gravity, of taking the heaviness out of her words in order to better contend with life. “Lightness isn’t stupidity,” she said. “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.”³⁸ (Lahr)

She expands on this idea in her collection of essays, claiming that the lightness in her plays is intended to “temper reality with strangeness, to temper the intellect with emotion, and to temper emotion with humor” (*100 Essays* 36). This intersection of lightness and gravity is a deep vein running through all of Ruhl’s plays, from death and dirty jokes in *The Clean House*, to dictators and fish puppets in *The Passion Play*, to depression and almonds in *The Melancholy Play*, and so on and so forth. Never settling into one prescribed style, Ruhl’s plays intentionally repurpose and overturn expectations of form, structure, and content. She works outside of the Aristotelian plot model, and encourages an acting style that strays from the usual psychologically “real” approach that dominates American theatre (Lahr). Preferring the irrationality of emotions, Ruhl’s works open themselves up to a strange sort of comedy that envelops tragedy and melodrama as its companions rather than its often inappropriately generalized opposites. Regina Barreca claims that “Often women's humor deals with those

³⁸ Italo Calvino delivered a talk on lightness in 1988, in which he sings the virtues of “subtraction of weight...sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all...from the structure of stories and from language” (Calvino). Using primarily mythology and poetry, he illustrates exactly what Ruhl claims in her quote: that lightness is, indeed, a deliberate, serious, and meaningful aesthetic choice.

subjects traditionally reserved for tragedy: life and death, love and hate, connection and abandonment" (*Snow White* 31). And though I would not necessarily posit that such a pairing belongs to women's comedy alone, it certainly does play a significant role in that of Ruhl's. James al-Shamma agrees when he points out that, "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 in an Hour* 136).³⁹ Ruhl reflects on the interplay of comedy and tragedy in her worlds:

In ancient Greece, comedies used to be appetizers in the form of satyr plays performed before the main course – a tragedy. Now we don't have daylong festivals of both comedies and tragedies, so now do satyr plays need to be contained inside tragedies? (That is to say, the dark comedy?) I have never had much patience with separating genres into distinct categories. Maybe that is because I long for the time when we sat all day in the sun and laughed for a while, then wept while masked actors wailed, and both the humor and the desperation of life were illuminated on one day. (*100 Essays* 37).

The comic dramaturgy of Ruhl's world, then, often lies in her understanding of expectations of form, and her ability to simultaneously engage and subvert that expectation. Comedy is a genre full of devices – from punchlines to spit takes and pratfalls – and those devices lend themselves beautifully to Ruhl's imaginative repurposing of laughter to coincide with much more complex emotions than amusement alone. John Morreall, a philosopher of humor, is only one in a long line of theorists to suggest that the amusement of comedy and the emotions of tragedy are contradictory: "The overarching difference is that comedies are designed to evoke amusement, while tragedies are designed to evoke emotions" (*Comic Relief* 75). But, as I will illustrate, Ruhl's comedy is intertwined with death. In *The Clean House* it is Ana's death, and the death of Matilde's parents; in *Passion Play* it is Violet's and Mary's implied and explicit deaths, as well as

³⁹ Then again, as Andrew S. Horton notes, "No plot is inherently funny [...] any plot is potentially comic, melodramatic, or tragic, or perhaps all three at once" (1).

the deaths of millions who suffered due to suicide and genocide and war. As I hope to show, humor is not a ten-foot pole for Ruhl, allowing the audience a safe distance from a pleasurable ribbing of the absurdity of our world. Humor, for her, is an invitation into the messy world of humanity that she chooses to put on stage.

In this chapter, I explore *The Clean House* and *Passion Play* as elegant examples of the ways in which Ruhl engages comic devices while straying from traditional conventions that would confine comedy to a set of formulae prescribed by centuries of comic theory. Calling on a number of broadly-focused comic theorists, I outline the recognizable elements of comedy at work in these plays, and the ways in which Ruhl rethinks and incorporates those elements with more traditionally tragic subject matter. In discussing *The Clean House*, I explore Ruhl's use of jokes and stock characters. I also touch briefly on the use of stock characters in *The Passion Play*, but my main focus in the discussion of this play is Ruhl's use of repetition and reincorporation. In exposing the robust dialogue between Ruhl's writing and comic tropes of joke structure, stock characters and repetition, I seek to reveal the complex, multi-layered comedy that emerges in each play.

***The Clean House: Dirty Jokes and Death*⁴⁰**

The Clean House – the first of Ruhl's plays to win her substantial national attention (and a Pulitzer Prize nomination to boot) – tells the story of a pair of married doctors – Lane and Charles – whose new Brazilian maid Matilde is too depressed to clean. When Charles leaves his wife for his sixty-something mastectomy patient Ana, Lane is left reeling, with only her maid

⁴⁰ My references to *The Clean House* are primarily from the script, but I do occasionally draw on performance details and audience reactions observed in my viewing of the 25 January 2007 performance at the Lincoln Center, viewed in the Lincoln Center Archives on 18 July 2014.

(who would rather be a comedian), and her sister Virginia (who has been cleaning the house in the maid's stead), both of whom become enamored with Ana as well. Finally, when Ana's cancer returns, Charles goes on a quest to find a cure, leaving Ana to die in the care of his ex-wife and the other two women. This death comes on Ana's terms, however, as she asks to be euthanized by way of Matilde telling her the perfect joke.

The world of *The Clean House* is one in which the rules of comedy are carefully inspected and repurposed. With explicit understanding of the traditions surrounding comic plots, characters, and dialogue, Ruhl creates a world rich in comic convention.⁴¹ All theatre, of course, relies heavily on convention to communicate with the audience, but jokes are particularly reliant on conventions, as they often draw their comedy from some inversion of established rules and conventions.⁴² That said, even in the act of playing with the conventions, jokes have a tendency to continue to respect them. According to Simon Critchley: "Most humour, in particular the comedy of recognition – and most humour *is* comedy of recognition – simply seeks to reinforce consensus and in no way seeks to criticize the established order or change the situation in which we find ourselves" (Critchley 11). In this sense, even jokes that appear to be mocking conventions need those very conventions in order to survive, so even

⁴¹ "Conventions" ends up taking on a couple of meanings in this discussion. First, "the operation of the theatrical event depends on the acceptance of a series of conventions by performers and spectators. They are, in a sense, the terms and conditions of the agreement between the two parties, and are likely to include simple matters such as that the actor will pretend to be somebody she is not, and that one part of the space available will be for performers and a different part for spectators" (Leach 190). On top of these fairly regular conventions of the theatrical event, there are conventions specific to each play: i.e. Capulets all wear red or everyone is turning into Rhinoceroses. But beyond the conventions of the theatrical contract are traditions and patterns and formulae by which artists tend to abide, i.e. jokes have a certain structure, comedies have a happy ending, etc. When I discuss Ruhl's manipulation of conventions, I am referring to the latter, which in turn, would affect the former in the course of the performance.

⁴² A simple example of inversion: "A man walks into a bar. He says, 'Ouch.'" Drawing on the expected convention of a common joke construction – a man walks into a bar – this joke inverts the convention in favor of the literal. This is only a minor example of the myriad ways in which jokes employ and invert expectation.

jokers are invested in upholding established forms. But in *The Clean House*, Ruhl plays with comic conventions in unorthodox ways, removing, rearranging and rattling those elements that we find most recognizable. She sets the stage for her rhetorical acrobatics with the deliberate creation of a set of characters who defy their conventionally accepted roles in the world. According to Henri Bergson, “It is comic to fall into a ready-made category” (Bergson 157). Stock characters, according to conventional wisdom, are often a part of much well-constructed comedy, perhaps because if the character is a type rather than an individual, it is easier to inspire the requisite distance to laugh at his or her misfortune. “Character becomes comic as person is reduced to thing, and this thing-ness is recognized as something ossified, habitual, or inflexible” (Bevis 34). Stock characters are a sort of short-hand for the audience, with certain types of behaviors and foibles assigned to them, and when the characters are stock *things* rather than actual people, it is, it would seem, easier to laugh at their misfortunes.

Ruhl seems aware of the stock characters expected for a family comedy, and provides us with some fairly recognizable examples: the career woman/wronged spouse (Lane), the housewife (Virginia), the man of the house/the cheating husband (Charles), the “other woman” (Ana) and the impudent servant (Matilde).⁴³ Then, having provided us with these familiar characters, Ruhl carefully contradicts each set of expectations, setting up a world where the expectations of comic stock characters can’t be taken for granted. Matilde follows after past theatrical servants in her sense of humor, but it is a sense of humor that has the power not only to illuminate and to amuse, but also to destroy. Humor is – for Ruhl and Matilde – about justice,

⁴³ I often find it interesting how similar contemporary stock characters remain to their ancestors in Commedia dell’arte, Moliere, Shakespeare, etc. Sitcoms and movies are often populated with misanthropic, miserly old men, charming but doltish would-be lovers, and lovable fools have made a fantastic living in the films of Judd Apatow. It is partly this common comic lineage that Ruhl cannot help but encounter in a play about lovers and employers and servants.

love, and even life and death, so being the keeper of humor holds a deep level of responsibility.⁴⁴ And as Lane tells us in the second scene, is a cleaning woman who “decided that she was depressed one day and stopped cleaning my house” (*Clean House* 9). She is a servant whose emotional life overcomes her functional life. And while we may have precedent in commedia dell’arte for an incompetent servant, a lazy servant or even an unwilling servant, a servant paralyzed by sincere grief is a significant departure from the expected type. Lane, Matilde’s employer, is a successful doctor who, despite her position of power, confides to her maid that, “I don’t like giving orders in my own home” (*Clean House* 14). And when her husband Charles betrays her, she finds that all of the sympathy goes to the other woman rather than to her – the conventionally wronged party. Charles (the only man in the play) is absent for much of the action – first because he is always at work or, as it turns out, with his lover; later because he has gone on a quest to find a tree that can cure Ana’s cancer. He exercises little to no control over the circumstances of the play – quite contrary to the power-broker husband we might have come to expect this successful doctor who cheats on his wife to be. As the ideal housewife, Lane’s sister Virginia fulfills her expected role as keeper of the domestic sphere, but this does not end with her own domestic sphere (she’s all too happy to come scrub her sister’s toilet in Matilde’s stead), and it is not for her idealized husband, but her own personal fulfillment that she meticulously cleans her house by 3:12 every afternoon: “If you do not clean:

⁴⁴ Aristotle notes in his off-handed comments about comedy in *Poetics* that “Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type” (59). So for hundreds of years, comedy’s roots have been with the servant class. Commedia dell’arte plays are famous for their comic servant stock characters. Usually lazy and crafty, their subplots mainly involve ways to get food (see Truffaldino in *The Servant of Two Masters*, for example). Shakespeare drew on these characters as well, creating Dromios (*Comedy of Errors*) and Grumios (*Taming of the Shrew*) who avoid, complain about, or are simply terribly foolish in the course of their work. Shakespeare’s servants often offset the more “serious” or dramatic love plots of the upper-class protagonists, providing comic relief in the midst of the romantic foibles. And though they may express pain, it is always of a physical, rather than an emotional nature.

how do you know if you've made any progress in life?" (*Clean House* 10) In fact, her husband seems to have little effect on her at all, as she describes him more as an accessory than a breadwinner or even 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" (*Clean House* 25). Charles is an unconventional male character primarily because of his lack of influence over the action of the play. Lane is an unconventional woman who has left the management of the domestic sphere to an employee who she is uncomfortable bossing around. That employee is unconventional in her refusal to carry out those duties due to her emotional pain. And Virginia is unconventional both in the extremity of her housewifeliness and in her disconnectedness from her husband.

Ana, on the other hand, is perhaps the most notable departure from her conventional role compared with the other woman. When Virginia and Matilde discover her sexy underwear mixed in with the laundry, the implication is clear: Charles has found himself a sexy, lacy, young sex kitten. Virginia posits the most likely scenario: "I hope it's not a nurse. It's such a cliché" (*Clean House* 35). Ruhl puts the conventional expectation in Virginia's mouth, solidifying the stock character in the minds of the audience before pulling the rug out from underneath it. Ana, it turns out, is neither young nor a nurse, but a sixty-seven-year-old mastectomy patient. And as the other woman, she is not portrayed or even treated as a villain or a harlot, rather everyone loves her immediately (except Lane – who does eventually come around and invite her into her home). As she sets up and destroys character convention after character convention, Ruhl creates a world in which rules are made to be broken. She overturns expectations and establishes an atmosphere wherein uncertainty leads to possibility, and

where no assumption should go uninvestigated – even assumptions about something as fundamental as the construction and purpose of a joke.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a joke is, “Something said or done to excite laughter or amusement...Something not earnest or serious” (Joke).⁴⁵ But as Ruhl described the experiment at the center of her play: “I’m interested in extreme states. Sort of if funniness were pushed to its *reductio ad absurdum*, like to the furthest edge, could it be lethal?” (Ruhl)⁴⁶ In another interview, she expands on this idea, rhapsodizing that “There’s something compassionate about humor; it has a saving power. It seemed to me that if you took the most sublime version of a joke – the Platonic ideal of a joke – that it could transport you somehow” (Ruhl quoted by Weckwerth 32). Navigating the conventions of jokes, she melds them with the conventions of ritual, creating a world in which a joke can amuse, cleanse, heal, kill, provide justice, or even set you free. *The Clean House* is indeed about jokes, but it is not about jokes as the OED would have us know them. Ruhl investigates, prods, inverts and expands the realm of the joke, creating a holy space in which all that separates a dirty joke and divine intervention is a heartbeat and a hiccup. In his study on comedy, Andrew Stott says:

the comic can be thought of as a means of opening up the possibility of multiple perspectives, as each concept culturally established as orthodox simultaneously presents itself for the possibility of comic subversion, like a silent but parallel conversation that could audibly erupt at any moment. (8)

⁴⁵ Salvatore Attardo provides additional context for the definition of a joke: “The term *joke* can be found in two different meanings within humor research. The first is that as a type of text; the second is more generally that of an instance of humor. Etymologically, the word comes from Latin *iocus*, which means ‘play’ or ‘game.’ It denotes a usually short narrative ending in a humorous punch line. Jokes are generally constituted of a setup, which presents the situation in which the events of the narrative develop, followed by the punch line, which occurs generally at the end of the text” (*Encyclopedia* 417).

⁴⁶ “the rational absurd is concerned with the breakdown of logic and exemplified in the technique of *reduction ad absurdum*, in which a logical proposition is led to a nonsensical or contradictory conclusion” (*Humor Studies* 1).

In *The Clean House*, it seems as if Ruhl took this observation as a challenge, applying this comic subversion not only to the world of the play, but to comedy itself, sometimes participating in established comic formulae, but more often than not, redefining comic conventions in service of a deeply profound view of the power of the joke. She fiddles with, appropriates and invents conventions, bringing the audience along as she illustrates that, “A perfect joke is somewhere between an angel and a fart” (*Clean House* 24). And in that space, the joke becomes so much more than a mere amusement.

Ruhl opens the play with our comic guide, Matilde, telling a lengthy – and somewhat obscene – joke in Portuguese. According to the stage directions, “We can tell she is telling a joke even though we might not understand the language” (*Clean House* 9). This is only the first of several standard jokes throughout the course of the play – four in Portuguese and two that are never heard. In their exploration of jokes and joke telling, Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves define a joke as “a highly sophisticated verbal flourish, a product of human culture and intellect and linguistic skill” (32). In *The Clean House*, Ruhl provides an exploration of the joke that runs far deeper than verbal acrobatics. None of the jokes we actually hear is particularly remarkable – the first is about a newlywed and the advice from his sex therapist, the second is about lacking male stamina, and the third is about the egos of Argentinian men – but it is not the content of the jokes that is of primary interest to Ruhl. In translation, Matilde’s Portuguese jokes are intentionally mundane, allowing the audience to focus on the familiar cadence, rhythm and ritual of joke-telling, rather than the “verbal flourish.” And it is precisely because

we do not understand the actual words of the jokes that we are able to interact with them on a more fundamental, ritual level.⁴⁷

According to Ted Cohen's philosophical study of jokes, all jokes are, to some degree, conditional: "It is a vital feature of much joking that only a suitably qualified audience...can receive the joke ... At the very least, the audience will have to understand the language of the joke, and probably much more" (12). In Cohen's terms, jokes rely on a mutual experience of something understood by joker and listener alike to qualify as funny, but Ruhl rejects the superficial implications of this thesis and trades Cohen's language as the common ground for the habitual repetition of ritual. And repetition breeds familiarity, even when certain elements of the ritual – like the language – may have changed. Ruhl's comedy eschews the punchline in favor of a sort of "Every-joke." The language barrier, then, opens rather than closes the jokes to the audience, who must, in order to appreciate these jokes, relinquish their customary reliance on the straightforward meanings of language.

Matilde even calls attention to the inherent rhythms at work in jokes when she tells Virginia "You know how most jokes go in threes? Like this: Da da DA. I'm making up one that goes in sixes: Da da DA, da da DA" (*Clean House* 34). The ritual of the joke has elements that are tangible. You don't just understand the comic premise, you *feel* the rhythm, and that rhythm is a signal from the teller to the listener; a sort of framework for the call and response of joke telling. And it is precisely because we do not understand the actual words of the jokes – those reliable joke conventions that have abandoned us – that we are able to interact with them on a

⁴⁷ I myself have spent four summers watching theatre in Russia, and though I do not speak Russian, I continue to be amazed how thoroughly I am able to follow the joke structure of a given performance. With almost no context, I almost always know exactly when to laugh.

more fundamental, ritual level. After one of the jokes, Matilde and Lane take a moment to reflect on the expectations surrounding this ritual:

Matilde tells a joke in Portuguese.

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.

Lane tries to laugh. (Clean House 48)

Lane is aware of her responsibility as a participant in the ritual – she can feel in the rhythm of the exchange that it is her turn – but like the audience, she is uncertain how to interact when what she feels and what she hears no longer coincide. Reviewer Charles Isherwood sympathizes with Lane, noting that, “We may never come to a full understanding of the jokes life plays, but the wisest and possibly the noblest response is to have a good laugh anyway” (Isherwood). Both audience and characters who hear these jokes recognize the crescendo, the repetition, and the delivery of the punchline, and though they are probably unable to decipher it, they recognize the inflections and patterns that come together to form a joke – and they may even laugh at the strangeness of being unexpectedly cast as the outsider, or even their ability to understand without understanding. Even when Charles attempts to tell a joke in English, the audience is denied the traditional joke structure:

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. (*Clean House 53*)

There is a way that jokes should work – Ruhl knows it, Charles knows it, the audience knows it – there must be a punchline! But this joke resists. Still, despite its incompleteness, the audience laughs, by this time (near the beginning of the second act), understanding that jokes will not

look like what they might have expected in this world. Ruhl so thoroughly and so entertainingly deconstructs the idea of the joke, that with neither linguistic cues nor punchlines, comedy as such remains very much alive.

In an interview conducted by Paula Vogel, Ruhl discusses her inspiration: “I think that at the most primal level, the intention to be funny, to share wit, is beyond language. When I wrote *The Clean House* and began it with the joke in Portuguese that probably no one would understand, that was part of the impulse” (Vogel). Like a Catholic attending mass in another language: the words are unfamiliar, but the sounds and motions are all still somehow the same – and still somehow meaningful.⁴⁸ For Ruhl it is the ritual and not the content of the joke that has the most power. In this sense, she might actually be in some agreement with Henri Bergson, who notes that “For any ceremony, then, to become comic, it is enough that our attention be fixed on the ceremonial element in it, and that we neglect its matter, as philosophers say, and think only of its form” (89). Bergson is specifically referencing the process of making “serious” ceremonies (or rituals) comic, but his insight certainly applies to Ruhl’s highlighting of the ceremony of the joke. And while there are numerous rituals Ruhl could have chosen, the joke is a particularly fascinating one as Simon Critchley points out: “Jokes are *anti-rites*. They mock, parody or deride the ritual practices of a given society” (5). In this sense, a joke is built to take aim at conventions, to point out the follies in the most highly valued rituals, and often to reinforce other conventions by mocking those who dare to deviate from the status quo – but in *The Clean House* the anti-rite simultaneously parodies its own practices and becomes the ritual itself. The audience must, in order to appreciate these jokes, accept the

⁴⁸ There may even be an echo of the more overt absurdity of plays like Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano*, which trades heavily in repetition while it decentralizes the role of language.

familiar elements of the ritual, accept its own criticism of those elements, and agree to step beyond the common context that necessitates understanding of most humor. This spiraling use of the joke as rite and anti-rite invites Ruhl's audience to share more actively in the responsibility of making meaning.

Matilde struggles in her solitary moments – first as Lane's maid, then as Charles and Ana's – trying to think up the perfect joke. She explains to Ana: "I made up eighty-four new jokes since I started working for you. I only made up one at the other house. It was a good one though. Sometimes you have to *suffer* for the really good ones" (*Clean House* 71). And here we find another disconnect from conventional wisdom on the subject of jokes: "Folklorists are fond of the idea that jokes don't get invented; they evolve. As [cultural critic Gershon] Legman put it, '*Nobody* ever tells jokes for the first time'" (Holt 50). Jokes, in their accepted, sense, are products of a fairly common comic lineage. The jokes that were told about Nixon were told about emperors before him and Bill Clinton after him. And while each generation may have patted itself on the collective back for the cleverness of the joke, they remain essentially ancestors with an uncanny family resemblance. Certainly the Portuguese jokes Matilde tells are (once they're translated) recognizable as part of standard joke formulae. And while Matilde enjoys these old chestnuts, she is never satisfied with them. She spends her free moments sitting in the dark thinking up new jokes, always searching for the perfect joke – something that must surely be independent of the same old folklore lineage of dirty jokes, ethnic jokes, puns or "knee slappers." These are the jokes she struggles to create on her own; these are the jokes that can kill. Jokes are no lighthearted escape, they are serious business, and they – like any other instrument of power – are to be handled with care. Certainly Ruhl is not the first to take

joking seriously. According to “scholar of dirty jokes” Alan Dundes, “Some people believe jokes and nursery rhymes and fairy tales are just harmless little stories that don’t mean anything...But they’re not meaningless. And they’re not necessarily harmless either” (Holt 46). But while Dundes refers to the metaphorical impact of jokes and their potential danger to influence ideology, Ruhl takes a much more literal approach, as she gives us a character who suffers because of and in order to create jokes. As the child of the funniest people in Brazil, jokes made Matilde who she is, but they also took what was dearest to her – her parents. And they occupy her every waking moment.

In addition to the four Portuguese jokes, there are also two jokes that we never hear: the perfect jokes. These jokes are too powerful to share with the audience, as they carry with them the power to kill. And though we never hear them, these jokes are an extension of the ritual of the Portuguese jokes already discussed. This ritual transcends habit and becomes a specialized kind of performance that – like the ritual of prayer – operates on belief in its “‘real’ consequences” (Bial 87). And surely there are few consequences more “real” than death. Aside from Matilde, the only people we know of who have interacted with perfect jokes are dead. She explains: “my mother died 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” (*Clean House* 11). But when Matilde shares her perfect joke with Ana as an unusual form of euthanasia, Matilde lives on, carrying the responsibility and knowledge of the perfect joke with her. From a ritual perspective, the perfect joke becomes a sort of last rite, releasing the hearer from his or her earthly suffering. The perfect jokes in Ruhl’s play work on the people who hear them in the most profound possible way, and thus are handled with the utmost care.

Matilde describes the challenge of the perfect joke: “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” (*Clean House* 74). And though both instances of this ritual are delivered with love, it is evident in the accidental death of Matilde’s mother that this ritual is a powerful burden.

In his landmark essay on laughter, Henri Bergson proclaims the inherent intellectual nature of comedy, claiming that: “To produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple” (Bergson 63-64). But the visceral nature of the reactions from Matilde’s mother and Ana to the perfect joke demands recognition of an element of the comic experience that reaches something other than the intellect. Simon Critchley points out that, “as a bodily phenomenon, laughter invites comparison with similar convulsive phenomena like orgasm and weeping” (8). In this sense, our reaction to jokes is not entirely in our control, and attempting to make the sense of humor the domain of the intellect alone minimizes the involuntary physical effects – effects that, in *The Clean House*, go beyond even laughter into death – unquestionably a physical rather than an intellectual response. There is a physical, emotional, and even a spiritual component to these perfect jokes that the characters do not fully understand, but perhaps understanding is not as necessary as acknowledgement. Matilde describes the power of a joke and the power of a prayer in nearly the same terms, linking them in Bial’s ritual notion of “real consequences” and elevating the spiritual impact of the joke as ritual when, in act one, she explains, “A good joke cleans your insides out. If I don’t laugh for a week, I feel dirty” (*Clean House* 26), and in act two she prompts Virginia to lead a prayer over

Ana's body: "A prayer cleans the air the way water cleans the dirt" (*Clean House* 107). Spiritual cleansing is a common ritual aim, and in Ruhl's world, jokes and prayers are on even footing, suggesting that each has the power – and perhaps the responsibility – to act directly on the world. They are not merely collections of vocabulary, nor are they merely words that have a particular internal emotional impact on the speaker. Jokes and prayers, in *The Clean House* actually have the power to inspire physical reactions such as healing or death. According to James Al-Shamma's study of Ruhl's work, "The perfect joke thus functions as an incantation might in a shamanic ritual, as means of gathering and focusing otherworldly power" (*Critical Study* 39). However, there is something different about this ritual. Because the audience does not hear either of these perfect jokes, we no longer have even the ritual that was so integral to the Portuguese jokes. What we do have, however, is the relic in the person of Matilde. She is the survivor of her father's perfect joke and her own. So at the end of the play, standing over Ana's body and looking back on her own birth, Matilde looks forward with hope: "I think maybe heaven is a sea of untranslatable jokes. Only everyone is laughing" (*Clean House* 109). Death is an ending, but it is also a beginning. And while understanding is something that is relied upon so heavily in this life, perhaps that battle to be understood is not paramount. In *The Clean House*, Ruhl presents us with a world where the ritual of laughter is what has value and meaning, rather than whatever it is that we may be laughing at.

Matilde explains what she learned from her mother about the power and responsibility of jokes: "in order to tell a good joke, you have to believe that your problems are very small, and that the world is very big. She said: if more women knew more jokes, there would be more justice in the world" (*Clean House* 26). Jokes operate from positions of perspective and power –

reflecting on the world and creating meaning. In order to create a joke worth telling, it requires a broad understanding of one's place in the world, and, consequently, a deep level of empathy for one's fellow human beings. In this sense, the ability to tell a good joke is connected to fundamental human impulses to understand and to be understood; to be connected to one another and to have a sense of purpose. Simon Critchley suggests that "Humour is an exemplary practice because it is a universal human activity that invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives" (18). This is certainly related to the kind of perspective Matilde's mother is talking about, but jokes in Ruhl's world, rather than lifting the tellers out of the world to a the level of a philosophical spectator, plunge them heart first into the untidy emotional experience of day to day life through which they achieve an even broader perspective. And if that power were in the hands of more women, Matilde's mother suggests, the world would be better for it.

In her collection of essays, Ruhl notes the conventional wisdom that comedies "often end in marriage" and that tragedies usually concern "the loss of one individual soul" (*100 Essays* 10). But *The Clean House* does not provide a tidy, genre-fitting ending for its audience. In fact, the last few pages are so emotionally turbulent that it is almost impossible for the audience to know from one moment to the next if they should be laughing or crying. Matilde tells Ana the joke – Ana laughs. Ana dies – Matilde wails. Charles returns carrying an enormous tree – the audience laughs. Charles cradles the body of his lost love, the audience is silent. Finally – Charles and Ana transform again into Matilde's parents reenacting the moment of Matilde's birth:

My father is telling her a joke to try and keep her calm.
My mother laughed.

She laughed so hard that I popped out.
 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. (*Clean House* 109)

From birth, it seems, Ruhl is unwilling to separate laughter from tears, life from death, comedy from tragedy. And though past thinkers might have believed that "Comedy is essentially a Carrying Away of Death, a triumph over mortality by some absurd faith in rebirth, restoration, and salvation" (Sypher 220), Ruhl's comedy is inherently and beautifully intertwined with cycles of life and death, taking her characters and her audience by the hand and facing tragedy side by side.

Passion Play: Divine Laughter

Passion Play is an undeniably ambitious enterprise: a three-part epic exploring Passion Plays throughout history.⁴⁹ The first part takes place in England in 1575 just before passion plays were banned by Queen Elizabeth, and centers on the cousins who play Jesus (John the Fisherman) and Pontius Pilate (Pontius the Fish Gutter), and the two young women who play the Virgin Mary (Mary 1) and Mary Magdalene (Mary 2). Mary 1 eventually becomes pregnant with the child of the ripe-smelling and otherwise physically unappealing Pontius, and to cover up her shame, pretends she has been blessed with a second virgin birth. The honorable John the Fisherman promises to take care of her, as Joseph did before him, but eventually the lies become too much to bear, and Mary 1 drowns herself, leaving *The Village Idiot* to play her roles

⁴⁹ Passion Plays emerged in Medieval times as part of local church celebrations for various festivals. Comprised of stories from the Bible, "the scriptural drama of the English cycles and the continental Passion plays is the major achievement of the medieval theatre" (Gassner xii). Usually performed in the town square either by traveling troupes or by local performers, full cycles of Old and New Testament stories were developed and handed down from generation to generation

of Eve and Mary in the pageant before it is shut down mid-performance by the Queen. The second part takes place in Oberammergau, Germany in 1934 just before Hitler rises to power, and focuses this time more on the relationship between the townspeople and the outsiders, be they soldiers or newcomers.⁵⁰ There is an Englishman who comes to document the pageant, an outcast Jewish girl named Violet, and a forbidden relationship between Eric who plays Jesus and the Foot Soldier playing Pontius. The third part takes place in Spearfish, South Dakota and follows a pair of brothers names J and P who played Jesus and Pontius respectively from 1969 to present day (these brothers are played by the same actors who played the cousins John and Pontius in the first part, and Eric and the Foot Soldier in the second part).⁵¹ While P goes off to Vietnam, J sleeps with his wife and becomes a famous actor, creating years of intra-sibling conflict after P's return.

The process of writing this piece spanned several different eras in Ruhl's own life as well: the first being performed as her undergraduate thesis at Brown University in 1997, the second catching the attention of director Mark Wing-Davey in 2002, and the third written "with urgency" leading up to the 2004 presidential election that saw the reelection of George W. Bush (*Critical Study* 112,136). Incorporating the historical phenomena of Passion Plays with Ruhl's dynamic poeticism, "The intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the 'world' and literature" (Hutcheon 124). The socially conscious nature at work through all three parts of the comedy participates in a sort of carnivalesque legacy "of laughter as misrule, a laughter with the potential to disrupt the

⁵⁰ Oberammergau is a Bavarian city that has performed a passion play every ten years since 1634. Only villagers are allowed to participate, and they essentially give up an entire year of their lives to this production each decade (Oberammergau-passion.com).

⁵¹ The Black Hills Passion Play was a popular attraction in South Dakota for 70 years, with its final performance in 2008 (Tupper).

authority of church and state" (Isaak 15). The carnivalesque is an ideal tool for the sort of genre-bending tone of Ruhl's work, as it "shares many features with the comic, including the mirthful exaltation of the trivial, the comical inversion of hierarchies, exaggeration and grotesquerie, and a focus on the bodily, particularly the things of the lower body, which Bakhtin identified as the seat of the carnivalesque" (*Encyclopedia* 111). On their own, the pieces are lovely and strange and funny and sad and thought provoking, but together, they form, a compelling (and often very funny) postmodern montage of how religion has influenced the best and basest of intentions throughout history.

One main comic tool Ruhl employs throughout this cycle is repetition and reincorporation – which Bergson refers to as "one of the usual processes of classic comedy" (107). She replays lines and motifs within individual plays and throughout the three plays, building a unique vocabulary shared between the actors and audience that, by the third play, would certainly "pay off" in the sense that everyone is brought in on the joke (in keeping with Cohen's aforementioned "conditionality") that seems designed to inspire an ever greater investment on the part of the audience in the world of the play. Of particular comic value, in my opinion, is the metatheatricality, whereby even audience members not well versed in theatre conventions will have the opportunity to observe theatre people and theatre practices multiple times over the course of the three-part production. In each act, each director, for example, provides ample material for comedy with his own blustering pomposity offsetting the traditional serious tone of a passion play and the religious events that are the occasion of its production. As each director rehearses, he calls out Biblical instructions as if he were God himself: "The heavenly choir rehearses!" (*Passion Play* 22) and "CHRIST TEARS DOWN THE

TEMPLE! Begin!" (*Passion Play* 101) and "We have to tech the ascension" (*Passion Play* 184). Each in his turn has a chance to explain to someone else how vital the director's position is, and these assertions of importance act as comic contrasts to the legitimately life and death conflicts in which the main characters are engaged. The first director explains "why the play must go on! We made a pact with God, when the plague had eaten the very stomach out of our village, that we would play the Passion and all for the glory of God" (*Passion Play* 68). According to this director, he is actually engaged in a covenant with God. The second director builds on the importance of the director in his own right, making his pride more about himself than about the relationship of the Passion with God: "There are times in every man's life – in his personal life even – when he needs a director...Whatever it is – he can't see – he can't think. He needs someone with vision – me – someone stronger – me – to tell him what to do" (*Passion Play* 116). Here he paints himself as a divine leader of men, working through the theatre to serve mankind. The third director is in this entirely for his own gratification, and even after he has asked for help from Mary 1 in speaking to J, he quickly withdraws the invitation, reminding them of his authority: "If any direction needs to be given, I will give it" (*Passion Play* 182). And while the director characters in each play are indirectly comic in the ways they seriously place themselves within this divine context, the stagehands or carpenters are more overtly comic for their obvious lack of appropriate reverence. Each part of the trilogy begins with the two stagehands prattling on about the fishmonger, farts, and St. Augustine's hookers (in each part of the trilogy respectively) while they are measuring the actor playing Christ for the crucifix. The juxtaposition at the beginning of each play of bawdy humor against the ultimate sacrifice

establishes an off-kilter world wherein the audience is assured that religion is not necessarily “sacred.”

The Village Idiot in part one and Violet in part two (played by the same actor) become a powerful repeated presence, as the girls weave their way through the first two plays (the same actress does appear in the final part of the trilogy, but in a less integral capacity than the first two. In the third part she is merely the daughter of Mary 1 and either P or J – the paternity is never made explicit). Outcasts who desperately want to participate in the passion play, the Village Idiot and Violet are identified by James Al-Shamma as the classic wise fool archetype (*Critical Study* 118), but I believe they might more accurately be identified among the ranks of a character Kathleen Rowe identifies as the unruly women:

an ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in the narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of carnival. The unruly woman represents a special kind of excess differing from that of the femme fatale (the daughters of Eve and Helen) or the madonna (the daughters of Mary), whose laughter, if it ever occurred, no longer rings in the myths still circulating around them. (10)

The Village Idiot and Violet are barred from participation in their respective Passion plays, and are therefore quite literally something other than Eve and Mary, the other roles they play. From their vantage point outside of the Biblical archetypes, they are able to interrogate the sacred texts. In the first part the Village Idiot loiters around the Passion rehearsals speaking and singing loudly to her carnivalesque Jack-in-the-box – much to the chagrin of the director. Though she is punished for her interruptions, she can't help but frequent the rehearsals, inserting herself and her toy into the action whenever possible. "The carnivalesque is not then equipped to topple the dominant order, but neither is the dominant order able to silence the carnivalesque" (Stott 36). Observing the rehearsal of the Angel Gabriel's revelation to Mary, the

Village Idiot delivers the lines (which she, just like her later counterpart Violet, knows by heart) in tandem with the actor: “Behold, Jack, thou shalt bring forth a son and shalt call his name JACK” (*Passion Play* 48). Choosing to insert her own reality into this holiest of scenes creates a cockeyed world wherein her toy is on the same plane of meaning as that of Jesus. In the second play, it is fairy tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Hansel and Gretel” rather than a Jack-in-the-box that occupy Violet’s attention. During a rehearsal of the scene in which Jesus admonishes the moneylenders, she proclaims loudly, “I don’t like that story. How about – once upon a time there were children named Hansel and Gretel” (*Passion Play* 102). She continues narrating her story with increasing gusto, competing with the action of the scene being rehearsed, until the director silences her. Of course, it is not the specific toy or story that is important, but the fact that, alongside the “greatest story ever told,” are other stories.⁵² This revelation both elevates the other stories and questions the assumed status of the Bible stories, giving us rare permission to laugh at these usually sacrosanct narratives.”⁵³

In both plays, the outcasts do eventually get to participate in the Passion in some way. In the first section, the Village Idiot assumes the roles of Eve and Mary in performance after Mary 1 (who normally plays those roles) drowns herself. In the second section, Violet hides beneath the table feeding Eric (who plays Jesus) his lines during a rehearsal of the Last Supper. Before she consents to accept the roles of Mary and Eve, The Village Idiot asks for approval from the Jack-in-the-box that she carries with her and often speaks to throughout the course of the play. And when the time finally comes for the Village Idiot to perform, her emphasis puts

⁵² This same idea is central to the irreverent musical *The Book of Mormon*, which basically claims that the story itself doesn’t matter, as long as whatever story you believe in leads you to a better life. As Elder Price says, “I mean, it was a bunch of made-up stuff but it POINTED to something bigger” (Parker, Lopez & Stone 169).

⁵³ Forgive my mixing of religious metaphors.

the play more in line with the carnivalesque interest in the appetites of the body over the purity of the soul (which would certainly have been preferred by the director):

(As Eve) Alas, Adam, right naked so am I.
 Ah, wicked worm!
She points to his privates.
Then she points to the snake.
 So that God will not see our privates and stare
 We shall cover ourselves with fig leaves
 For we are NAKED – and all bare! (*Passion Play* 70-71)

The Village Idiot recognizes the creation story as just another story, and as such, she does not approach the script with the reverence of the other participants, instead playing up the essential humanity of sexual humor already present in the story, but usually ignored. As Bakhtin notes of the carnival, it is "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (quoted in Simeonova 73). Violet's participation comes in a different form when she hides under the table during rehearsal for the Last Supper, prompting Eric (playing Jesus) since he is unable to remember his lines. As he recognizes how well she knows the script, he welcomes her help, but as the scene goes on, she gets carried away and deviates from the script:

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. (*Passion Play* 120)

Her comically reductive observation that "some pretty strange things will be done in my name" takes on a chilling tone within the context of the Oberammergau Passion Play – praised by Hitler for its anti-Semitism just a few pages later – when she reminds them all that Jesus was a

Jew. Like the Village Idiot, Violet is punished for expressing her own take on the passion, but not before she has used these alternate amusements and texts to foreground the ambiguities surrounding these holy traditions.

I would be remiss in my discussion of repeated elements if I did not mention the “big beautiful fish puppets” that appear in the first and third parts of *Passion Play*. They appear first to Pontius as he ruminates on the sad circumstances of his physical shortcomings (in addition to being slight of build and unattractive – particularly compared to his cousin John – a mishap at his birth left Pontius with a festering, particularly smelly abscess in his stomach) – parading in and stripping him down to a loincloth. Their second appearance comes at the end of the first part when they bear Pontius’s body off stage after he stabs himself. Finally, they return at the end of the third section to escort P into the distance on his boat after he summons the wind in his final monologue. Ruhl is explicit that the puppets be beautiful, but this beauty does not preclude the potential for laughter as towering fish puppets surround and strip the fishmonger – a truly carnivalesque inversion of the natural hierarchy. And their reappearances with his death and with P’s final goodbye retain a certain wonderment and exaggeration even in these serious moments. P is surrounded by the fish like his Elizabethan predecessor (Pontius) after he closes the epic by relating what well may be the moral of the story:

“I don’t know if this country needs more religion or less of it. Seems to me everyone needs a good night’s sleep. That way we’d all wake up for real in the morning. It’s good to be awake. When you’re awake you can fight for what you believe in, no matter what costumes you’re wearing.” (*Passion Play* 235)

Whether you’re wearing a loincloth or street clothes or even a giant fish puppet, we all have a place in this fight that P relates as he drifts toward the horizon.

Even casting serves Ruhl's instinct for the comic potential of repetition and reincorporation as she creates a common stock of characters whom we begin to identify with their Biblical counterparts as much as with the parts they play throughout the performance. The same actor plays the virtuous actor playing Jesus and the tormented actor playing Pontius Pilate in Elizabethan England, 1930s Germany and 20th century America, for example. In particular, her powerful decision to have the same man play Queen Elizabeth, Adolf Hitler and Ronald Reagan lends an absurdity or at least a level of abstraction to these ideologues that might not have come through as completely if they were cast separately and traditionally. Each leader in turn breaks the fourth wall and intrudes on the audience in ways that might certainly be played, at least in part, for their comic value.⁵⁴ And when Queen Elizabeth reappears as Hitler and Reagan, it is impossible for the audience to forget that this is the man they saw in drag in the first part of the cycle. This repetition and reinvention of the figure of the leader invites us to look at these figures with a different lens than most history. This humorous lens may well disarm us, leaving us emotionally or intellectually unprotected when these characters reveal the darkness at their cores. As each leader makes his or her entrance, the horror of what s/he says is framed with a comic exaggeration, holding the audience in a delicate space between the laughable and the horrible. In the first part, Queen Elizabeth enters on the heels of *The Village Idiot's* performance as Eve and describes her own costume of "layer upon layer of white paint" on her face (*Passion Play* 71). She then proceeds to outlaw performances of the

⁵⁴ The manipulation of the fourth wall between actors and audience has been a point of much discussion by many prominent theatre theorists. Artaud suggests that "we abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or a barrier of any kind, which will become the theater of the action" (96). Brecht lamented of his audiences that "their eyes are open, but they stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear" (Willett 187), preferring to create theatre that awakened and engaged his audience. As Ruhl allows her historical leaders to directly address the audience, she too negotiates this tenuous relationship.

passion play: “If any man or woman in England is seen with a painted face, assuming the person of a holy figure on a stage, I will have them beheaded. Immediately” (*Passion Play* 72). As this proclamation hangs over this little town whose identity is entirely caught up in the passion play, the queen invites them to confess their sins to her: “HAS ANYONE IN THIS VILLAGE ANYTHING TO CONFESS? *No one speaks.* Good. I’ll have my courtiers search your houses. Just to be certain” (*Passion Play* 72). The harshness of this ancestor of the PATRIOT Act delivers an all too familiar satirical sting to the devastation we have just witnessed.⁵⁵ When Hitler arrives in Oberammergau, he too interrupts the performance, but this time it is to praise it, not to outlaw it. He rhapsodizes first on how beloved he is – how “the people, they fell in love with my voice, but the women, they fell in love with my eyes...The people are always very glad to see me” (*Passion Play* 137-138). Hitler’s certainty of his own greatness – along with the memory of this same actor as Queen Elizabeth – will no doubt illicit knowing giggles from the audience, but they will quickly die away as he delivers part of an actual speech that Ruhl quotes in her play:

One of our most important tasks will be to save future generations and to remain forever watchful in the knowledge of the menace of the Jews. For this reason alone it is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau...There one sees in Pontius Pilate a Roman racially and intellectually superior, there he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of the Jews. (*Passion Play* 138)

The ridiculousness of his self-aggrandizing entrance is quickly overshadowed by the darkness of his intentions, and the horrors that the audience knows he is about to unleash. Finally, in the third part, Reagan’s speech rambles through his use of rouge (an echo of Queen Elizabeth’s

⁵⁵ “The PATRIOT Act, which was enacted in response to perceived failings in intelligence gathering after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, was intended to modernize and expand the ability of government agencies to investigate terrorism and terrorists. Among its provisions were broader definitions of terrorism, expanded access to new types of information, and improved exchange of information among different investigative agencies” (Pike). Perceived by many critics as a dangerous violation of rights regarding personal privacy, this expansion of state-sanctioned surveillance is echoed in Ruhl’s portrayal of Queen Elizabeth’s proclamation that she is sending people to search the homes of her subjects.

comments on her makeup), Gorbachev's son's goldfish, and his first job as a radio announcer before he gets to the meat of the matter, spouting heartless rhetoric like "Now people have said I'm not concerned about the poor, about the homeless. Not true. They're homeless, you might say, by choice" (*Passion Play* 229), and ending his remarks with an indictment of nontraditional families:

Now you're about to see a play about those values our country holds dear: family, God, and baseball. No, not baseball. God. And family. And intact families like Jesus, Mary and Joseph. And God, the Father. Two fathers, I know, but not really two fathers like that, not in that way, no, because those two fathers have the plague and will bring Armageddon down on the pure wheat fields of this land. (*Passion Play* 230)

The sort of dotty, charming, meandering tone of the first half of his speech carries through his anecdotes into his unsettling and intractable social views, choking the audience's laughter in our throats. In her portrayal of these leaders, Ruhl created echoes of absurdity and intolerance that reverberate off of each other through the centuries and into present day, making strange our interaction with history, satire and even our own laughter.

In addition to repetition and reincorporation between the three plays, we see repetitions internal to each of the plays. One particularly poignant repetition occurs in the second play when Eric (who plays Jesus) and the Foot Soldier (who plays Pontius Pilate) play a game of "would you rather," which is actually a fairly good laugh. Some questions are philosophical ("Would you rather be a just beggar or an unjust king?" (*Passion Play* 90)), and some quite silly ("Would you rather be a dwarf or a hermaphrodite?" (*Passion Play* 91)), so the stakes of the game remain fairly low, which allows us the comfort to laugh and enjoy the delicate flirtation between the two men. But the game is played again at the end of the second part, this time by the town outcast, Violet, and Eric, who is wearing his fresh Nazi uniform. The

“would you rathers” Violet poses to Eric in this scene are gruesome and violent (“Would you rather kill a dog or kick a baby?” (*Passion Play* 144), reflecting the painful reality that he has clearly come to put her on a train to a concentration camp. And though the audience may remember their comfort with the game Eric played with his friend and prospective lover earlier in the play, we find that, when there is a formerly good man on stage wearing a Nazi uniform, no one is laughing. The intricate tapestry of comedy, absurdity, satire and sadness that Ruhl has woven in *Passion Play* destabilizes the audience time and again, asking them to confront their own impulses for laughter and the implications for our conscience.

Like *The Clean House*, *Passion Play* leaves an open, marriage-free ending as P “sails off into the distance” alone (*Passion Play* 235). Ruhl’s is not a dramaturgy that leaves its audiences with concrete lessons, catharsis or relief. *Passion Play* transcends genre and time and space to bring to life stories of loss and love and oppression and ultimate sacrifice, all introduced by a few carpenters telling dirty jokes and closed off by “big beautiful fish puppets” (*Passion Play* 235). There is a fluidity to the comedy that Ruhl applies to her worlds, and it is seen on a grand scale indeed in this three part meditation on the power of one story to affect the stories of so many others. Using the passion play “as a lens through which to examine issues of community, leadership, and religion” (*Critical Study* 137), Ruhl applies a delicate comedy that illuminates the pain and tragedy that walks alongside it. As Regina Barreca observes, “Sex, death, and comedy all breach cultural taboos. Humor goes where others, angelic or not, fear to tread” (*Signet* xxii).

In July 2014 I spent two days in the Lincoln Center Archives watching Ruhl’s plays *The Clean House*, *Eurydice*, and *In the Next Room, or The Vibrator Play*. Among my notes after *The*

Clean House I scribbled two questions to myself: “How many comedies do you leave crying like this? How many plays that make you weep leave you feeling so good?” My own experience echoed that of *The Stamford Advocate’s* Jonathan Rougeot whose reaction to *Eurydice* was to muse, “I’ve never laughed so much at a production that I left feeling so devastated” (*Critical Study* 14). Working with so many familiar tools – jokes, stock characters, repetition – Ruhl uses comedy as a window to the tragic and tragedy as a window to the comic. Defying formulaic expectations of genre, she creates multi-layered, poetic worlds in which “It’s all funny if you let it be. Even death, the biggest joker of them all” (Heimel 148).

CHAPTER 4: SHEILA CALLAGHAN

A recent review of the world premiere of *Everything You Touch* by Sheila Callaghan gushes that “Callaghan is the theatrical poet laureate of her generation, and we are lucky to be around as she continues to make clear what a mess our species has become with such delicate grace camouflaged by her wicked, unpredictable, wonderfully dark humor” (Holder). Though her plays tend toward harsh, violent, and grotesque imagery, her use of comedy stands out in her dark, cruel worlds as a necessary element that serves not to soften, but to sharpen the blows she deals. When I asked Callaghan to describe her philosophy on comedy in her plays, however, she resisted the label for her work:

I feel ill equipped to talk about comedy because I don't feel like I'm a comedy writer - so tonally I feel like “comic” doesn't describe my work, but “funny” might. If that makes sense. In comic work the goal is to make people laugh. In funny work, I think the goal is to make people see, or see truth, you know. And if you happen to laugh at the absurdity of what's being presented to you, then I think that's what makes it humorous, at least in my work, and what I like to watch. (Interview)

Callaghan is less concerned with writing something that makes people laugh, than she is with writing something that makes people think. For Callaghan, the laughter is a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself. As with much talk about art, intention is a complex element of the definition. That is to say, despite the historical difficulty in defining “art,” the creator's intention that it be considered art remains, for me, a necessary ingredient. Whether that art is successful is a much more complex and subjective discussion, but the impetus for the expression itself is an important starting place for understanding and assessing it.⁵⁶ And if the

⁵⁶ Roland Barthes complicates the question of intent, as in his article *La mort de l'auteur* (The Death of the Author), he argues that authorial intent is ultimately unknowable: “literature is precisely the invention of this [indiscernible] voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” (2). To be honest, my father loves to talk about his college poetry class when he brought in a poet to tell the class

intention of Callaghan's work is not primarily to inspire laughs, it would make sense that readers either consciously or unconsciously tied to theories looking for such an intention might pass such plays by. In his definitions of two main comic theories – Comedy of Superiority and Comedy of Relief – Simon Critchley explains that “we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people” and “laughter is explained as a release of pent-up nervous energy (2-3). While Andrew Stott refers to laughter as “the most immediate meter of comedy's success or failure” (2). And though he admits that other stimuli may lead to laughter, such as “embarrassment, fear, guilt, tickling, or laughing gas” (2), he ignores the fact that comedy might not necessarily lead to laughter. It is in this uncertain connection between laughter and comedy that some of the alleged obscurity of Callaghan's comedy is born.

Covering topics from roadkill to rape, from attempted suicide to societally inflicted trauma, Callaghan's plays attack the injustices she sees around her, exposing them to sharp and often strange scrutiny. Over and over again she looks at expectations and challenges facing women in contemporary society. She seems to see the absurd standards of perfect beauty, femininity and family as violent attacks on women, and in her plays she attacks those standards with at least equal ferocity to that with which they are inflicted. In this chapter, I will examine her uniquely violent approach to comedy by examining her plays *That Pretty Pretty; or The Rape Play* and *Women Laughing Alone With Salad*. My intention is to bring to light her clever use of the outlandish and the ugly, illustrating the ways in which her comic voice

what he had intended – and to point out how different his intentions were from their interpretation. However, the question of the intention of the creator continues to hover over theatre in a way that it does not in painting or literature. Unlike the painting on a wall or the book on a shelf, the dramatic text is not completed until it has been interpreted by directors, designers, and actors, putting the intentions of the playwright in a tricky limbo where they can never truly be known, but will continue to be sought and negotiated with each production.

simultaneously exposes and perpetrates violations that entertain, amuse, disturb, and enlighten.⁵⁷

METHODS – Violation, Abjection, and the Grotesque

Approaching the comic in the plays of Sheila Callaghan requires a strong stomach and an appreciation for exaggeration. From an 11-year-old's attempted murder/suicide to graphic images of rape, from piles of dead animals to self-destructive battles with body image, the subject matter of Callaghan's plays has an angry, ugly, messy bent that can threaten to overpower the comic at work in her writing. *That Pretty Pretty* involves scenes of torture, rape, degradation, and murder, all of which treated with heightened rawness that can be extremely problematic for many viewers, especially those who gloss over the comic treatment each violation receives. It is no wonder that the extreme violence in Callaghan's plays is sometimes misinterpreted.⁵⁸ Regina Barreca points out that "Women's comedies have often been misread because the anger underlying the humor has disturbed the conservative conventions of comedy" (*Last Laughs* 10). However, as harsh and biting as Callaghan's plays tend to be on the surface, her use of the comic becomes even more important to understand, in order to avoid missing amidst the blood and bile and body fat her criticism of a society with its hopelessly destructive set of priorities. Theorist Matthew Bevis notes the important intersection of the body and the comic: "[The comic] pauses to wonder at the fact that we have to carry our bodies around with us, whilst also allowing us to reconceive them in new ways" (Bevis 32). But

⁵⁷ I suspect that Victor Hugo might have had a fondness for the grotesque bent of Callaghan's work, as he remarks in his preface to *Cromwell*, "In modern thought, however, the grotesque plays an important role. It is found everywhere; on the one hand, it produces the deformed and the horrible; on the other, the comic and buffoonish" (302). He goes on to note that "the beautiful has only one type; the ugly has thousands" (304). And Callaghan most definitely seeks out more than a few of those thousands!

⁵⁸ One reviewer labeled the play "a raunchy, savvy and only partly successful black comedy" (Zinoman).

Callaghan's reconceiving does not seem quite so mildly contemplative as Bevis's observation might suggest. The bodies around which Callaghan's plays revolve are sites of physical and emotional pain inflicted from without and within. This delicate line between suffering and comedy appears to have a deep connection with what has been identified by A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren of Boulder's Humor Research Laboratory (HuRL)⁵⁹ as the Benign Violation principle: "The benign-violation hypothesis suggests that anything that is threatening to one's sense of how the world 'ought to be' will be humorous as long as the threatening situation also seems benign" ("Benign Violations" 1142). According to McGraw and Warren, there are three elements that can make a violation seem benign: "(a) the presence of an alternative norm suggesting that the situation is acceptable, (b) weak commitment to the violated norm, and (c) psychological distance from the violation" ("Benign Violations" 1141). As an example of violation assuaged by acceptance of an alternate norm, McGraw and Warren pose this scenario:

Consider the scenario...in which a man rubs his bare genitals on his pet kitten. In the original scenario, the kitten 'purrs and seems to enjoy the contact'. The protagonist violates a moral norm related to bestiality by using his pet kitten as a sex toy. However, because no one is harmed – note that the kitten seems to enjoy the contact – the behavior is acceptable according to an alternative norm based on harm. Consequently, we suspect that many people will see the behavior in this scenario as a benign violation and be amused. ("Benign Violations" 1144)

The purring of the kitten – the reaction of the violated "victim" – becomes the key signifier pointing the observer toward an alternate norm, and therefore, in McGraw and Warren's terms, the possibility of comedy exists. Cat lovers may have a hard time accepting this alternate norm, but for those with less of an attachment to feline well-being, commitment to a norm

⁵⁹ And the award for world's best acronym goes to...

finding fault with rubbing a kitten against one's genitals would probably be weaker, demonstrating the second possible route to the benign. According to Benign Violation Theory, then, it seems that circumstances have most potential for comedy when a norm is acknowledged and violated, but mainly when it is one from which an audience can give itself a proper amount of distance. Mel Brooks famously explained that "Tragedy is if I cut my finger....Comedy is if you walk into an open sewer and die" (Tynan 94). McGraw's theory appears to be a more scientifically minded attempt to say exactly the same thing. Only those things that do not matter completely and directly to the audience can be fodder for comedy. That is certainly not to say that effective comedy is forbidden from dealing in unsettling or even disturbing footing, rather that, it is often up to the comedian or writer to lead the audience, leaving a clear path from the violation to the benign, where, it is hoped, laughter awaits.

For Callaghan, more often than not, the violations presented deal directly with the human body - in particular the female body. As Laura Mulvey points out, the female body is already a heavy signifier, carrying "castration threat" (833), "erotic object" (838), and any number of other chauvinistic and objectifying meanings with its every viewing. With this knowledge, Callaghan repeatedly thrusts the female body and its myriad meanings and responsibilities into the spotlight. And though her violent images are all too often misread as serious-minded and insensitive, her reflection on and violation of the female body actually does connect her comedy to a longer lineage of comic thought that revels in this lack of sensitivity. In his survey of comedy, Andrew Stott remarks that "One idea that may help us understand the place of the body in comedy is the notion of 'abjection'. This concept, developed in its most familiar things which repulse or nauseate the subject but which do not utterly belong outside

him or her" (86). Abjection – a theory credited to Bulgarian feminist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva – deals with the conflict between the intellectual, elevated self and the low, often filthy body that we are unable to escape.⁶⁰ According to Barbara Creed, Kristeva's abjection is defined "in relation to her notion of (a) the 'border' (b) the mother-child relationship and (c) the feminine body" (8). Of course, abjection is not necessarily comic. In its original conception, abjection addresses psychological traumas like those of separation from the mother and realization of the body's mortality, to name only two. And Kristeva is clear that "it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order" (*Powers of Horror* 13). This order is disturbed, in part, by the human inability to separate itself from its baser elements of constant decay and death. In his study of stand-up comedy and abjection, John Limon notes that "[t]o 'stand up' abjection is simultaneously to erect it and miss one's date with it: comedy is a way of avowing and disavowing abjection, as fetishism is a way of avowing and disavowing castration" (4-5). By putting the human body – and in particular its faults – on display for an audience to laugh at, Limon argues that stand-up comedy exists along the same borders as abjection. Wallowing in, lamenting, and celebrating the dark, ugly parts of humanity can be scary, but it can also be titillating and even hilarious.

While abjection is a fairly modern concept, Andrew Stott traces its deep roots to the "grotesque" that frolicked so freely in carnival times of the Middle Ages and beyond: "The grotesque could be described as an embodiment of the abject. A form of humorous monstrosity

⁶⁰ Kristeva's work on the abject grows in large part out of her interpretation of and departure from Freudian theory. Her theories reject subjectivity and "attend to the body and the drives, taking up the theme of loss or exile of the mother's body... the abject is described as neither inside nor outside, neither subject nor object, neither self nor other, troubling identity and order with the instability of boundaries, borders and limits" (Zakin). The relationship with the abject is, Kristeva argues, a primal and fundamental human conflict that precedes the Oedipal Complex or the development of identity. Humans are both scared of and fascinated by the abject, and it is something they confront numerous times throughout the course of a lifetime.

devised for satiric purposes, the grotesque marries the repulsive and the comic" (87). Famously identified and analyzed by Mikhail Bakhtin in the writings of Francois Rabelais, the grotesque places the horrors of the body front and center in an uncomfortable, subversive, and potentially comic reordering of the world. In his discussion of the comic grotesque at work in Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin tells us that

The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. (26)

While the intellect, manners, and beauty are, under most circumstances, the exalted parts of the human experience, in the grotesque revelry of the carnivalesque, they are overshadowed by the darker sides of humanity. While Bakhtin deals explicitly with traditions that developed around Catholic Holy Days such as Corpus Christi, the "ambivalent degradation and reversal of proper order" (Simeonova 73) that arose from such celebrations crystallized over time into a more generally applicable theory on subversion of the status quo. In "the carnivalesque, the realm of inversion and fantasy where, for a time at least, the ordinary world can be stood on its head" (Rowe 11), there is freedom to laugh. The violation of the natural order accomplished by the inversions of the Bakhtin's carnival days, for example, were permitted because they were acknowledged to be finite; when the festival is over – much to the relief of those in power – so is the domain of the grotesque. In terms of Benign Violation, this certainty that the festival inversion will end assures that any violation perpetrated during that time is – due to its impermanence – benign. But the inversion – be it historical or contemporary – may not be quite so benign. "Carnival laughter...was not an individual reaction to some 'comic' event, but the

laughter of all the people, universal in scope, and directed at all" (Isaak 16-17). Arguably, Callaghan's grotesque comedy belongs to this proud tradition that uses this kind of inversion to extend her jokes beyond individual punchlines to an expression of frustration with and rebellion against the established order.

At the intersection of the sublimity of the intellect and emotion of humanity, and all the ridiculous, base, and animalistic things that our bodies nonetheless do, there is ample fodder for comedy. In her landmark work *Powers of Horror* in which she lays out her theory of abjection, Kristeva explains, "[w]e may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it - on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (quoted in Creed 8). Combining comic readings with Kristeva's theories, abjection serves as both a basis for laughter and a *memento mori* of sorts,⁶¹ allowing us to laugh into the abyss of the inevitable death signified by our continually degrading bodies. The path I follow from Callaghan to comedy, then, begins with her portrayal of violation and abjection, following her through the mischievous grotesquerie of embodiment and exaggeration that oozes out of each of her scripts.

That Pretty Pretty, or The Rape Play

Violation abounds in Sheila Callaghan's "loopy meditation on rape culture" (Cornfield), *That Pretty Pretty; or, The Rape Play*, and in many of Callaghan's plays, a practice that brings her work into direct conversation with Benign Violation Theory. She says of her own plays that the

⁶¹ OED: "A warning or reminder of the inevitability of death, *esp.* a skull or other symbolic object. Later sometimes in weakened use: any grim, ominous, or sobering symbol."

funniest moments are “the moments that make me feel the most uncomfortable watching them” (Interview). She is well aware of the comic tension associated with violation, and she plays liberally with that violation. And in order to maintain that tension, she engages with similar playfulness the three elements of the benign – that is, presence of an alternate norm, weak commitment to the violated norm, or distance from the violation. But she is not content with an interplay where the benign undercuts violation. Instead, she repeatedly questions how benign these three elements really are, thereby redoubling that delicious discomfort that is at the center of her comedy.

That Pretty Pretty; or, The Rape Play “doesn’t so much start as explode into action” (Dattaro). It follows two almost interchangeable pairs – two men and two women – through what may be one of the more shocking evenings of depravity in contemporary theatre. Murder, multiple rapes, sexual degradation, necrophilia, and a little Jell-O wrestling are only a few of the violations perpetrated by the characters in Callaghan's pointed satire of cultural representations of gender and violence. The play begins with Agnes and Valerie luring an inebriated Rodney (whom they picked up at a pro-life political convention) to their hotel room where they whip him and themselves into a sexual frenzy before shooting him in the head and then blogging about it. The scene is replayed later as Owen and Rodney tie up, torture and finally murder Agnes - who seems to be sexually aroused throughout the whole sequence. Are Owen and Rodney emulating the women who are traveling the nation chronicling their murders of pro-life men? Are the women we see only exaggerated figments of Owen’s fevered imagination as he appropriates their story to create his own political commentary? As the depraved duos crisscross, reality and fiction collide with almost as much violence as the

characters, and just as little resolution. But it is Owen who has the last word. At the end of the play, in a Q&A session following what seems to be the premiere of the screenplay he has struggled this whole time to create, Owen comments on his the "fucked-up shit chicks go through. Rape, and babies, and stripping, and being objectified by the media" in which he "juxtapose[s] the crap in the Middle East with the war on women's bodies...It's an experiment" (*That Pretty Pretty* 47-48). This experiment ends with a physically and emotionally damaged Valerie attempting to maintain her dignity as her doctor rapes her in her hospital bed while Agnes looks on, a scene that culminates with the doctor detonating a hand grenade in her vagina – the terrible climax to Owen's magnum opus screenplay.

In a cursory examination of the events of *That Pretty Pretty*, violation proliferates while benignity seems difficult to find. The list of depravities and might make it difficult to believe that this play would be called a comedy by any standard. It is closer to Sarah Kane's "in-yer-face" *Blasted* than anything resembling a traditional comedy. But Callaghan is skillful in her manipulation of these circumstances.⁶² She begins the action with the stage direction caveat that "Something feels very fake about the whole setup...perhaps the set is too vivid, perhaps everyone is a little too enthusiastic. The acting in the following scene should be completely artificially over-the-top intense. Lots of volume" (TPP 9).⁶³ The distance that McGraw and Warren call for in their benign violation theory shows itself early. The distance is designed to keep the audience from being overwhelmed by the anger, violence, sexual deviancy and

⁶² In-yer-face is "a journalistic term for a new style of drama that emerged in 1990s Britain, when a number of young playwrights produced works that were seen as being deliberately aggressive, confrontational, and provocative" (in-yer-face). Sarah Kane was a prominent voice (albeit brief – she committed suicide in 1999) in the movement. Her play *Blasted* includes the removal and eating of an eyeball, rape, defecation and a seemingly endless barrage of other horrors.

⁶³ Hereafter, I will refer to *That Pretty Pretty*, or *The Rape Play* as TPP in citations.

general unpleasantness of the coming scene involving Agnes and Valerie's murder of Rodney – not to mention the two hours that follow. John Limon discusses a parallel experience in the stand-up comedy of Paula Poundstone and Ellen DeGeneres, claiming that they re-appropriate the standard stand-up duality of self and artificial self: "Stand-up itself has the structure of abjection insofar as comedians are not allowed to be either natural or artificial. (Are they themselves or acting? Are they in costume?)" (6).⁶⁴ Though Poundstone and DeGeneres are negotiating space between the real person and the (probably exaggerated) performed persona, and Callaghan's characters are negotiating space between a realistic and an exaggerated performance, the abject intersection of natural and artificial remains useful for my reading of Callaghan. In the case of the comedians, heightened artifice creates a degree of emotional safety for the performer from the personal traumas they may be relating in the form of jokes. The heightened artifice in *That Pretty Pretty* provides a similar relief for the audience. The prescribed falseness of the first murder scene may allow for some distance, but it also invites the observer into the abject border between real and unreal, benign and violating. Furthering the exaggerated fantasy of the world of *That Pretty Pretty*, after Agnes and Valerie kill a man, urinate on the bed and punch each other, a stage direction tells us that "An über-chipper Jane Fonda enters, dressed in leg warmers and a headband. She begins doing aerobics for us." Valerie's response – perhaps like the audience's – is a simple and relieved, "Jane Fonda...thank God" (TPP 18). After eleven pages of emotional onslaught and desecrated bodies, we are confronted with an embodiment of distance in the form of the spandex-clad symbol of

⁶⁴ One particularly visible example of the persona vs. the person is Stephen Colbert, as he presented himself on *The Colbert Report*, which played on Comedy Central from 2005-2014. He was so successful at portraying his Bill O'Reilly-esque conservative pundit, that he was invited by President George W. Bush to speak at the 2006 Press Correspondents' Dinner, where "Colbert's ironic performance stunned members of the live audience [and] delighted legions of progressives" (Greene 130).

feminine physical ideals. The Fonda of leotard and legwarmer fame, however, is not of the current moment, but more likely serves as an ideal from Owen's childhood of the perfect woman. In the face of extreme violation, Callaghan proscribes an exaggerated and unrealistic style, and introduces the 1980s superwoman. On the surface, this looks like a fairly straightforward adherence to McGraw and Warren's idea of distance, in that she goes out of her way to place the play – and therefore its horrifying acts – outside the realm of reality where it could, theoretically, become dangerous. But as the action continues, the benign becomes the violation, largely through her use of the two other vehicles of the benign: an alternate norm and weak adherence to a norm. And as she maneuvers these supposed safety nets, she leaves the audience laughing, but not necessarily safe from the source of that laughter.

Harkening back to the purring kitten rubbed against a man's genitals in the discussion of benign violation, Callaghan similarly engages sexual morality, but goes much further in her violation, making the journey back to benign a tricky one. The first time through the hotel scene, Agnes and Valerie lure a drunken Rodney back to their room to murder him and post their exploits online. He enjoys himself with them sexually until they shoot him in the head. The second time through the hotel scene, Rodney and Owen lure a drunken Agnes back to their room, but before they murder her, they put her through an increasingly violent succession of acts. In each iteration, the lines spoken by the characters are almost the same. It is the carefully laid-out stage directions that distinguish the difference between the two encounters. In the men's scene, in place of the more traditional seduction carried out by the women, "Rodney grabs Agnes by the hair. She does not react" (TPP 20). But things progress rapidly: "Rodney shoves Agnes onto the bed and presses his knee into her back, still holding her hair. He begins

to tear off her clothes. She does not react. As a matter of fact, it seems to have a calming, pleasant effect on her" (TPP 20). This pleasant effect suggests McGraw and Warren's "alternate norm," providing, through Agnes's delight, a sense that there is a morality in which assaulting a drunk woman, if not entirely acceptable, is at least neutral. The "she wanted it" refrain of rape culture rings beneath the interaction, lulling the audience into the familiar fallacy of acceptance. The kitten has begun to purr, as it were. But the violation does not end there: "Rodney begins to tie Agnes up in the style of Abu Ghraib: he places a pillowcase over her head and attaches electric wires to her hands...He shocks her five times. Each time, she lets out a shout of delight" (TPP 21). Now the horror and the neutrality give way to "delight." The poor, abused kitten is purring in earnest now – and the audience is shocked. Benign violation would tell us that this alternate norm gives us permission to laugh, but the laugh is caught in the audience's throats as they remember that there are, in fact, circumstances under which we are told to accept such behavior. The all-too-familiar images of US soldiers torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison flooded the media and inspired necessary, and often horrifying, discussions about where the line of human decency is drawn in regards to prisoners of war. Callaghan's explicit stage directions revive that discussion on stage in front of us, placing this featured historical moment of dehumanization in the context of systematic dehumanization of women. It is important to note, in the face of these horrors, that the level of violation Callaghan explores is not by any means outside the contemporary frame of reference. The films of Quentin Tarantino and the Coen Brothers, for example, deal heavily in this kind of brutality:

Nihilistic comedy has no limits on the targets of its humor; it turns the most atrocious of human acts – rape and beating in *Cape Fear*, cannibalism in *The Silence of the Lambs*...and maiming in *Reservoir Dogs* – into quasi-comic expressions of exuberant amoral energy. (Hibbs 140)

But unlike the live theatre, the movie theatre provides built in distance in the form of a screen and a pre-recorded performance. However horrifying the images may be on screen, the audience is not sharing a space with the people perpetrating them. Callaghan chooses the live theatre for her admittedly filmic dramaturgy in order to hold the audience more completely in time and space with the events unfolding before them.⁶⁵ The specificity of the Abu Ghraib image mentioned above, for instance, is a far more evocative image of the inhumane treatment of women and foreigners, not to mention society's acceptance of violence in general, than is Owen's heavy handed screenplay within Callaghan's play (the one that culminates with rape, grenades, and a self-congratulatory talk-back). Owen even takes the time to explain that his is not benign: "Some people just don't have the stomach for social commentary [...] Well fuck 'em [...] I'm not the man with the lullaby, my friends. I'm the man with the MACHETE" (TPP 21). But this admission is a comic reflection on violation – if he has to tell us how very much he is violating us, how seriously can we really take him? The circle of benign and violating spirals around and around on itself throughout the play, to a point where the audience can hardly be sure if they're laughing out of amusement, or sheer disorientation.

If there is a main narrative arc in the hotel scenes, wedged in between is a strange banquet in which the four main characters sit down for a proper dinner – albeit a dinner at which Owen sports a fresh gunshot wound to the head, the women are not allowed to eat, drink or fidget, and which eventually devolves into a brutal Jell-O wrestling match. Callaghan's

⁶⁵ When I say that Callaghan's dramaturgy is filmic, I am referring not only to the heights of violence, which are much easier to achieve on film with time to hide the tricks while building the perfect shot, but also the way in which time and space behave in her plays. Location and time are fluid in her plays; scenes leap from place to place and moment to moment without more conventional "scene changes" to denote the linear passage of time. In her play *Roadkill Confidential*, she even goes so far as to use the film term "Jump cut" to describe the way she moves from scene to scene.

direction this time tells us, “Tonally, this should resemble a British drawing room comedy – stiff and strange” (TPP 26). And, of course, our mistress of emotional distance – Jane Fonda – is on hand as the server. The majority of the dinner is taken up by Owen regaling the table with what he proclaims is “A FUNNY STORY!” that is both “comical” and “completely true” (TPP 28). In this story, he and a group of soldier buddies corner a native tribe (the members of whom they call “poop flingers” in a cave and set them all – men women and children – on fire. He details the clever trap, the flame throwers, and the chaos as bodies on fire came screaming in agony out of the cave:

So when the poop-flinger came at us we torched him. But he was still running. And so we torched him again, and he kept running. He ran around in a little circle. And he was on fire. And his skin was melting off him. And there were screams, but they weren’t his. They also came running out. They were on fire too. They were much smaller than the first poop-flinger. Half his size. And one really small one. (TPP 29)

The story of this genocide is told as a charming dinner-time anecdote, but Owen assumes the violation is benign because of the alternate norm that tells us these foreign “poop-flingers” are not human, and therefore not subjects for pity. Like the Abu Ghraib torture in the hotel scene, Callaghan again puts the patriarchal/military mindset at the center of dehumanization. If there is any concern for the norm that says not to treat humans this way, this dinner party’s – and this society’s – observance of that norm has often proved to be exceedingly weak. This violence-justifying logic mirrors Agnes and Valerie’s opinion of anti-abortion crusaders and Owen and Rodney’s opinion of women in the previous hotel scenes – if they’re less than human, the violation is necessarily benign. But as the women applaud and praise Owen for his “funny little stories” (TPP 30), the audience is left to question their own relationship to the norms addressed: is the alternate norm acceptable? Callaghan does not leave the audience

much time to ponder, as Jane Fonda and the female characters clear and upend the table. Valerie and Agnes proceed to strip to their underwear, then “they each do a line of coke off the other’s ass” (TPP 30), and, once Jane returns with the Jell-O, they begin a battle royal for the amusement of the men.

Once the battle is finished, Jane Fonda confronts Owen, asking, “Why are you doing this?” (TPP 31). Owen has no answer, but instead begins punching himself. In the most literal example of distancing in the play, each blow is felt not by Owen, but by Jane. He punishes her for his own faults. With each punch he deals to himself, Jane reacts physically, as if she were struck. The violation he perpetrates against himself is made benign by the distance, but for Jane, there is no distance.

Callaghan does not stop at confronting the audience with our acceptance of a troubling alternate norm. She goes further to point out – as McGraw and Warren would call for in a well-behaved example of benign violation – that our interest in preserving the societal norms of peace, respect, and overall non-deviance turns out to be unsettlingly weak. She uses the guise of the benign as commentary, implicating the audience as vicious voyeurs. She whips up laughter, and then whips the legs out from under it. She says:

So I guess my humor is an effort to make people see, and engage people and not have them be bored. Or at least, like, you know, it’s a good way of being political too, right? Like, you get a little bit of aesthetic distance from something so you’re more able to talk about, ‘cause people don’t want to be taught how to think they want to find their own way there – and if they’re caught off guard, it’s a way of disarming them so they can be more receptive to anything, to a different point of view, something they’re not used to.
(Interview)

Distance, like that discussed in McGraw’s benign violation theory, turns out to be a conscientious element of Callaghan’s comedy. The distance referred to in Benign Violation

theory acts in a similar way to the distance encouraged by Bertolt Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* (Alienation Effect), but to different ends. For Brecht, the desired emotional distance is intended "to transform [the audience] from general passive acceptance to a corresponding state of suspicious inquiry he would need to develop that detached eye with which the great Galileo observed a swinging chandelier" (Willett 192). Brecht's distance prevents the audience from getting mired in emotion and sentiment in order to become serious critics of the social ills represented onstage. McGraw's distance, on the other hand, prevents the audience from getting mired in emotion over the perceived violation with the goal of allowing them not to take it too seriously. Callaghan, on the other hand, seems to use both modes in tandem. She does not merely allow the distance to make the plays more emotionally palatable for her audiences. She carefully navigates the narrow space between benign and violation, leading her characters and her audience members along with her. She may well use McGraw's comic distance to lure them into a false sense of security before forcing them to – in a more Brechtian sense – confront the issue at hand. But she does not want to brutalize her audiences either:

Well, I mean I've been in theatre that feels brutal for the sake of being brutal and I like that just fine, but I also think unless it's done really delicately, it runs the risk of brutalizing without effect, you know. People just feel like what was the point of that. I feel terrible, what am I learning? Why have I put myself through this, just to feel like shit? What are you telling me about the world, right? I feel like if you put humor, if you lace humor throughout that kind of brutality, you're pulling people out enough so they don't have to ask those questions, you're giving them a tiny little bit of perspective, tiny little bit of relief um so that they're able to answer that question why am I being put through this – or ask the right questions. Because you never want to have an audience – I don't ever want to have an audience walk out saying what the fuck was that about. I want them to feel like that raised a lot of questions, and I'm interested in what it means. But not like that was pointless, why did you hurt me?" (Interview)

In *That Pretty Pretty*, the pairing of violence and comedy is an intentional and integral tool as she puts violation on display, making the gruesome spectacle – and those in society who are

too able to accept it – a subject of mockery.⁶⁶ “This is a show that forces you to see things you don’t want to see, and think things you don’t want to think, wrapped up in a darkly comedic and unrelentingly graphic package” (Dattaro). The idea that these acts of degradation could ever be made benign is, in my opinion, the real violation that Callaghan is satirizing.

Women Laughing Alone With Salad

In 2012, Sheila Callaghan was commissioned to write a play as part of the University of Maryland Baltimore County’s “Grrl Parts” play festival. Based on a popular internet meme of the same name,⁶⁷ *Women Laughing Alone With Salad* was then commissioned into a full length script, which, at the time of this writing, has still not formally premiered. *Women Laughing Alone With Salad* presents three women – one young and thin, one slightly less young and less thin, and one in her fifties (whose size is not explicitly mentioned) – as they navigate unattainable standards of physical beauty, men’s expectations, and women’s expectations of themselves and each other. The one man in the show is a character named (appropriately) Guy, and to the women, he is a lover, a potential lover, and a son, respectively. The play moves at a manic pace between a series of alternate realities wherein the women are able to take power into their own hands, and the present, wherein the women’s only control seems to come from eating salad. As each woman deals with her relationship to Guy, their self-denigration spirals out of control into a veritable orgy of hyper-sexualization, violence, and lettuce.

⁶⁶ Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty displayed a similar intersection of violation and laughter in the service of providing insight: “Humor as destruction can serve to reconcile the corrosive nature of laughter to the habits of reason” (91).

⁶⁷ Women Laughing Alone with Salad: “A blog devoted to the bizarre stock photo trend of women looking WAY too happy to be eating salad, sometimes literally in the middle of cracking up laughing at their hilarious greens, while alone.” The original post that sparked the tumblr blog came from thehairpin.com in 2011.

Sheila Callaghan's extravagant meditation on false or misguided body image draws directly on the abject female body, and its implications for authentic identity, as a source of comedy. "In abjection, subjects confront what they must exclude or expel in order to maintain identity, that is, they confront their own dependency, mortality, finitude, and materiality" (Zakin). Whether expelling the literal mother, the maternal always dormant in the feminine biology, or hegemonic expectations imposed on the female body, Callaghan's characters inhabit a complex world of abjection and identity. John Limon claims that, "When you feel abject, you feel as if there were something miring your life, some skin that cannot be sloughed, some role (because 'abject' always, in a way, describes how you *act*) that has become your only character. Abjection is self-typecasting" (4). It is just this sort of self-typecasting that Callaghan is playing with. *Salad* focuses on the extremes of self-loathing and even self-torture to which many women subject themselves in the name of perceived physical beauty (or perceived lack thereof), providing three women who have been typecast or have typecast themselves as the "skinny bitch" (Tori), the "chubby slutty girl" (Meredith), and the "woman past her prime" (Sandy). For all of them, sex and food are their primary means of engaging with the world. The pathway to becoming the "paragons of beauty" that hegemonic ideals expect them to be can only be followed by their physical, abject bodies – however inauthentic they may be.

First, I will address Callaghan's treatment of eating. As one point of differentiation between comedy and tragedy, theorist Henri Bergson notes that, "the hero in a tragedy does not eat or drink or warm himself. He does not even sit down any more than can be helped. To sit down in the middle of a fine speech would imply that you remembered you had a body" (94). Comedy, according to Bergson, lives in the body and its appetites – ingredients that are

too undignified to burden the highborn characters at the center of historical tragedies. But in Callaghan's world, both tragedy and comedy arise from society's complete inability to ignore any woman's body. As Susan Bordo prominently stated in her treatise on the place of the female body in Western culture,

Viewed historically, the discipline and normalization of the female body – perhaps the only gender oppression that exercises itself, although to different degrees and in different forms, across age, race, class, and sexual orientation – has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control. (166)

The opening of the play discovers the three women, in the manner of the meme for which they were named, sitting in a park with salad and laughing. "They eat their salad like it's the most delicious and hilarious thing ever [...] It goes on for a full three minutes. Seriously. Maybe longer" (*Salad 2*). For these women, salad not only sustains them literally, it consumes them psychologically. Meredith explains:

Ever hear that quote about the typical French woman, how she sees herself as beautiful despite her physical flaws, because she's worth the effort of eating well and taking care of herself? She *deserves* to be slim and healthy? More than she deserves that piece of cake? When I eat salad I feel like I'm a French woman loving the fuck out of myself. (*Salad 5*)

Callaghan paints a grotesque caricature of hegemonic societal pressures as she repeatedly sexualizes the salad that is repeatedly shoved down the individual and collective female gullet. In this sense, Callaghan's comedy confirms Stott's assertion that "[t]he grotesque is a form of exaggerated and ambivalent social commentary produced by the violent clash of opposites, especially those that are comic and terrifying, existing in a state of unresolved tension" (Stott 87). Throughout the play, salad haunts, comforts, arouses, and even attacks the women as they attempt to live in their bodies. When Meredith discovers that she was not being "checked out" because she was "hot," but merely because her dress was ripped, "[t]he Bartender hands her a

giant bowl of salad" (*Salad* 13-14) – her only solace when her grotesque body has betrayed her. After Tori indulges Guy's fantasy about all the breakfast foods she might order (but ultimately would never eat), the other women "march in, carrying giant bowls of salad. They pelt her with lettuce, covering her body, burying her with it" (*Salad* 26). When she has the audacity to display her base human appetite, salad becomes a weapon for shame and suppression. Guy notes his disgust when his mother Sandy – apparently a former women's rights activist and self-proclaimed independent woman – places her order for a salad: "Fucking salad. For a bra-burner" (*Salad* 32). Though Sandy makes no reference to herself as having been a crusader, Guy sees her as just another female disappointment, succumbing to the weakness that salad represents. When Guy brings Meredith home to make Tori jealous - hoping that this "fat" woman might be immune to the absurd societal pressures to which his bulimic girlfriend is subject - Tori calmly hands her salad, which she begins to eat and rhapsodize about with gusto: "I LOVE SALAD. Sometimes when I eat salad I'm like, *fuck yeah*. I can feel the lettuce leaves sweeping all the toxins straight into my colon" (*Salad* 60). She details the biological experience of eating as it relates to excretion - following the process of abject eating from start to finish. The influence of salad on these women comes to a head when, after arguing over Guy and their respective places in the world, Tori and Meredith are caught in a downpour of lettuce:

three tons of lettuce drops from the sky, landing with an enormous, terrifying THUD on the ground and the women [...] Tori and Meredith turn into animals. They attack each other mercilously [sic] with salad, forcing one another to eat. It is a vicious battle. Goes on for a while. Finally, they both suffocate on the salad and die. (*Salad* 62)

Salad turns out to be a weapon against each other as well as against themselves, and it destroys them even more than they claimed it could sustain them. "Our contemporary aesthetic ideal for women, an ideal whose obsessive pursuit has become the central torment of many

women's lives" (Bordo 167), most certainly torments these characters, and their allegiance to that ideal leads them to torment themselves and each other. Callaghan parallels the real, dangerous weapon of hegemonic body expectations with salad, giving this seemingly harmless leaf of lettuce all the force of an avalanche. And though the ways in which these women relate to lettuce – whether it be with ravenous desire or all-encompassing shame – are clearly violations of their authentic bodies and self-esteem, they remain comic exaggerations. But the effect this leafy green has on Callaghan's women is all too real, again exposing the serious origins of the seemingly benign silliness.

In *Salad*, the other abject appetite that must be satiated is that for sex. From Meredith's first moment of dialogue, she is concerned with her sexual attractiveness as she congratulates herself for winning a man's attention in a dance club: "Ha! He's looking at me again" (*Salad* 3). She goes on to catalog all of her physical selling points, from "six years of jazz, two of tap, two months of ballet" to "I bet I remind you of your mom a little. Meat on her bones. I can smother you with my maternal bosom" (*Salad* 3). As if out of a Freudian textbook, the sexual and the maternal and the deadly are inexorably connected by their dirty little apron strings. When Guy approaches Meredith in the bar, their graphic sexual talk progresses quickly, to the point that he is propositioning her within the first few minutes. He talks explicitly about how and where he would violate her abject body, and just as the talk is about to reach a near-orgasmic climax, Meredith stops him: "Later. I need to yank you out of time first" (*Salad* 8). Suddenly, they are in 1920s Paris, where Meredith feels safe, at ease, and in control. It is, she claims "a time when the feminine ideal was robust and autonomous" (*Salad* 12), which she would very much like to be. She provides herself distance from the abjection that was threatening to engulf her, and

places herself in control of the violation when, in a few minutes, she asks Guy if his girlfriend is "so skinny I could shove her entire body up my ass without any lube" (*Salad* 11). But when she is catapulted back into the real world, it turns out that the Paris fantasy was not the only imaginary element to her flirtation, as Guy tells her "I was just watching your ass. Like every other guy here...You have a rip in the back of your dress. Right at the crack" (*Salad* 13).

Significantly, Bakhtin writes about the grotesque preoccupation with the body's orifices:

The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. (26)

In true grotesque manner, then, in the two interactions cited above, Meredith's abject body and its appetites are represented by her buttocks. And as both a reward and punishment for those appetites, her buttocks lead her both to sexual pleasure and humiliation.

As the elder woman in the play, as well as the mother of the only male character (Guy), Sandy teeters on the brink of complete insignificance in a hegemonic world obsessed with youth and beauty.⁶⁸ According to Emily Zakin, Kristeva argues that "the maternal body is a privileged site of abjection, as it is that which must be excluded in order for individuation and separation to take place, so that one can distinguish self from other." With Sandy, Callaghan gives us a mother – without whom life is not possible – who remains well beyond her life-giving usefulness as a constant reminder of the impermanence of life. She is the giver of life, whose

⁶⁸ Though it may be coincidental, I cannot help but note the repetition here of the mother's name in Tina Howe's *Birth and Afterbirth*. In that play, Sandy is the quintessential mother, defined entirely by her relationship to her husband and son, and the tragic realization that she is no longer able to conceive. Having lost this key element of womanhood, she seems to be falling apart throughout the course of the play, with sand falling from her hair and teeth falling out. Callaghan's Sandy seems to have a lot in common with Howe's, though Callaghan's is farther down the road of deterioration.

aging body is marching unavoidably toward the end of life before our eyes. In her discussion of Kristeva's abjection as it pertains to the horror genre, Barbara Creed notes that "[a]lthough the subject must exclude the abject, the abject must, nevertheless, be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life" (9). The monstrous feminine that devours and destroys in horror films becomes the butt of the joke in the hegemonic society Callaghan's play seeks to critique.⁶⁹ Having already expelled the child (or been expelled by the child – her ungrateful son Guy), Sandy's body attempts to expel her uterus as well when, at several points, "something wet, fleshy, blob-like and glistening with blood drops from between her legs and lands on the floor with a splat" (*Salad* 26). If Meredith felt she benefitted from the intersection of the sexual and maternal, Sandy finds that they have both abandoned her. Her uselessness as either a mother or a sexual being is comically highlighted when the essential feminine organ attempts to abandon this sinking ship. In a moment of fantasy flashback, Sandy imagines herself as a new mother, inhaling cake and being admired by her husband for her "extra weight" and her "big breasts leaking milk and [her] gut all floppy like a freezer bag" (*Salad* 41). She revels in the moment when the grotesque body of discharge and misplaced fat had a purpose. Now, every part of her has become increasingly unnecessary, as she has become the abject that must be discarded by her son, her husband, and, assumedly, all men. If Bakhtin is correct in his contention that the grotesque involves "the body in the act of becoming" (317), we observe Sandy's body in the act of becoming irrelevant. But Sandy is not one to go without a fight, as we see in the description of her new beauty treatment intended "to take years off your

⁶⁹ *Alien* is a classic example of the monstrous feminine, which Creed points out includes numerous images of the primal conception moment, birth, and abjection. See her excellent work *The Monstrous Feminine* for a more detailed account.

hands. They say hands are the true marker of a woman's age, you know" (*Salad* 30). This "nutty Mediterranean treatment," it turns out, involves keeping her hands in a bucket full of small animals intended to "eat all the dead skin off your hands and then some" (*Salad* 31). In this case, the "and then some" takes her hands down to stumps, though she is certain they will not be missed. The lengths to which she goes to counter or at least postpone this becoming-irrelevant extend the grotesque into a pitiful, but comic portrait of the abjection and inevitability of the aging body.⁷⁰

Half way through Act One, Callaghan departs from the characters she has established so far and inserts a scene that occurs in a sort of fantasy moment outside of time and action of the play. In this scene, the actors no longer play their characters, but "three anonymous women" in a restaurant (27). Each in turn receives a red pepper, a yellow pepper, and an onion. The women caress the vegetables seductively while Guy describes each one in sensual detail. They proceed to eat these vegetables while Guy provides a smooth-jazz underscoring, hyper-sexualizing the perceived indulgence of a vegetable (which is, unsurprisingly, regurgitated by one of the women). Callaghan identifies this scene as one of her favorite comic moments in the play, but she also admits:

I don't actually laugh when I watch this, I'm just like AAAAAHHHH!!! 'Cause, like it feels just so on the nose, it digs really hard into something. Like it goes into the hellmouth of this experience, and like way too deep than you really ever want to be and it's super awkward, um, and I like that, I like that feeling, being too deep. (Interview)

Too often, comedy is dismissed as light entertainment, something that skips along the surface of life, providing "escape from the troubles of the world." We laugh, according to some

⁷⁰ Sandy is part of a long tradition of women who fear the loss of their femininity and vitality as they age. Arkadina in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* is one prominent canonical figure who shares this struggle.

theorists, when our expectations are “lightly offended” (*Linguistic* 40). But such light offense, such benign violation is too insubstantial for the work Callaghan sets out to make. For her, “Humor laughs out loud, makes noise, and by so doing, makes trouble about issues rarely spoken of in polite conversation” (*Signet* xxvi). The comedy in *Women Laughing Alone with Salad* – and many of her other plays as well – is not an escape, but a vivid, boisterous critique of the unfair hegemonic expectations and resultant extremes of behavior that surround us. Her plays “[display] her peculiar speech and restless exploration of nether crannies of inner experience that illuminate the common quandaries of relating to an often baffling modern world” (Meisel). The hegemonic expectations of feminine beauty and maternal usefulness that she lampoons in *Salad* run deep, and so must her comedy if it is to be an effective means of exposing them. Plunging into the abject depths of appetite – for both food and sex – Callaghan reaches into some of the darkest elements of humanity, and empowers her characters and her audiences to confront their own unconscious cravings, judgments, and pardons. This writing is part of a lineage of “dangerous” comedy by women, labeled by Judy Little as “dangerous because the comic context is a liminal one in which inversions are not turned upright again; instead, the distorted quests or bizarre festivities persist in the transition phase and are not resolved” and this “radical freeplay...allows comedy to live up to the very best of its bad reputation” (Little 21).

CHAPTER 5: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF ONE DIRECTOR'S APPROACH TO *DEAD MAN'S CELL PHONE*

I was sitting in the back right corner of the house a couple nights before tech for my production of *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, watching our run from a new angle. An emeritus professor at Southwest Minnesota State University, whom I had just met that night, shuffled over to sit beside me. Placing half a bag of his trademark Dove chocolates on my notebook, he leaned over and asked, "Have you seen this play before?" I smiled and responded that, yes, I had just directed a production a few months ago back at Wayne State – his alma mater as well, it turns out. He paused for a moment and asked, "Is it funny?" In that one sentence, he put his



Figure 1 - Jennifer Goff in conversation with Professor William Hezlep in the Fine Arts Theatre at SMSU⁷¹

finger on the question that had plagued me from the very beginning. I told him that yes, actually, it was funny. He chuckled, "You've played it in front of an audience? And they laughed?" Yes, quite a lot, and at quite a lot of things. "You know, I think I just don't get it. Maybe I'm too old." I laughed and confessed that it had taken me a long time to find the

⁷¹ All photos in this chapter are from the author's collection unless otherwise noted.

comedy myself, and that even when we did begin to find the play funny, we weren't really sure that the audience would agree with us. Once we put the show in front of an audience, we were often surprised by the moments that they did and did not find funny.

Dead Man's Cell Phone is not a laugh-riot to read. It is a little off-kilter on first impression. Ruhl did not write with the familiar cadence of setup and punchline that usually telegraphs to audience and artists alike how the comedy is to be delivered and received. It is a play about death and loneliness and lies and illegal organ trafficking. It is a play that does not assume that things will just work out for the best. It is a play that does not deliver a concrete message or moral comeuppance. There is something unsettling about the world of this play and the questions it poses: What is good? What is right? Is there such a thing as good and right? Do bad people deserve love? Whose responsibility is it to decide? ... Is there an app for that?

Estelle Barrett, discussing the function of arts-based inquiry, explains that “[l]earning takes place through action and intentional, explicit reflection on that action” in a process that “acknowledges that we cannot separate knowledge to be learned from situations in which it is used” (5). Indeed, staging Ruhl’s script brought her comedy to light in ways that I hadn’t fully anticipated in my readings alone. *Dead Man's Cell Phone* meanders slyly through a strange universe that takes no norm for granted, leaving us with the formidable task of discovering the rules and comic sign posts alongside our audiences.

With its first production in 2007, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* was being written just before the launch of the Apple iPhone, which changed (arguably extremely and permanently) the way that human beings interact with technology and each other:

The iPhone unlocked a reality in which we can potentially have anything we want, anytime and anywhere. And as a result, everything has changed—from how people interact socially to how students learn in classrooms, and from how we do our jobs to how companies make products. (Chen 11)

James Al-Shamma points out the inherent duality of Ruhl's central device: "The cell phone both connects and isolates...it closes distances of thousands of miles while virtually removing the user from his or her immediate environs" (*Critical Study* 86). Even before the cell phone made its giant leap into all the things it is to us today, Ruhl was noodling with the ramifications of constant connection and disconnection. In her strange little fairy tale about a well-meaning woman's cell-phone-aided self-discovery, Ruhl explores the intersection of human and machine, misguided dreams and authentic reality, lobster bisque and lentil soup.

The plot of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* begins with a deceptively simple and recognizable moment: an incessantly ringing cell phone. But from there, the journey of the protagonist, Jean, is anything but simple.⁷² A quiet woman with "an insular quality" (*Dead Man* 11), Jean is enjoying a bowl of lobster bisque at a local coffee shop when she approaches the man at the next table whose cell phone won't stop ringing. When she discovers that Gordon is not answering his phone because he is dead, she decides to take responsibility for his phone, answering calls that embroil her in his family, his job, his affairs, and all the complications that come with them. While attempting to comfort his lover (The Other Woman – who we learn in passing is named Carlotta), his mother (Mrs. Gottlieb), his widow (Hermia) and his brother (Dwight), she falls in love with each brother in turn, gets caught up in the international intrigue

⁷² Ruhl seems to be placing Jean in a common comic situation; that of the fish out of water: "I'm fascinated by people who are deposited into strange landscapes. Theater can explore displacement so well because the audience itself has been brought into an unfamiliar landscape" (Ruhl quoted by Weckwerth 34). And Ruhl has no problem allowing her interpreters and viewers to be a little out of water as well.

of Gordon's involvement with illegal trafficking in human organs, and even spends a brief interlude with Gordon in the afterlife. Finally, in a strange *deus ex machina*, everyone ends up just where they should be – Jean with Dwight instead of Gordon, Gordon with his mother instead of one of his women, Mrs. Gottlieb with Gordon instead of in perpetual mourning, Hermia back in the ice follies instead of as the dutiful wife, and Gordon's mistress running his old company instead of living in Gordon's shadow – because, as Gordon tells us, “there are no errors in the afterlife” (*Dead Man* 53). In what seems like only a moment, the misguided dreams that each character has clung to for the entire show fall away in favor of what authentically completes each of them.

In this chapter, I put my script analysis alongside the discoveries made in preparation, rehearsal and performance for two separate productions of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* – one in October 2013 at Wayne State University (WSU), and the other in February 2014 at Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU). This combination of text work and praxis sheds light on the ways in which Ruhl's comic devices come to life in performance. My approach is in line with guidelines set by Robin Nelson, in that “The practice, whatever it may be, is at the heart of the methodology of the project and is presented as substantial evidence of new insights” (26). I discuss the productions in conversation with each other, rather than one at a time, in order to highlight the room that Ruhl leaves for interpretation by individual productions. To connect my in-depth textual analysis to the performances, I root my discussion in three main production experiences. First, I examine our use of properties in rehearsal and performance. Second, I explore my introduction of two silent chorus characters to both of my productions. Third, I explore analysis and elements of genre. Throughout these sections, I incorporate descriptive

passages detailing my use of active analysis etude work in the rehearsals. These passages are intended to illustrate one director's approach to filling in the questions left by the playwright in her characteristically open-ended dramaturgy.

THE ASSIGNMENT

The Wayne State University "director-scholar" PhD program was conceived in large part by Dr. James Thomas, whose belief is that advanced theatre scholars should be at least as knowledgeable about producing theatre as they are writing about it.⁷³ This focus on creative work is an element that, as I discovered in my own search for a program, is all too rare. In addition to required coursework in literature, history, and theory and criticism, the Wayne State curriculum is organized around the direction of a series of plays which have been studied using the formalist analysis that Dr. Thomas lays out in his book *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers*, now in its fifth edition. For each of three years, PhD students are expected to direct a play in the university's studio theatre with the support of undergraduate actors and designers, using the method of analysis put forward in Dr. Thomas's book as our foundation. Our first two years are dedicated to scripts that adhere primarily to guidelines associated with psychological realism. In the third year, we are encouraged to step out of that comfort zone into more nontraditional literature. The process involves weekly meetings with Dr. Thomas in which we reflect on discoveries made in analysis and rehearsal, and culminates in the production of "the book" – a 4-inch binder containing all elements of script work, rehearsal

⁷³ The PhD program in theatre was initiated at WSU in 1962 as a division of the Speech department. The theatre department officially launched its dedicated PhD in 1986, and it took its current form in 1994 when James Thomas took over as Graduate Director. Due to infrastructural restrictions and years of budget cutbacks, the PhD program was, unfortunately, discontinued in 2014.

records, design discussions, production stills, and more. The centerpiece of this book is our formalist analysis, in which we investigate the questions raised in Dr. Thomas's book, chapter by chapter. We lay out the dramatic structure one event at a time, describe the given circumstances and background story in depth, identify internal and external actions laced into the script, break down each character's trajectory, examine the playwright's diction,⁷⁴ and identify the tempo, rhythm, mood, and style of the play. The analytical exercise at the center of Dr. Thomas's instruction is his way of teaching his directing students to interrogate and understand the playwright's world. In addition, my study at Wayne State had the exciting extra bonus of my being asked to participate in our Month in Moscow program at the Moscow Art Theatre (helmed by Dr. Thomas) a record four times (thrice as a student coordinator), which encouraged me to incorporate Russian rehearsal techniques under Dr. Thomas's guidance as well.⁷⁵

In my fourth year of graduate study, I was finished with coursework and had completed the requisite three directing assignments. I had been set to direct *Dead Man's Cell Phone* the previous year, but that took a back burner when I was extended the opportunity to direct on WSU's 1200-seat main stage. Since I was on a fellowship and still in town, I was invited to direct a fourth time, allowing me the opportunity to finally take on Sarah Ruhl. Though I was in my fourth year, and the production wasn't required by the curriculum, Dr. Thomas continued to oversee my process, and I did still end up creating "the book" for my own records. During my

⁷⁴ Diction refers to "the technical and artistic qualities of language, and the selection and arrangement of words, phrases, sentences, lines, and speeches" (Thomas 234).

⁷⁵ Dr. Thomas has studied in Moscow since 1991, working with artists at the Moscow Art Theatre and beyond to shape his own approach to a text. His script analysis book builds on a focused version of Russian Formalist analysis called Action Analysis, which is "a reduced type of formalist analysis based primarily on the events in the plot" (Thomas 1). The directing techniques through which he guides us incorporates some of Stanislavski's later work – Active Analysis – which is a more hands-on extension of the Action Analysis laid out in the book.

first week of rehearsal for *Dead Man's Cell Phone* at Wayne State, I was met with an unexpected turn of events when I was hired by Southwest Minnesota State University as a



Figure 2 - Complete production binder with rehearsal script on top

guest director for the same play, already on the schedule in their winter semester. In this setting, I was no longer the student, but the professional, the teacher. I have directed without Dr. Thomas's support numerous times before, but after four years of fairly close scrutiny, it was a good experience to be flying solo again. Working with one faculty designer and a handful of student designers, my status as guest artist gave me a level of authority at SMSU that I hadn't had in a setting where I was a student as well.

Though both productions were educational, undergraduate productions, there were several substantial differences between the two experiences from a logistical standpoint. WSU has a student body of nearly 30,000... double the size of the town in which SMSU is located: Marshall, MN.⁷⁶ WSU is in the heart of midtown Detroit, whereas the 3,500 student SMSU is more than two hours from the nearest urban center: Sioux Falls, SD. WSU's department boasts

⁷⁶ Marshall, MN – Population 13, 446.

over 100 theatre undergraduates – following both a BA and BFA track – and produces about fifteen plays in three theatres each year, while SMSU’s department – which offers a BA – is quite a bit smaller and puts on three to five shows in two theatres each year. The WSU environment is substantially more hectic and competitive than SMSU. Also, WSU students all have some relationship to Russian theatre practices, whether or not they themselves have participated in the Month in Moscow program, while the students at SMSU were completely new to the tools that I was employing with them.⁷⁷ And, of course, at WSU I was casting from a pool of students I knew well, while at SMSU, I was casting students with whom I had had about 5-10 minutes of interaction in between power outages on two cold evenings in December.

By the time performances arrived for both productions, the cast and designers and I had dealt with challenges and confusion. We had made discoveries. We had rolled around inside Ruhl’s story and we felt certain of the world we created and the tale that would unfold within it, but we were uncertain of how that world and that tale would be received - especially considering the reactions of some of the people in the department who had only read it, rather than spending several weeks with it in rehearsal. Still, even in the face of all of our doubts, in Midtown and Marshall alike, the laughs came. But they came more unpredictably than in any other show I can remember working on.

ANALYSIS AND REHEARSAL

The scripts Ruhl delivers to those who would produce them are intentionally unfinished in a sense, as she notes (in an interview with Polly Carl) that “I always find plays beautiful that

⁷⁷ Wayne State University has a 13-year relationship with the Moscow Art Theatre. Each June, we bring a group of acting students (and occasionally design students) to study acting, movement, ballet, singing, and history with master teachers there. This program is led by Dr. James Thomas, and I have personally participated in it four times.

have a little bit of that sense of the unfinished, and then the audience – or the designer, or the director, or the actors – fills in the empty space.”⁷⁸ Similarly, in the notes before her adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, Ruhl tells her readers/collaborators: “I have seen this play designed many ways; on a plot of grass with a small golden replica of Knoles; on something of a dangerous playground on an open space with costume racks. The design is left purposely open” (*Orlando* 135). In this sense, Ruhl’s work is very much a product of her postmodern circumstances, as “no narrative can be a natural ‘master’ narrative: there are no natural hierarchies; there are only those we construct” (Hutcheon 13). Even the primacy of playwright or text is questioned in this porous dramaturgy. There is always an element of this kind of collaboration in a production process, but the degree to which artists’ imagination is called upon by Ruhl is, in my experience, much deeper than the traditional director/script relationship. There is an open invitation written into her work that ensures that different productions will have room to develop their own identities. There are questions without answers. There are stage directions with no rules. As Hutcheon points out in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, “among the many things that postmodern intertextuality challenges are both closure and single, centralized meaning.” This “willed and willful provisionality,” (Hutcheon 127) manifests itself in Ruhl’s work in these built-in opportunities for co-creation. In a conversation about *The Clean House*, Ruhl commented on the way one production was able to bring her stage directions to life in an unexpected way:

There’s a scene where Lane, a doctor married to a doctor, imagines her husband kissing the breast of his new lover, who is one of his patients. The stage direction says, ‘Ana wears a gown. Is it a hospital gown or a ballroom gown?’ Well, Marilyn Dodds Frank,

⁷⁸ The term “empty space” usually belongs to Peter Brook’s 1968 treatise on theatre which claims that “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (9). Ruhl’s turn of phrase may be loosely connected in their shared invitation to create, but her reference seems to be more directed at the spaces left between the lines of her scripts than the literal empty space of which Brook spoke.

who plays Ana, walked out in a renaissance ball gown made of lavender hospital-gown material. It had a train that was about 20 yards long. So she begins walking out in this purple gown, and it just keeps coming and coming and coming. I would never have thought of that. That was a high point of my life really. (Vogel)

The joy Ruhl took in the creative interpretation of her inviting stage direction is, in my opinion, central to her dramaturgy of possibilities and collaboration. Thinking back from our first read to our final bow, the exploration of this process slowly exposed Ruhl's comic layers to reveal the nuanced, exciting, bizarre, postmodern world that she and we created together. As someone who has spent a great deal of my theatrical career performing, directing, and studying comedy, and with the knowledge that my dissertation work would center largely on the work of this playwright, my entire journey with *Dead Man's Cell Phone* - both of my productions - has been one of finding and communicating the comedy delicately woven into Ruhl's strange, fairy tale about life in the digital age. In particular, my work with actors brought to life the interplay of the comic and tragic elements of the play that is so central to Ruhl's dramaturgy. The chance to stage the work twice provided insight into the empty spaces and ambiguities left for directors and actors by the playwright. With each element we made more concrete, we unlocked more potential for understanding and, ultimately as our audiences proved each night, laughter. As Performance Studies scholar Tzachi Zamir notes, "acting has to do with particularization in another sense also: the necessity to actualize a single possibility that is merely included in the cluster of possibilities that configure the text" (238). I extend this observation to encompass the entire process of mounting a production, as each directorial, acting, and design decision builds on the framework laid out by the playwright, making manifest one interpretation and solidifying each production as its own distinct entity – its own way of filling in Ruhl's "empty spaces."

Sitting around the table for the first read through at Wayne State in October 2013, I wasn't sure what to expect. I believed the play to be funny, but I also believed it to be the most challenging piece of theatre I had directed to date. Personally it was challenging because of the time I had spent and would be spending with Sarah Ruhl as part of my dissertation work – I had elevated her, as it were, onto a pedestal that could render her unreachable. Structurally it was challenging because Ruhl, by her own admission, avoids traditional linear narratives, which she feels are too weighted down by a puritan tendency for moral instruction: “Perhaps change is all-important in most dramatic forms; in the arc play, change is usually of the moral variety – a lesson learned” (*100 Essays* 32). Ruhl specifically discusses her resistance to adhering to dominant Aristotelian, cathartic, linear plot structures. She even counters Paula Vogel's other five suggested alternative plot structures:

circular form (see *La Ronde*), backward form (*Artist Descending a Staircase* or *Betrayal*), repetitive form (*Waiting for Godot*), associative form (see all of Shakespeare's work, in particular his romances), and what Vogel calls synthetic fragment, where two different time periods can coexist (*Angels in America* or *Top Girls*). (*100 Essays* 31-32)

Instead, Ruhl offers up what she describes in an interview as a more Ovidian construction of “small transformations that are delightful and tragic” (Lahr).⁷⁹ She goes on later in her own writing to claim that “in Ovidian form, the play takes pleasure in change itself, as opposed to pleasure in moral improvement” (*100 Essays* 32). Ruhl also goes out of her way to leave her worlds open for interpretation and collaboration from the directors, designers and actors who take on her scripts, delighting in writing “Stage directions that are both impossible to stage and

⁷⁹ Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid) was a Roman playwright perhaps best known for his *Metamorphoses*, a multi-volume verse collection of legends and mythology of ancient Rome. Ruhl identifies his work as telling stories that involve smaller, more personal transformations than the climactic, large moral reversals (peripeteia) described by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Leonard Barkan claims that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* “is a world where female emotions, themselves associated with change, are given prominence” (14).

possible to stage” (*100 Essays* 169). Realistic (and highly moralistic) plays like Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* contain utilitarian stage directions describing the literal setting, the number of people in the room, and critical moments of action: “Proctor is thrown into room by two guards, followed by Willard” (45), but Ruhl’s directions almost seem like daydreams she is sharing or a conversation she is having with directors. In *The Melancholy Play* she says, “It would be nice if the actor who plays Julian were from a country other than the United States. And he or she should be a very good cello player. And handsome, and brooding. If possible, Julian is a man. If not, women cello players are extremely acceptable” (*Melancholy* 228). In *Late: A Cowboy Song* she muses “Red is teaching Mary to ride a horse. It would be nice if it were a real horse. If not, an abstract approximation of a horse will do” (*Late* 170). And in *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* she calls for “A cell phone ballet. Beautiful music. People moving through the rain with umbrellas, talking into their cell phones, fragments of lost conversations float up” (*Dead Man* 57).⁸⁰ She may have specific visions of how these elements are to come to life, or she may not. But whether she does or doesn’t, her descriptive abstractions give both tonal guidance and a sense of freedom to the interpreting artists. This deliberately ambiguous poeticism of Ruhl’s worlds creates a subtle strangeness to her writing, a feeling that intimidated me with its beauty and intricacies from the time when I first proposed the script to my adviser

⁸⁰ I will discuss this section, known as the “cell phone ballet,” in more detail, but the choice of umbrellas in the rain warrants some explanation. First, in his large monologue that begins Act 2, Gordon describes the way humans are crowded together on the city street: “You know when people are so crushed together in the rain, in the city, so many people, that no one person needs an umbrella, because one umbrella covers three people?” However, as physically close as all these people are, they are all “yelling into their cell phones,” completely oblivious to the people around them. (39) He goes on to use this metaphor to describe his work trafficking organs, explaining that he unites the person who needs money with the person who needs organs: “There are parts enough to make everyone whole; it’s just that the right parts are not yet in the right bodies. We need the right man to – redistribute. One umbrella covers three bodies” (40). But this image goes beyond Gordon’s monologue to Ruhl’s personal views on theatricality: “Why are umbrellas so pleasing to watch on stage? The illusion of being outside and being under the eternal sky is created by a real object. A metaphor of limitlessness is created by the very real limit of an actual umbrella indoors” (*100 Essays* 6).

the previous year. The perfect jokes of *The Clean House* swam through my head as I read stage directions like “Embossed stationary [sic] moves through the air slowly, like a snow parade. Lanterns made of embossed paper, houses made of embossed papers, light falling on paper, falling on Jean and Dwight, who are also falling” (*Dead Man* 37).

But the intimidation I felt was no longer an option, as we went around the room introducing ourselves on that first night of rehearsal. Once the formalities passed, I presented my spiel. This was my opportunity to introduce the actors to the play – not only to the script that (I hoped) they had already read on their own, but to the play that I hoped we would be making together. This was their first time hearing my opinions and expectations. This was the discussion that would propel all of our discoveries for the next five to seven weeks: “This is a play about connections,” I told them, “real ones, forced ones, missed ones. It’s a play about goodness – and the realization that we can’t force our idea of goodness on the rest of the world – and the idea that there might be more than one way to be good, more than one way to be worthy of love.”

I had spent months before rehearsals executing a close formalist analysis of the play. In my first meeting with my adviser, I presented what I believed to be the seed of my play: connections.⁸¹ There is the literal connectivity suggested by a cell phone, of course, which allows one person to contact another – in particular, Jean to come into contact with all of Gordon’s people – but there are also the in-person connections Jean forges through her appropriation of Gordon’s cell phone. She does not appear to be a person with many connections in the world, as there is almost no discussion in the script of Jean’s life before she

⁸¹ “The seed, then, is the ‘essence of the author’s plan,’ the basic subject of the play, the central issue ‘for the sake of which the play was brought to life’” (Thomas 9).

met Gordon.⁸² There are no references to family, friends, or acquaintances beyond the stage direction that she is “writing a thank you letter” (*Dead Man* 11) in the café at the beginning of the show, and the revelation that she works “at the Holocaust museum. In the office” (*Dead Man* 32).⁸³ With no apparent worldly connections of her own (or at least, none that are of concern to this dramatic text), it may well be easier for her to get swept up in Gordon’s world – one at which he is firmly at the center. She picks up his phone and takes his place as the fulcrum around which the other characters gravitate, inheriting and evolving his connections into her own in the midst of her attempt to preserve his.

My adviser agreed with my analysis, but only in part. He explained that this was really only a “first plan” answer. According to Stanislavski, any play is made up of the “first plan” elements – “plot on its most basic level” (Thomas 97) – and the “second plan” elements – those that “[occur] inside the characters, changing their internal as well as external circumstances” (Thomas 105-106). Jean is not only seeking connections, after all. She is attempting to make the connections she creates fit into a specific view of the world in which all people are inherently good. She does not know this man, so she makes him into the man she thinks he should be. She makes up poetic final words for The Other Woman in which he proclaimed his love for her: “He said: tell her that I love her. And then he turned his face away and died” (*Dead Man* 20). The Other Woman is taken aback, since Gordon had never said those words to her in life. And for

⁸² “In *DMCP*, Jean evolves solely from the action of the play - nothing from her past informs the present action. Her 'depth' is created by her emotional passage into love, a throwback to the comedies of Marivaux and his famous *marivaudage*. The *marivaudage* represents the progress of the characters falling in love during the course of the play, an innovation that provided the basis for modern romantic comedy” (Castagno 130).

⁸³ Jean’s employment at the Holocaust Museum feeds thematically into her desire to create idealized memories of Gordon for his family and friends. The act of remembering is, for Jean, beautiful in and of itself, but the opportunity to curate those memories to tell the story as she wants it told is far more attractive.

Hermia, she took all the intimate fears that Hermia expressed and settled them in one imaginary love letter:

Dear Hermia. I know we haven't always connected, every second of the day. Husbands and wives seldom do [...] I know that sometimes you were somewhere else when we made love. I was too. But in those moments of climax, when the darkness descended and our fantasies dissolved into the air under the quickening heat of our desire – then, *then*, we were in that room together. And that is all that matters. Love, Gordon. (*Dead Man* 48-49)

Hermia, who has been imagining herself as someone else for the last ten years whenever she had sex with her husband, is able to look at her marriage “with a new light shining on them” (*Dead Man* 49), because she and Gordon had never been this open with one another while he was alive. Jean makes up the kind and beautiful lies that she tells to his family to comfort them with the loving words she is sure he would have said if he had had the time – without the knowledge that he never would have said them.⁸⁴ James Al-Shamma observes that “Jean fabricates stories about the deceased Gordon that recast him in a better light; in doing so, she constructs a fulfilled image of him for the benefit of his family and loved ones” (*Critical Study* 84). Jean did not know Gordon, and therefore could not know how far her stories are from the philandering, organ-harvesting man that he was. In fact, it never crosses her mind that he could be anything other than a good man. As she explains to Gordon, “I saw you die. I saw your face. I wanted for you to be good” (*Dead Man* 54). A naïve idealist, Jean assumes that people are good, and her actions are all attempts to make the rest of the world live up to that belief. After a disastrous family dinner, she tells Dwight, “I think people are usually nice, deep down, when

⁸⁴ Ruhl clarifies Jean's actions: “I call Jean's stories confabulations, I never call them lies” (*Dead Man* 65). This turned out to be a delineation that I was uncomfortable with. I did not want to soften what Jean was doing – she was lying. They were meant to be kind and beautiful lies, but they were lies, nonetheless. And, as Jean is not mentally ill, these are statements that she knows to be false. She does not believe them – though she might prefer to. And it was more interesting to me that she is just as badly behaved (from a finite, moralistic standpoint) as is Gordon.

they're put in the right circumstances" (*Dead Man* 31). Despite her rose-colored glasses and noble intentions, her imagined version of Gordon causes his loved ones pain when it clashes with the Gordon they knew. She reaffirms Gordon's philandering for both *The Other Woman* ("He said that he loved me [...] I waited for such a long time. And the words – delivered through another woman" (*Dead Man* 20)) and Hermia ("You and I both know Gordon had affairs [...] After I met you, I was convinced that you and Gordon were having an affair" (*Dead Man* 46-47)). And she crushes Mrs. Gottlieb by passing on a comment from Gordon about her cooking: "We never talk about her cooking," Hermia tells her after Mrs. Gottlieb storms out (*Dead Man* 30). The kind words that Jean puts in Gordon's mouth are a disconnect from the real words that came out of his mouth for his entire life, and no matter how hard she tries, Jean cannot reconcile the two. Jean herself starts into the journey with Gordon's family believing that she loves him "in a way" (*Dead Man* 15), but she ends up sleeping with his brother. It turns out that she cannot force Gordon or anyone (even herself) into her idealistic mold. But the fact that none of these people is particularly "good" does not seem to be a problem in this world. In the end, there is no judgment passed on any of the characters – even Jean (for spinning lie after well-intentioned lie). Goodness, then, became my "second plan" seed, but it was not a one-sided goodness.⁸⁵ It is a recognition that Jean's attempt to force everyone to conform to the goodness at the center of her world view is foolish, disingenuous, and ultimately unfair to the good in those around her.

⁸⁵ Is there an echo here of John Dewey's philosophy of practical idealism, which insisted that idealism "imagine a future that is worth striving for, and enhance our ability to create the tools for its realization" (Roth 173)? Jean's idealism certainly is not passive; she acts on the world to attempt to bring her ideals into being.

I remember hearing myself say all of this, and thinking that it didn't sound much like I was describing a comedy. I remember the actress who played The Other Woman in my WSU production coming to me in the middle of the run with the discovery that Gordon seemed to give us the moral of the story: "Morality can be measured by results: how good do you make people feel? You make them feel good? Then you're a good man" (*Dead Man* 40). In the midst of talking about harvesting and selling human organs for a profit, Gordon drops a filthy little truth: it's all relative. So in this comedy, there is no "corrective," no laughter that leads the characters and the audience to the socially acceptable straight and narrow. Instead, the liars and philanderers and organ traffickers all find their own happiness without trading in their evil ways.

"Wow, this is a really weird play," commented the young woman playing Jean in my WSU production, and heads around the table bobbed along in agreement. I could feel my own uncertainty echoed in each nod. As we read, we did indeed laugh – but I'm not certain we were laughing for the right reasons yet. We were laughing at how much the world differed from our own, rather than allowing Ruhl's strange new world to inspire laughter in its own terms. We laughed because we were uncomfortable. We laughed at old Mrs. Gottlieb dropping f-bombs in the middle of eulogizing her son: "Could someone please turn their fucking cell phone off" (*Dead Man* 16). We laughed at Dwight's awkward flirting: "Can I braid your hair?" (*Dead Man* 35) We, of course, laughed at the Catholic jokes: "The funeral was yesterday. Yes, it was a very nice service. It was Catholic so it wasn't very personal – I'm sorry – are you Catholic?" (*Dead Man* 43).⁸⁶ We laughed uncomfortably as the actress playing Hermia plowed through her

⁸⁶ About half the cast – including myself – turned out to be Catholic.

monologue about her sexual fantasies. We laughed at the strangeness of a homemade kidney lamp – and where Jean could possibly have gotten the supplies to make it on the flight to Johannesburg. We laughed at Hermia’s return to the ice follies. When I say that we laughed for the wrong reason, I mean that most of the laughter, in that first read, came from our inability to understand the world of the play itself. There was an incongruity between the script and our expectations of dramatic realism, and there was a hovering discomfort with the fact that it was our task to decode all of this over the course of the next five weeks.

Early on in the rehearsal process I was surprised by how unwilling we sometimes were to let go of traditional psychological realism. This is perhaps understandable in that “since the beginning of the twentieth century, realism has been the dominant mode of theatrical expression” (Demastes ix) – particularly in American theatre. More precisely, realism has been the dominant mode of the theatrical expression that these relatively inexperienced students have seen and participated in. Everything needed a REASON. The dramatic environment in which most of us have been brought up in this country is one that attempts to hold Hamlet’s mirror up to nature, one that “conceals the text’s own laws and which we are supposed to take for a relation to reality” (Todorov quoted in Richardson 1). As a microcosm, the students who comprised my cast and design crew had had very little exposure to non-realistic theatre. But the world of *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* is not one of strict cause and effect. And it does not usually resemble the world that we live in on a daily basis. Simply mining the script for clues about the past (as one might in a canonical realistic piece like Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*) would not

suffice.⁸⁷ Attempting to make sense of the events as if they were happening in the real world would make some of them unimaginably strange or terrible (I return, again, to Mrs. Gottlieb's self-immolation). Ruhl does not pepper her plays with long-hidden traumas to be unearthed in the third act, she creates a whole separate world in which these characters live, and allows them to do so in their own way – a way in which always remains consistent with the play's meaning. Elinor Fuchs asserts that "A play is not a flat work of literature, not a description in poetry of another world, but is in itself another world passing before you in time and space" ("Small Planet" 6). So I decided that our task in rehearsal was to understand as much as we could about the rules of this world, rather than attempting to fit the world into the rules of our own. A part of our daily rehearsal time was devoted to Active Analysis – a process of using improvised etudes to build deeper connections to and understanding of the world of the play.⁸⁸ This approach to rehearsal is one that is central to our training at WSU, as we study the tools in the Month in Moscow program, and with my adviser independently as well. "The task is to filter the given circumstances through their own sensibility in order to 'evaluate' the facts, to understand their meaning in the context of the play and to start the process of feelings themselves in the role and the role in themselves" (Jackson 170). The playwright provides the who, what, when, where, why, and how (the given circumstances), and it is up to the actors, director, and designers to bring those things to life. In order to do this, the actors must be able to imagine themselves in those circumstances, to treat them as true, even though they (and the

⁸⁷ An exemplar of modern playwriting, *A Doll's House* hinges on the fact that dutiful, adorable wife Nora had illegally borrowed money in the past to pay for her husband's treatment. This fact allows her to be blackmailed, and eventually leads her husband to decide that this moral misstep makes her unfit to raise their children. His refusal to take the fall for her, as she had imagined he would, causes her to leave him. This information is carefully parceled out throughout the play until it is finally revealed.

⁸⁸ Active Analysis integrates "mental reconnaissance with physical investigation by means of *etudes* (thematic improvisations) – performance etudes using the play's major events" (Thomas xxv).

eventual audience) know them to be fictional.⁸⁹ The etuding process is intended to create experiences that expand the actors' memories as their characters, playing the rules of the distinctive world to their outermost borders. We set out to understand how this world works, how these characters would respond under other circumstances within that world. "The stage world never obeys the same rules as ours" ("Small Planet 6), particularly in a magical world like Ruhl's, so if it does not obey our rules, then what rules does this world obey?

When taught by Moscow Art Theatre School master teacher Sergei Zemtsov, etudes take on two forms: missing scenes and dreams.⁹⁰ Improvisations around missing scenes give the actors the opportunity to uncover and experience events that are only touched on in the script. These events may have occurred before the play began or offstage during the dramatic time of the play. Examples of missing scenes we explored were Gordon's family identifying his body at the morgue, Gordon and Hermia's wedding rehearsal dinner, and Dwight's memory of when "one time we had dinner and – Gordon was nice to me" (*Dead Man* 36). These missing scenes can answer questions or fill in blanks left by the playwright, and they give the cast more chances to live and work inside the world of the play. Dreams, on the other hand, more often turn into nightmares in the etude context, as they become an opportunity to examine the desires and fears of the characters. It is important to note that dreams must be imagined from

⁸⁹ This is what is known as the paradox of the actor. Described by 17th century French philosopher and historian Denis Diderot, the paradox of the actor is that s/he must truthfully represent the emotions that s/he knows to be false (R. Cohen 161-162). Stanislavski expanded on this with his focus on the "magic if," which encourages the actor to imagine themselves under the given circumstances of the characters; "If always launches the creative act and the Given Circumstances develop it further" (Stanislavski 53). All of this is encapsulated quite succinctly in acting teacher Sanford Meisner's creed of "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances" (Morong).

⁹⁰ There is a distinction to be made between etudes in an acting class setting, and etudes in a rehearsal setting. In a classroom, they are designed to enhance students' sense of creativity and attention to detail in creating and living within a set of given circumstances. Classroom etudes might involve students creating events as a shoelace or a sloth. Rehearsal etudes, however, are linked to the text in rehearsal and are intended to give the actors more opportunities to live within and understand the given circumstances of the play.

one character's point of view: whose dream is it? Missing scenes can be seen more objectively, as everyone participates in the same moment and reacts to it in their own way, but a dream is a slice of one character's reality, and the other characters behave as they might be perceived from that one central character's point of view. For example, my WSU cast improvised a nightmare of Gordon's in which all of Gordon's Christmas gifts for his family were accidentally switched out for human organs, leaving his family horrified when they were confronted by the harsh reality of his work. My SMSU cast improvised Dwight's nightmare in which Gordon's corpse rose up from the coffin at the funeral, and the family tossed Dwight into the box instead, happy to trade him in for the superior brother. In each of these episodes, the actors were able to play with characters' insecurities and values beyond the scope of the lines and blocking that they would eventually perform for an audience. Though none of these etudes would ever be seen, each one taught the group more and more about living in the world that we would be performing, making them more agile and confident within it. And no two etudes were the same from cast to cast. For instance, both casts asked the question of why it is that, as Hermia says of Mrs. Gottlieb, "we never talk about her cooking" (*Dead Man* 30). At WSU, the group improvised Gordon and Hermia's rehearsal dinner, for which Mrs. Gottlieb had prepared a homemade meal that ended up giving the entire wedding party severe digestive issues. At SMSU, on the other hand, Mrs. Gottlieb made a ratatouille for her husband and sons, and somehow managed to poison her husband in the process (which also explains why, now, she eats only "large quantities of meat" (*Dead Man* 25)).⁹¹ What is important about these etudes is not the specific events, however, but the opportunity for the actors to live more deeply in the world of their

⁹¹ Ratatouille is a French stewed vegetable dish.

characters. The WSU production had a lighter tone, which seemed to work just fine with an etude that involved an awful lot of flatulence, while the SMSU production had a dark tinge to the atmosphere that made accidentally poisoning a husband seem reasonable. Etudes are about knowing the rules of the world and following them out to their farthest reach. I might compare the etude process to learning a language: if you can only say a few necessary sentences in a new language, you haven't really learned to speak it. It isn't until you are able to come up with sentences on your own that you truly understand and own that language. Similarly, etudes take actors' imaginations beyond the words written on the page, and into the world implied by those pages.

As we explored these missing scenes and nightmares, particularly at WSU, we found ourselves returning again and again to the question of how Jean fit into the picture. It was easy to find situations outside the script in which the family members might have encountered each other – their shared history makes that simple. But because we see the moment that Jean meets the Gottlieb family, it was more difficult to fit her into their background story. And since there are no details in the script that hint at Jean's life before Gordon, it was difficult to create etudes that centered around her life. So instead of attempting to build a thorough (and necessarily random) background story for Jean, in the WSU etudes we started finding places that she would pop up in the etudes about the family. At Gordon and Hermia's rehearsal dinner (which was, in the etude described above, held at the Holocaust museum), she was a waitress, and the Cellular Beings (silent characters that I added, whom I will discuss in more detail later) were attempting to get her to meet Dwight. Rather than attempting to manufacture some sort of history for Jean, our etudes focused on the complex family unit into which she inserts

herself, and the unknown history she might have had with them. We built on questions raised in the script rather than broad, random questions that we might ask of any character. *Where was Jean born? Who are her parents?* Issues like these are not minimal concern to this world, and Ruhl makes no mention of them. What happened after Jean rushed off to South Africa, leaving Hermia at the bar? Why is Mrs. Gottlieb so taken with the idea of Hermia returning to the ice follies? Questions born in the text were the ones that interested us. As Ruhl explains, “Think of subtext as to the left of the language and not underneath it [...] There are [...] pools of silence and the unsayable to the left or to the right or even above the language” (*100 Essays* 66). Our etudes were an attempt to open up those pools of silence for ourselves.

CELL PHONES AND PHOTOS AND SPOONS, OH MY!

One way to differentiate between the unique experience of staging the play and reading the play is through analysis of the physical objects that are used on stage in the process of performing. The cell phone is, of course, a key item in the trajectory of *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*. A number of other comic and emotional moments come to life through the use of specific properties on stage beyond the cell phone. As I noted in my discussion of *The Clean House* (see chapter 3), it is all too often assumed that tragedy, drama, or melodrama are the realm of the heart, comedy is the realm of the head. But Ruhl inspires laughter that is deeply connected to emotion, and that the affective nature of the objects used for comic effect in *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* is an inroad to understanding and executing that complex comedy. In her work on what she terms “happy objects,” Sarah Ahmed writes that “Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (“Happy Objects” 29). Objects,

according to Ahmed, carry specific affective meaning with them, and our repeated experiences with those objects confirm and reinforce those emotions with each encounter. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, the character Jean endows – and by extension, my productions endow – a number of objects with particular deep, emotional meaning. When those objects absorb or resist the emotions Jean places on them, comedy ensues. While a reader's imagination can certainly respond to the description or presence of objects included in a play script, it is only when those specific objects are in action on stage with actors in front of an audience that their full potential can be understood.

The primary object at work in this play is, of course, the cell phone. Before even a single line is spoken, the insistent ring invites Jean and the audience into the story that will illuminate the myriad ways in which contemporary humans allow technology to define them. "Ruhl's exploration of contemporary cellular telephonic relationships tackles the problem of what it means nowadays to carry our phones with us as appendages on our bodies, to be always 'reachable' but never 'touched'" (Holzapfel 122). The comic device of merging the human and the inanimate is in line with Henri Bergson's nearly century-old essay on laughter, in which he points out the comedy inherent in the portrayal of man as he "resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once for all and capable of working automatically" (Bergson 156). The technological wonder of Bergson's day was automation - the ability for a machine to do, over and over, and with as little variation as possible, the exact same thing. This is a feat that the human body cannot replicate, and it is from this disparity that Bergson's ideas of comedy are drawn: "What, therefore, incited laughter, was the momentary transformation of a person into a thing" (Bergson 97). Bergson argues that it is comical to observe a flexible, unpredictable human being

behaving like clockwork – repetitive, mindless, frozen, etc. He “sensed comedy whenever we see the human turning mechanical” (Bevis 29). For Bergson, comedy lives where the human and the technological collide. A little over a century later, however, the technology with which mankind is now faced is not with technology that merely automates. Technology of the 21st century is part of what *Wired* writer Brian Chen calls the “anything-anytime-anywhere future” in which humans are connected to each other and their desires at the swipe of a screen. He says that, through the iPhone “the physical and digital worlds are coalescing to turn us into the super-connected beings we’ve always dreamed of being” (4).⁹² Whether as interactive as the iPhone’s Siri, or seemingly mechanical as predictive texting, cell phone technology is much less about automation than it is about human (or human-like) interaction. In the 21st century, humans interact with technology, not in automation, but in connection and ubiquity. So, when Ruhl’s comedy takes on the murky space between human and technology, her central idea comes not from the hilarity of a human becoming more like a machine, but the all too real circumstance of a machine approximating human contact.⁹³ Jean treats the phone not only as a connection to the people in Gordon’s life, but as a conduit to the man himself: “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” (*Dead Man* 36). Never having met the man while he was alive, Jean’s relationship with him is made up of fictions that she imagines about him, connections that she draws from the people he knew, and her ideal

⁹² Chen is a correspondent devoted to covering Apple, so his references tend to be brand specific. But it seems safe to assume that most of his observations apply to all smart phones.

⁹³ Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto,” which discusses the intersection of human and technology in the contemporary world, would be an interesting lens through which to read *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*. She asks a question that Jean may be unconsciously asking throughout her love affair with Gordon: “Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other being encapsulated by skin?” (178)

images of how he would have been with them – she falls in love with a corpse and a cell phone – but isn't there a degree of fiction in all relationships? Jean's feelings for Gordon are real, even if the Gordon she loves never really existed; and even the bulk of her loving acts are actually aimed at a cellular phone rather than at a human (an element of the comic-mechanical at work). For Jean, "two inert devices simulate live interaction – the dead man and the cell phone" (Castagno 125). The real Gordon tells her, "we're all just floating receptacles – waiting to be filled – with meaning – which you and I provide. It's a talent" (*Dead Man* 54). So, through her connection with the cell phone (and therefore, with Gordon's real life family), and the stories she tells, ideal Gordon becomes real for her. And though she knows that she is making these stories up, she believes that they would have been true of him – perhaps even feeling a degree of collusion from him through the phone that she clings to.

Through the first act in particular, the phone acts as Gordon's voice – or even maybe as Gordon himself – making himself heard and his presence felt from beyond the grave, and perhaps even attempting to speak up in the face of all of Jean's misdirections:

The handheld object of Gordon's phone begins to perform as a kind of ghostly, everyday property on stage. It rings during the middle of Gordon's memorial service, interrupting his mother's eulogy as if her son himself were speaking from his grave...At one point the phone interrupts Jean's intimate encounters with her love, Dwight, Gordon's brother...every time Gordon's phone rings on stage it momentarily restores through sound the lingering memory of his ghostly presence. (Holzapfel 118-119)

The object becomes the character, and it is with this technological object endowed with humanity that Jean initially falls in love. She does not use this phone to communicate with Gordon, rather the phone functions as Gordon's surrogate. For example, a normal relationship between two living humans would likely involve one lover introducing the other to his or her

friends and family. This is how Jean experiences the calls she answers on Gordon's phones: as his loving invitation into his world.

In performance, a good deal of the laughter comes from this misplacement of human attributes onto the phone and the dead man. The audience knows that Jean has never met this man, and they find comedy in the moments that Jean seems to forget that she never really knew him. Just before his funeral, she takes center stage and asks God for help in comforting his loved ones, but she goes further: "I know I only knew him for a short time, God. But I think that I loved him, in a way" (*Dead Man* 15). From night to night, audiences responded the same way – how could she possibly love a dead man? Or a cell phone, for that matter? This was a question we asked in rehearsal as well – how was the actress to fall in love with a dead body? We realized that the phone was the answer. The play opens with his ringing phone demanding her attention. He is dead, but the phone calls out to her. Like any number of classic romantic comedies, her first reaction to him is to be angry at him – how inconsiderate that he would leave his phone ringing like this in a public place! "Are you ill?" she asks him, "Are you deaf?"



Figure 3 - Jean holds a spoon under Gordon's nose to see if he is breathing - WSU

Her frustration heightens to the point that she just answers the phone for him, but once she realizes he is dead, things change. She moves into a new stage in her romantic comedy circumstances – that of confusion. Once she realizes he is dead, she never speaks *to* him, only *about* him. She doesn't know what to do, but she knows that she is somehow connected to him: "Should I stay with him?" she asks the 911 operator, and judging by her response, "How long?" she has been told to stay (*Dead Man* 13). But the next call is the one that shifts her perception the most. The next call is from Gordon's mother. Now he is no longer a lifeless body, he is someone's son – the phone has brought him to life for her. From here on out, she speaks to the dead man as if they were truly meeting:⁹⁴

It was your mother.
 Do you want me to keep talking until they get here?
 Gordon, I'm Jean.
 You don't know me.
 But you're going to be just fine.
 Well, actually –
 Don't worry.
 Are you still inside there?
 How did you die so quietly?
 I'll stay with you.
 Gordon.
 For as long as you need me.
 I'll stay with you.
 Gordon. (*Dead Man* 14)

Her interaction with Gordon's life via the phone has allowed this inanimate shell to be alive for her. "To Bergson's notion, a comic impasse occurs wherever a human being ceases to behave

⁹⁴ Interestingly enough, the terminology of Jean "meeting" Gordon became a point of contention between myself and the marketing department during my production at Wayne State. When asked to write a description of the plot, I opened with "Jean and Gordon meet at a café... unfortunately, Gordon is dead at the time of this meeting." Marketing argued that the copy I had written describing the play was misleading, as one obviously couldn't "meet" a dead person. The pull of American realism (literalism?) is strong, and ultimately I was forced to change the copy to read "encountered." Still, from Jean's point of view (and Ruhl's for that matter), I argue that a "meeting" is exactly what occurred.

like a human being - that is, whenever he 'resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once for all and capable of working automatically,' but is incapable of *living*" (Sypher xii). In Ruhl's play, however, the "comic impasse" occurs when something incapable of living is brought to life – not by the playwright, but by the character who interacts with it. And in this case, Gordon (and his phone) are not only brought to life, they are tied up in one of the fundamental experiences of life: love. The actress who played Jean in my first production reflected on this moment in a conversation after a performance: "I never expected people to laugh when I promised Gordon to stay with him for as long as he needed me, at the end of scene 1. I always felt that moment to be very serious for me, yet I always got a few chuckles from the audience." The intersection of the human and the inanimate in that moment is strange, and it paves the way for one of the key comic conceits of the rest of the performance – Jean's relationship with an imaginary version of a dead man, as it is carried out between her and a cellular phone.

Jean's relationship with Gordon deepens as she continues to answer the phone and continues to travel deeper and deeper into Gordon's life, meeting first with his mistress, then his mother, and finally his widow and his brother. With each meeting, she creates more stories about the man she created out of this cell phone, and with each story, the audience finds more and more to laugh at in the making human of these objects. When The Other Woman comments that "Gordon could be quiet," Jean agrees: "Yes. He was quiet" (*Dead Man* 19). The audience laughs because she is assigning a human trait to a dead body, which had no choice but to be quiet.

At dinner, Jean presents Gordon's family with three items that she has clearly stolen from the café in hopes of providing an idealized and comforting narrative of Gordon's death:

This salt is for you, Hermia. Because he said you were the salt of the earth.... And this is for you, Dwight. *Jean gives Dwight a cup.* Because Gordon said you were like – a cup. Because you can hold things. Beautiful things. And they don't – pour out....And this is for you, Harriet. *She gives Gordon's mother a spoon.* Because of your cooking. (*Dead Man 29*)

Each of these gifts become more than the mundane items that they are. They may even become more than kind gestures of farewell from a loved one. Like the cell phone is for Jean, the salt shaker, the cup, and the spoon (the salt shaker and spoon in particular, as I will soon demonstrate) may actually become Gordon in that moment. Both Hermia and Dwight seem legitimately moved by their gifts, and the hidden side of Gordon that they seem to represent. But Mrs. Gottlieb – whose maternal opinion our productions decided Jean held in highest esteem – flies into a rage: “What did he mean by that?...HE COULD NOT HAVE MEANT THAT NICELY!” (*Dead Man 29*). Jean presents the spoon as a gesture of love from a son to a mother, and instead – probably to the amusement of real Gordon – delivered a sharp jab from beyond



Figure 4 - Jean gives Mrs. Gottlieb the spoon at SMSU

the grave⁹⁵. However, as the time with my first production of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* came to an end, the actress who played Mrs. Gottlieb made a suggestion about the life span of the spoon. While it was a shock at first, she believed that, ultimately, Mrs. Gottlieb would keep anything that connected her to Gordon, and that she wished she had been wearing the spoon on a chain around her neck in the final scene. This was an idea that we pulled into the second production in Minnesota, which greatly complicated the affective and comic potential of this



Figure 5 - Mrs. Gottlieb with the spoon around her neck at SMSU

simple object. First, it was a well-meaning gift, then it was an insult, and finally, it was a trophy of her son's final moment. Of course, at all of those times, it was a lie. But like grief, the meaning of this simple prop evolved significantly through the course of our productions.

Similarly, Hermia's salt shaker had a longer journey in my productions than it does on the page alone. Moved by this kind gesture in her husband's final moment, Hermia is driven to

⁹⁵ The spoon had its own comic meaning for my first cast, as about half the time, when Mrs. Gottlieb threw it, it would stick right into the carved foam rib-eye like a javelin. The audience never noticed, but it was always a game for the cast to see what it would do in each night's performance.

drink. The actress who played Hermia in my first production asked to be allowed to bring the salt shaker to the bar, which gave her a link to Gordon while she rambled on and on about their sex life. Jean, of course, means the salt shaker as a kind of final gesture from a kind man, but for Hermia, it is a guilt trip. She and Gordon have been so disconnected from each other for so long, yet in his final moments, she has been led to believe that he thought kindly of her – something she knows she would not have done had their positions been reversed. Bringing this



Figure 6 - Jean with Hermia and her salt shaker at WSU

token of guilt with her, Hermia talks to it, fondles it, and generally treats it with all the intimacy and confusion that she harbors for her husband.⁹⁶

In our productions, we found another object that kept Gordon present onstage despite his untimely death. On the second night of rehearsal at WSU, as we read through the script, the actress playing Mrs. Gottlieb laughingly reached out and grabbed the actor playing Gordon during her eulogy. She clung to him overdramatically as she wailed her way through the lines. In this moment, a crucial new prop was added: a physical manifestation of Gordon in the form of his memorial photo from the funeral, which Mrs. Gottlieb ended up carrying at all times. The

⁹⁶ It looks like Hermia really is Catholic after all!

photo became, like the phone, an extension of Gordon. When Mrs. Gottlieb interrogated Jean, for example, she clutched the photo, stared at it, stroked it, and even placed it on the couch beside her. She also made sure to whisper and cover the photo to protect his feelings when referring to his wife Hermia as, “you know – his widow” (*Dead Man* 24). When the family sat



Figure 7 - Mrs. Gottlieb and Jean at WSU



Figure 8 - Mrs. Gottlieb delivering Gordon's eulogy at SMSU

down for dinner, Mrs. Gottlieb placed the photo prominently on the table beside her, comically punctuating the line, “No, no, time to move on, no time like the present” (*Dead Man* 26). And when Mrs. Gottlieb invited Dwight to carve the ribeye, she pointedly repositioned the portrait

to be sure that Dwight could see that he was watching. Much as the phone allowed Jean to interact with her version of Gordon, the photo allowed Mrs. Gottlieb to interact with hers. The woman who really knew and loved him carries an inanimate object that constantly reminds her that he is gone, whereas the woman who never knew him carries an inanimate object that she treats as a living connection to the man she imagines loving.

CELLULAR BEINGS

Dead Man's Cell Phone is somewhat cinematic in its construction, as the action moves from place to place quickly, and without room for lots of blackouts and scene changes – a significant test of a director's or designer's creativity. As part of my plan to deal with this, I made the decision to cast two characters who were not in the script. I cast two actors without really knowing what I was going to do with them. At worst, they might have ended up as glorified set change crew. It actually took me a long time to figure out who and what they should be. For the sake of a name on the cast list, I called them the "Cellular Beings." I didn't know much, but I knew that they would be connected to the cell phone ballet... another part of the script that I had no idea what to do with.

In my first few rehearsals I introduced different improvisations, hoping to discover not only the role of the Cellular Beings (or the CBs, as they came to be known), but to discover what the cell phone ballet might end up looking like. First, I asked them to think about all the things that a cell phone can do, and then to choose one of those things and to embody it. There was a lot of negativity in that initial attempt: removing face-to-face contact, hiding, distracting, etc. Then I asked them to do it again while I played music. That became really fun. They played off of each other a lot. There was a lengthy and intense game of tag between the actors playing

Gordon and Jean. One of the CB actors tried to remain separated from the others, but the actress playing Mrs. Gottlieb hugged her and followed her around the room, relentless in her desire to connect.

From there, we created a set of tableaux - one for each of the key events in the play. In this process, it was fairly easy to put the scripted characters where they belonged, but it was most interesting to see how we fit the CBs in. They became helpful technological imps, doing their best to get the characters where they needed to be. Once we created all the tableaux we moved fluidly from one to the next, and the CBs started finding their purpose in earnest. It seemed that they had definite ideas about where the characters should be going, and much to their chagrin, the characters weren't always headed in the right direction. Jean would reach out to Gordon as the CBs tried to restrain her, trying to direct her toward Dwight, for example. So there it was: these strange beings became the celestial guides of our production, hovering in the background and trying to show the characters their correct paths. Gordon tells us that there is a "spiritual pipeline" in the afterlife that assures everyone ends up where they should (*Dead Man* 53), and that all those cell phone conversations stay in the air as "the music of the spheres" (*Dead Man* 56). These CBs became the personification of the spheres, the pipeline, the cloud of connections strung between each person as they bounce off of one another. In one evening's dream etude, for example, the cast decided to explore the dreams of the CBs, and they chose to illustrate their role in carrying news of Hermia's hypothetical pregnancy throughout the family network. They were human manifestations of the always-on connectivity of the cellular world. They were distinctly unlike anything in the real world, so the way the CBs



Figure 9 - The Cellular Beings - WSU

worked taught us a lot about the world of our play. Once we decided that the CBs were insiders, we began creating silent interludes that the CBs would perform in between each scene as the set pieces were being moved by our real crew. They guided characters in and out, they missed connections with each other, they scattered paper about in preparation for Dwight and Jean's stationery closet tryst, and finally, they made sure that, when Dwight and Jean kiss... "the lights go out" (*Dead Man* 63). They were not only guides for the characters, but for the audience as well.

The CBs worked out so well in my first production that I couldn't picture the show without them anymore, so I cast two young women to play them in my second production in Minnesota, but the function of the characters became very different. My concept for the second production actually grew out of a comment my first Jean had made at our first night of rehearsal: she noted that Jean reminded her of Alice in Wonderland. So my second production ended up growing out of that idea. I followed Jean as she fell "down the rabbit hole," as she met strange and colorful characters that she didn't understand, as the situation around her

spiraled out of her control, and not everyone was necessarily there to help her. In this iteration, the CBs took on a more mischievous tone than they had in the previous production. We costumed them in black suits to match Gordon, and we gave them white masks and pocket watches: they were the white rabbits that she chased deeper and deeper into the unknown. And though they were like my first CBs in that they understood where everyone needed to



Figure 10 - Gordon and the Cellular Beings - SMSU

be, they were perfectly happy to oblige Jean as she headed in the wrong direction. They let her learn from her own mistakes. They were carefully choreographed to lead Jean from scene to scene, to appear and disappear, and to keep her off-kilter, since Gordon's world was not her world, and the Gordon she had imagined was nothing but an illusion. In the improvisations that built these CBs, the two actors always did everything they could to make any given situation worse. When Gordon stole away to meet with his mistress, the CBs (as waitresses or guests) wondered aloud “where the heck” he could have gotten off to. When Dwight tried to talk to one of them, they shrugged him off in favor of his more charming brother. The life they took on

within the play stemmed from the same impulse of using these beings to explain the rules of the world, but they ended up going about it in two different ways. They were characters that Ruhl never conceived, yet they somehow fit perfectly into the world that she had created, because she left room for me to put them there.

It is worth noting that the CBs in the WSU production ended up being much funnier than the CBs in the SMSU production. I often considered why this might be. First, the CBs were much more approachable at WSU. Their faces were visible, they had individual personalities, they broke the fourth wall repeatedly, they expressed opinions about the events that were unfolding



Figure 11 - CB with Green & Goethe Street Sign at WSU – Ruhl calls for Jean to mispronounce it “Go-thee” (*Dead Man 13*). The CB was not amused.

onstage. They even participated in the occasional sight gag. During one scene transition, as one CB deposited Jean in Mrs. Gottlieb’s living room for the first time, she paused to take a look at the maternal force of nature that was about to plow Jean over, and took a moment to silently express her sympathy. The audience, having just sat through the bombastic eulogy scene, laughed along knowingly, enjoying the insider status that they now shared with these beings.



Figure 12 - A CB pats Jean knowingly on the shoulder after delivering her to Mrs. Gottlieb's home - WSU

The SMSU CBs, however, were more monolithic. They did not develop as much of a relationship with the audience, and therefore never seemed to achieve the same level of comic force. But in that production, their purpose was not to build camaraderie with the audience or to inspire laughter, but to entice Jean as she plunged willingly farther and farther into Gordon's world. In a larger space (400 seats with a 12-foot gap between the stage's apron and the first row), it made more sense that the stage world – and therefore its representative inhabitants – would be more detached from the audience. The intimate 100-seat setup at WSU lent itself more obviously to the connection the CBs fostered with the audience.

In my WSU production, the work with the CBs did a great deal to bring the cell phone ballet mentioned above to life. Structurally, this felt to me like a significant turning point in the play, but I couldn't picture it for the longest time. With each day of etudes, I hoped that the cast would magically create something that morphed into the cell phone ballet, but, of course, that was an unfair expectation. Once I figured out that the cellular beings were connected to the spiritual pipeline that Gordon talks about, I knew that I wanted their interludes to lead the audience to the cell phone ballet. I didn't want it to come out of nowhere, but without knowing

what the cell phone ballet was going to be, I didn't know how to make those interludes lead us there. In the script, Ruhl has written a full page discussion the possibilities for the cell phone ballet and what each production might consider:

You might consider going round and recording people's overheard cell phone conversations. Or use messages that have already been left on your phone[...]You might consider layering these bits into a song, or spoken over a song, having them vaguely sung, or not, having non-actors record them, finding bits of your own found text, or translating some or all of it into Japanese and various other languages. (*Dead Man 64*)

The tone of her note implies to me that she could have gone on much longer with possibilities, or that she could have just left the note out entirely. "It rankles me to be this vague," she says, "but the cell phone ballet depends so much on the sound designer, director, and all the rest of it" (*Dead Man 64*). Leaving this key moment entirely open to the individual production's



Figure 13 - Cell Phone Ballet at WSU

interpretation, Ruhl invites invention. My interpretation ended up being fairly simple – no complex choreography, just some attractive movement patterns, umbrellas, and instructions to the cast to each find their own tempo and relationship with their cell phones. It was a slow process finding the soul of this piece, but as each of the CB interludes became clearer, so did the ballet. I did follow Ruhl's advice that "One thing I learned is that if the movement is

complex, the music and voices should be simple; if the voices are complex, the movement should be simple" (*Dead Man* 64). Because my movement was so simple, I worked closely with my sound designer to create a vivid tapestry of voices. The cast was assigned to write down snippets from overheard phone calls, and we recruited people throughout the department to record them so that the sound designer could layer those sound bites and some ring tones over the music I had chosen. What she ended up creating was a very entertaining collage of sounds of which our cast and department had a sense of ownership. When people in the department came to the show, I could hear them leaning over to their companions to claim, "that was me!" or trying to guess who belonged to a particular voice. It worked tremendously well in the WSU production.

Unfortunately, as well as the ballet worked for the WSU production, it never achieved the same effect at SMSU. Combinations of a condensed rehearsal period (about 3 1/2 weeks before tech, as opposed to the more usual 5-6 weeks before tech), an inexperienced sound designer, a cast uncomfortable with improvisation and movement, and a lack of early clarity on my part led us to nearly the exact same cell phone ballet. The music was the same, and the choreography was very similar. We were able to record and incorporate new phone call sound bites, which at the very least made the voices of SMSU present, but the feel of the piece was so appropriate for the first production that it never felt right in the second. It wasn't even as directly connected to the SMSU CBs, as this ended up being the only scene in which they appeared without their masks. So, while the cell phone ballet became pinnacle of the CBs'



Figure 14 - Cell Phone Ballet at SMSU

trajectory in my WSU production, it ended up feeling awkwardly out of place in the production at SMSU. It is a moment of magic unlike anything else in the script, so that foreignness could be excused, and I don't think the overall experience of the show was hampered by it, but I do not feel that it was enhanced either. Even looking back now, I don't have a concrete vision of what the “right” cell phone ballet might have looked like for the SMSU production – and I don't think I could know that without my cast and designers. I just wish that we had had the time and fortitude to find it!

A COMIC TONE

“In practical terms, *genre* is the collective emotional spirit of a play” (Thomas 303). Though he does ask for this spirit to be identified as part of the complete formalist analysis of a play, James Thomas does not limit the possibilities of the genre. He is not interested in literary labels such as those that might demand that plays containing X, Y, and Z must be labeled as a tragedy. Instead, he asks that the reader identify the elements at work, and discern whatever emotional spirit is most useful for the production. This open approach to genre is necessary

when looking at the work of someone like Ruhl. As I discussed in chapter 3, a good deal of Ruhl's comedy is interlaced with tragedy and death, and it seems fair to say that a play with the dead guy right there in the title would participate in that same dramaturgical mold. James Al-Shamma notes that the "dominant mood" of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is "definitely comic" (*Critical Study* 93), as comedies tend to be delineated by the presence of a "happy" or life-affirming ending. So even if the prevalence of grieving mothers, estranged wives, and forfeited kidneys may seem a little off the beaten comic path, the hurried "happy" endings supplied for each of the characters would seem to follow this basic rule of the comic genre. However, while the play is certainly funny, and while the endings may be happy (if only ironically so), to simply call it a comedy does not seem accurate either. Resisting traditional genre labels, this play requires examination of elements of comedy, tragedy, melodrama, mystery, fairy tales, and the absurd, and sensitivity to the ways in which they intertwine.

Mrs. Gottlieb is a grieving mother, which is sad on the face of it. But she is abrasive and off-putting and over the top in ways that make her mourning comic instead of melodramatic. In her first meeting with Jean, Mrs. Gottlieb is alternately truly heartbroken ("When someone older than you dies it gets better every day but when someone younger than you dies it gets worse every day. Like grieving in reverse" (*Dead Man* 22).), and aggressive ("You don't have children?...Why not?...You're getting older. How old are you?... Married?...How do you expect to have children then?...When you're thirty-nine your eggs are actually forty, you know" (*Dead Man* 23)). At dinner, the WSU production found a wonderfully tragic moment of motherly loss when Mrs. Gottlieb shares a memory of Dwight's childhood hijinks, only to realize that Gordon's death has left her alone with this memory:

Remember when Dwight was little and he could 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 and how we all would laugh! Oh. I guess there's no one here to remember that. (*Dead Man* 28)

This story was a difficult one for my actors to come to terms with in rehearsal. It is a strange story about a time – for the teller, at least – filled with laughter, but the story itself is not particularly funny. And it was actually in how unfunny the story was that we found the comedy. As the actress playing Mrs. Gottlieb tried to tell the story, she felt herself slowing down, feeling bored and boring. She expressed her frustration in a rehearsal, so I gave her the direction to play the opposite – to treat the story as if it were the most hilarious story she'd ever told. When she tried this new direction, the story took on a life of its own. Scattering in guffaws and table slaps, the words were all but incomprehensible, and the other actors stared at her in disbelief, knowing that their characters had no way to relate to this effusiveness. And it turned out that the story itself barely mattered. The characters didn't know or understand the story – no one in the theatre did, except for Mrs. Gottlieb and her now dead son, and that's what mattered: that the story belonged to the two of them. When I heard the story soar like that, I immediately told her to undercut it with her final line. The uproarious, manic laughter brought the energy to such a height, that when she stopped short with the realization that "there's no one here to remember that," it took the air out of the room. From there on out, this memory became a joyous, rowdy one for Mrs. Gottlieb, one that inspired almost outlandish laughter. It was probably something that she and Gordon had laughed about over and over again. However, when she shares the story this time, the other characters, and the audience along with them, are dumbfounded. We were able to build the comedy of this moment from the apparent lack of comedy in the story and circumstances. Each night the audience laughed along at the

strangeness of the story and the exuberance with which Mrs. Gottlieb told it, but all too quickly, the laughter is choked in the audience's throats, as Mrs. Gottlieb's very real grief stops them all in their tracks.

Though she may think otherwise, Mrs. Gottlieb is not the only person mourning Gordon's loss. Jean's first on-stage encounter with someone from Gordon's life is with his mistress, known in the script as The Other Woman. Though her reappearance later as the mysterious stranger would suggest that this meeting was primarily for the purpose of trying to obtain Gordon's business contacts stored on the phone, Jean's revelations change everything. The scene starts with The Other Woman firmly in control, assessing Jean's attractiveness and explaining the responsibilities of being a beautiful woman. "A woman should be able to take out her compact and put lipstick on her lips with absolute confidence. No apology" (*Dead Man*



Figure 15 - The Other Woman watches as Jean puts on her lipstick - WSU

18), she purrs, insisting that Jean follow suit: "Put it on. Take your time. Enjoy yourself" (*Dead Man* 19). In the WSU production, this became a delightful moment of character discovery for the audience, watching the two women apply lipstick so differently. The power structure of the

scene shifts, though, when Jean decides to tell The Other Woman that Gordon proclaimed his love for her with his dying breath. There is something delicate in this moment, as Jean makes the decision to make up her first “confabulation”: “Gordon mentioned you before he died. Well, he more than mentioned you. He said: tell her that I love her. And then he turned his face away and died” (*Dead Man* 20). The audience saw her meet the dead man, and they know that he said no such thing, so they laugh the laugh of knowing insiders, watching someone do something that will lead her down a comic path, but the effect it has on The Other Woman is really quite dramatic as “she wipes a tear away” (*Dead Man* 20). The comedy of the lie and the truth of a lover’s grief (we learn at the end of the play that she had been with Gordon for twelve years) wind around each other to provide much of the groundwork for the rest of Jean’s journey. As I mentioned above in my discussion of Ruhl’s use of “confabulation” to describe Jean’s stories, her lies (as I believe they still are, however beautiful) occupy a tenuous space between farcical absurdities and sincere offerings, keeping the overall tone of the play flexible and unpredictable from an audience perspective. However, from a production perspective, it was partly our task to find and communicate the consistency within the ambiguity. We had to create a world in which Jean’s lies or confabulations could be as well-meaning as they were fabricated, and as real as they needed to be from moment to moment.

The final mourning woman that Jean meets is Gordon’s wife Hermia. During the family dinner scene when Hermia is left alone with her openly grieving mother-in-law, she comments that she is “so sad that it’s - awful. Now I know why they call it awful sad” (*Dead Man* 27). The joke itself seems simple enough, and in my opinion, not terribly funny, but every night it was a reliable laugh line. Both of my Hermias delivered the line completely straight with no hint

toward the comic. The audience can't help but laugh – partly out of relief, as it is uncomfortable to observe a private moment between two mourning women, but also because it is such a strange, matter-of-fact way to describe an emotional experience as deep as mourning one's husband. But Hermia's experience goes beyond this little turn of phrase when, in the second act, she gets drunk and talks to Jean in great detail about the sexual fantasies she employed to endure sex with her husband. She is outlandishly frank with this perfect stranger, whom she assumes to have been one of any number of women sleeping with her husband. When Jean offers her a sympathetic ear, Hermia jumps in with "Lately I've been thinking of the last time I had sex with Gordon." Holding nothing back, she confesses, "Over the last ten years, when Gordon and I would have sex, I would pretend that I was someone else. I've heard that a lot of women, in order to come, pretend that their lover is someone else. Like a robber or Zorba the Greek or a rapist or something like that" (*Dead Man* 46). This was a line that I was consistently worried about in rehearsals, but one that consistently got a strange laugh from almost every audience – strange in that we were not expecting it, but also strange in that the laughter itself sounded somehow disproportionate. It was a moment that we deliberately chose to play as straight as possible, not wanting to call additional attention to the word, but also knowing that, in its place at the end of a list, Ruhl had written it to be heard. Both of the actresses who played Hermia in my productions were fearless in their delivery, treating it as if it were the most normal thing in the world, and their refusal to comment on the unsettling nature of what they were saying was what seemed to sell it for the audience. The unabashed sex talk goes on for



Figure 16 - Jean and Hermia at the bar - SMSU

about a full page, and the audience titters along uncomfortably at first, and uproariously eventually when, after confessing that she had fantasized about herself as Jean earlier that evening, she cheerfully proclaims, “I wouldn’t normally tell you that but I’ve had a lot to drink at this point” (*Dead Man* 47). Finally released from the discomfort of listening to such intimate revelations, this moment tended to elicit a sizable laugh. A sort of, “no kidding!” from the audience, relieved that they were able to move on, but where they go from there is deeper into Hermia’s grief, as she ponders burying Gordon’s phone, figuring – like Jean – that if the phone stopped ringing, he would really be gone. Still feeling the guilt from Gordon’s (Jean’s) gift of the salt shaker, she speaks some of the most heartbreaking words of the show – a moment that consistently brought me to the verge of tears in our performances:

Do you know what it’s like marrying the wrong man, Jean? And now – now – even if he *was* the wrong man still, he was *the* man – and I should have spent my life trying to love him instead of wishing he were someone else. (*Dead Man* 48)

A scene that started with outrageous sexual comments settles into a moment of quiet, truthful, simple sadness from a woman who has not only lost her husband but also fears she missed the chance to love him.

The end of the play was particularly problematic when it came into conflict with the aforementioned cloud of American realism that hung over our heads. In his discussion of realism, Vladimir Nabokov noted that artists had become “so hypnotized by the conventionally accepted rules of cause and effect that [they] will invent a cause and modify an effect rather than have none at all” (326). The desire for a linear narrative is strong – particularly in younger artists who have yet to experience the myriad methods of storytelling that are available to them. Long before rehearsals began, I had asked my fiancé to read the play so we could discuss it at home. He found the final two scenes frustrating, because he couldn’t figure out what had happened. In the penultimate scene, Jean awakens in the afterlife (after having been knocked unconscious by Gordon’s mistress in Johannesburg), and has a long conversation with the real Gordon, who explains death, lies, and his ideas concerning the relativity of morality. Jean is eventually left alone when Gordon is sucked through the cosmic pipeline to wait for his mother, but she calls out to Gordon’s brother Dwight (using their romantically agreed upon password: the letter Z), at which point she is sucked away too, only to appear back in the Johannesburg airport on a pile of luggage. Dwight and Jean are then reunited, and they return home to Mrs. Gottlieb where, in the final scene of the play, she sums up what has happened to everyone since Jean has been gone (it’s been months, apparently), and then sets herself on fire in order to join her favorite son in the afterlife. Until these two scenes, time moves in a fairly understandable and linear way in this play, but the end puts this illusion of realism to rest,

leaving a score of questions that Ruhl prefers not to answer. Did Jean really die? How long was she gone? How could she have been missing all this time? How did she come back to life? How did everything tie itself up so neatly for everyone? Why doesn't anyone care that Mrs. Gottlieb killed herself?!

In the first rehearsal of the Minnesota production, one of the actors asked directly what happens at the end of the play. "It seems a little abrupt," he told me, treading lightly as he expressed his frustration to this relatively unknown guest director. But I quickly assured him he wasn't wrong. There is a distinct shift in tone and format in the final scene that suddenly seems to become a funhouse mirror version of what has already been a fairly distorted world. At first, I tried to find the kind of concrete, Aristotelian plot elements that lead easily to the climax and tidily into the denouement, but eventually I realized that concrete answers were not as important as the feelings that were evoked by each of these events. It doesn't really matter if Jean is dead or unconscious or somehow sucked bodily into the cosmic pipeline for a temporary visit. It doesn't matter how long she was gone, or why Mrs. Gottlieb suddenly hurls herself into a giant barbecue pit (while singing) without a moment's hesitation. What matters is that the creator of the thoughtful, loving, exemplary Gordon encounters the real man, and her concept of goodness cannot survive the collision. From the moment she meets him, the world cannot be the same. If the initial laughter at Ruhl's strange world comes at least in part from the incongruity we experience between this world and ours, the final scene then changes the rules, and subjects the audience to a second level of incongruity – one that is now out of step even with the bizarre world that only recently had begun to feel familiar.

A clue to the abruptness of this ending comes back to Ruhl's dissatisfaction with the Aristotelian narrative arc that assumes a catharsis and a moral lesson.⁹⁷ We might expect Jean to confess her lies, and be absolved and loved because of the valuable "lesson" she has learned.⁹⁸ But when that expectation is not met, providing instead resolutions we didn't even know we were looking for (Dwight printing subversive political tracts? Hermia in the ice follies?), it feels rushed and contrived, but the contrivance is intentional.⁹⁹ Ruhl lampoons Aristotle's expected denouement, providing resolution in a series of exaggerated symbols and metaphors, instead of linear and justifiable human behavior. Mrs. Gottlieb's unprovoked summing up is a barrage of resolutions:

A lot has happened since you've been here, Jean. Dwight has been using his letter press to publish books of subversive political theory and poetry [...] He's on all the government watch lists [...] And Gordon's mistress – Carlotta – she's taken over his business [...] He left her nothing, you see, I the will – and she'd been with him twelve years. Gordon should have been more generous. And Hermia – well, Hermia has had an offer to return to the stage [...] The Ice follies. Hermia used to be a world class dramatic skater, but Gordon thought it was undignified for his wife to dance on the ice wearing loud make-up. So she left the follies for him [...] Well, now the follies have her back. She's on tour. Denmark, then San Jose. (*Dead Man 60*)

Soon after, Jean explains the afterlife, Mrs. Gottlieb kills herself, and everyone lives "happily ever after." But it's not really how appropriate or believable the ending may feel that matters.

⁹⁷ Mac Wellman, a prominent (and wildly unconventional) playwright and one of Ruhl's teachers, notes that "The ARISTOTELIAN is the story unfolded as plot. The STRANGE is the story perpendicular to the ARISTOTELIAN which unfold in phase space, not in time, and hence cannot be told in terms of plot" (6). In his estimation, even the most seemingly non-Aristotelian elements of a play still have ties to and intersections with the Aristotelian. Perhaps Ruhl's departure is merely perpendicular.

⁹⁸ *While You Were Sleeping*, the 1995 rom com that saw Sandra Bullock simultaneously in love with a comatose man she'd never met and his conscious brother provides an excellent model for what an audience might expect from the setup *Dead Man's Cell Phone* provides – complete with eventual confession and romantic resolution.

⁹⁹ Even the infamous handbag denouement of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* had bread crumbs left along the course of the plot that could, in retrospect, add up to that contrived happenstance. But Ruhl displays no such illusion of logic.

Ruhl prefers endings that allow us to believe that the world goes on after the action of the play concludes:

I do not like to end my plays with the phrase “End of Play,” even though editors often cross out “The End” and substitute the phrase “End of Play.” To me “The End” signifies mythic time and the notion that, oddly, there is no end. “The End,” for me somehow implies its opposite. Its very finality implies a new cycle beginning. Whereas “End of Play” implies the end of some aesthetic object that has a definite and real end because it is, after all, only an object. (*100 Essays* 209)

Ruhl’s desire for an open ending goes beyond the emotional difficulty in departing from the world of a play.¹⁰⁰ She notes that this hinting at continuation is a characteristic of comic titles as well, claiming that “comedies...use linguistic structures that describe life in general persisting after the play is over” (*100 Essays* 10).¹⁰¹ Perhaps Jean has learned that the rest of the world is under no obligation to behave as she would like them to, that her view of the world is not necessarily how the world really *is*, and that she cannot achieve authenticity herself by expecting others to be inauthentic themselves. Still, despite her troublesome attempts to impose her world view on those around her, there are no visible consequences for any of the lying or organ trafficking or infidelity or any other bad behavior that has populated the previous hour and a half. Perhaps Jean and Dwight will share “not a mediocre love, but the strongest love in the world, absolutely requited” (*Dead Man* 62), but Ruhl doesn’t tell us exactly where everyone else ends up. In conversation during rehearsals, we wondered if this ending might be just one of any number of possibilities floating about among the spheres for these

¹⁰⁰ In Cixous’s veneration of women in the face of their male oppressors, she proclaims, “Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we’re not afraid of lacking” (878). There is a certain admiration for a lack of resolution in these words that might link Ruhl’s dramaturgy to Cixous’s *écriture féminine*.

¹⁰¹ It is, perhaps, optimistic of Ruhl to assume that the public writ large would read an open ending with quite as much poetic meaning as this quote assumes. Might Ms. Ruhl have a bit of Jean in her after all?

extraordinary characters. As Dwight takes Jean in his arms and proclaims, “Now we kiss. And the lights go out” (*Dead Man* 63), the recognition of the stage further confounds the world of this play, and we laugh at the metatheatricality, the nod to formulaic love stories, and the refusal to live up to the formula.

As Thomas points out in his discussion of nonrealistic texts, “the given circumstances governing their worlds are determined more by thematic issues than by plot or character. In other words, the given circumstances in nonrealistic plays create literally a *theme world*” (69). This is a key insight when attempting to define a genre for *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*. Jean’s journey is about the way her naïve idealism influences those around her – and on herself. In a world of organ trafficking, carnivorous mothers, and cosmic pipelines, the given circumstances construct a cloud in which comedy and tragedy, ideals and reality confront each other in a thunderous cacophony of laughter, tears, and puzzled silences.¹⁰² Al-Shamma arrives at the label of “a post-modern comic fantasy” (*Critical Study* 97), noting the postmodern resistance to constructs that might delineate a play as a straightforward comedy or a tragedy (or a melodrama, for that matter). But in reading Ruhl’s musings on genre, her comments on fairy tales seem appropriate: “In fairy tales there is no real world that precedes the fiction; there is only a fiction that continually unfolds” (*100 Essays* 30). With so little background about any of the characters – and Jean in particular – *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* relies only on the story it tells, rather than some deep, dark history that pushes the characters on their paths, and it was this

¹⁰² In most cases, when I make references to audience reactions, I am inferring what is intended by the playwright, rather than relating directly what a specific audience may have experienced during a specific performance. I believe that the playwright’s expectations of the reaction of the audience is important to the understanding of dramatic literature, and am taking a bit of dramatic license as a scholar and practitioner to relate my interpretations of the potential relationship between the material, the production, and the audience.

sort of thinking that led me to think of the play as a sort of digital fairy tale.¹⁰³ This freed us up in productions to throw ourselves into the sometimes magical, sometimes illogical (sometimes outright bizarre) events of the story, to discover and decide on the rules, and to bring to life vivid versions of Ruhl's world that were distinctively ours.

CURTAIN CALL

Before I directed *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, I had never seen a production of any of Ruhl's plays.¹⁰⁴ I was a reader and an admirer, and I had obviously been writing and thinking in reasonable depth about her works, but it was not until the irreplaceable opportunity to engage with her text not once, but twice that I became a collaborator. Over the course of analysis, rehearsal, and performance for these two wholly different production experiences, I was able to develop an understanding of this script that I never would have had otherwise. Though I cannot say that I have definitive answers to all of Ruhl's enigmatic questions, I can look back with confidence on the work I shared with these collections of artists, confident that the answers we found were true to the worlds we lived in for those brief moments. In a speech to Amherst University in 2008 Sarah Ruhl explained her career shift from poetry to theatre: "I found the public voice of theater satisfying...because the visual universe became the subtext for the poem. The silent poetic image could be realized physically on the stage" (*From Poetry*). Ruhl

¹⁰³ The fairy tale genre has, in many ways, become nearly synonymous with the Walt Disney versions, in which, more often than not, they "share the common underlying structure of an active hero, the prince, who saves the passive heroine, the princess, from malicious females who are the social and sexual rivals of the heroine" (Duggan 15). This is, of course, a reductive – albeit pervasive – account of what is historically a much more complex and nuanced genre. In the Disney sense, Ruhl's play certainly seems divergent, as this princess (Jean) is neither a princess nor is she saved by a prince. Whether she saves herself, or she and Dwight save each other, or whether anyone is saved (or truly needs saving) at all remains to be seen. But the journey and tribulations on the way to finding her authentic self do feel appropriate to the fairy tale.

¹⁰⁴ As of February 2015, I have still never seen one of Ruhl's plays live that was not directed by yours truly.

writes for the stage; she writes for psycho-physical interpretation. She writes invitations to artists who are brave enough to plunge into a mystery and solve it as they go.



Figure 17 - Dwight Kisses Jean in the closet of the stationery store, as the CBs sprinkle them with paper snow - WSU

CHAPTER 6: EPILOGUE

By a strange twist of fate, in 2014 I found myself at dinner on a chilly October evening in the tiny town of Frostburg, MD with well-known comedy writer Bruce Vilanch. Though I knew him primarily from my childhood viewings of *Hollywood Squares*, Bruce Vilanch got his start writing comedy when a burgeoning performer named Bette Midler, after reading one of his reviews of her 1970 cabaret show, asked him to start writing for her. After working and touring with her, he made quite a reputation for himself as a staple of the TV variety show; writing for "Donny and Marie" and "The Brady Bunch Hour" among others. In 1989, he began writing for telecasts of the Academy Awards, eventually serving as its head writer for years. He also told us about one job in which he was called in as the only male writer for a comedy special on Lifetime called "Laughing Back: Comedy Takes a Stand" that featured such 1990s headliners as Delta Burke, Sharon Stone, and Janeane Garofalo. The 1999 documentary about him – *Get Bruce!* – portrays him as Hollywood's "go-to guy" for punching up jokes in any performance for any performer.

Vilanch came to visit Frostburg State University on his way to Washington, DC to write for the upcoming ceremony awarding the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor to Jay Leno.¹⁰⁵ Lucky for us, his manager is an alumnus of FSU, and that is how he happened our way. All afternoon and evening he regaled us with tales of his time with Bette Midler, Lily Tomlin, Marie Osmond, Ellen Degeneres, Joan Rivers, and so on.¹⁰⁶ The list of brilliant, all-but-undeniably

¹⁰⁵ In seventeen years of the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor, it has been awarded to five women.

¹⁰⁶ I was one of a group of local folks deemed by the chair of FSU's Theatre Department as interesting enough to dine with Bruce after his public talk.



Figure 18 - Jennifer with Bruce Vilanch, his manager, and some of the faculty of Frostburg State University's Department of Theatre & Dance - 16 October 2014¹⁰⁷

funny women with whom he had worked seemed nearly endless, so I couldn't help but ask him – over organic soup and martinis – about the pervasive insistence that women are not funny. He shook his trademark wooly head: "I never understood that. I grew up surrounded by funny women, so it never occurred to me until I got out in the world and heard people – usually crotchety old men – saying that. I don't know where it comes from. I think women are hilarious."

The actual question of where the “women aren't funny” myth comes from may never be satisfactorily answered, and frankly, the origins of such a reductive and erroneous notion prove not to be terribly important to the discussion of comedy written by women. What may be more important is the underrepresentation of women that stems, at least in part, from that persistent myth. According to Regina Barreca, "Women's comedy is marginal, liminal, concerned with and defined by its very exclusion from convention, by its aspects of refusal" (*Last Laughs* 15). Barreca establishes fertile groundwork for a study like this dissertation,

¹⁰⁷ Photo courtesy of Frostburg State University Department of Theatre & Dance

defining not *how* all women are writing, but the circumstances under which they are writing and the circumstances under which they are (mis)interpreted. The plays I have treated in this study are written with an awareness of comic expectations laid out by numerous – mostly male – theorists and writers before them. And though they are sufficiently aware of those expectations, they are not reliant upon them. In fact, not only do many women writers refuse to conform to canonical comic expectations, they do not confine themselves to any one single prescribed way of responding to them. It is, in many ways, the variable nature of the comic devices at work in women's writing that makes them more difficult to pin down, less likely to be accepted and identified in a conventional way, but, in my humble opinion, more exciting to engage with.

When I asked how she would define comedy, Sheila Callaghan told me, "I guess it has to have an element of surprise, you know what, I guess it has to have an element of surprise, it catches you off guard, and it tells you the truth about something in a way that you hadn't seen it before" (Interview).¹⁰⁸ Theories of incongruity and violation are standard fare in comic theory. All too often they are described in tandem with distancing, with making easier, with comfort. John Morreall, for example, suggests that comedy serves to "disengage us from situations that would otherwise be disturbing. They 'aestheticize' problems so that the mental jolt they give us brings pleasure rather than negative emotions" (*Comic Relief* 53). But Ruhl and Callaghan use their incongruity and violation of norms and expectations to bring their audiences closer to the pain and strangeness of each playwright's dramatic worlds, to complicate, and to unsettle the

¹⁰⁸ This description has a lot in common with Bertolt Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* (Alienation effect), "a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this 'effect' is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view: (Willet 125).

settled. Their “mental jolts” intertwine rather than separate the pleasure and negative emotions mentioned in the previous quote. Both playwrights deal significantly in incongruity, but they express it in the comic devices they choose to illuminate that incongruity. For Wylie Sypher, “Comedy is essentially a Carrying Away of Death, a triumph over mortality by some absurd faith in rebirth, restoration, and salvation” (220). But Ruhl and Callaghan use their comedy to summon death and destruction rather than to banish it. In *The Clean House*, it is incongruous – and therefore traditionally funny – that everyone seems to have more sympathy for and interest in the “other woman” than in the “wronged wife,” but this incongruity is itself made more incongruous by Ruhl’s inclusion of illness and death. How do we respond when faced with such unexpectedly complicated situations? It seems incongruous to laugh, and yet, in the hands of these playwrights, we almost inevitably do. And though Matilde attempts to instill her surroundings with laughter, she tells jokes in a language we do not understand, or she uses the jokes as euthanasia. Callaghan drops 1980s Jane Fonda into the middle of 21st-century murder sprees, yet somehow, as the degradation of women progresses from murder to Jell-O wrestling, to rape *and* murder, Callaghan treats as incongruous her audience’s *questioning* of this world rather than the violence itself. In the comic dramaturgies of both Ruhl and Callaghan, incongruity compounds incongruity as each playwright repeatedly upsets the audience’s unacknowledged expectations, elevating each playwright’s own unique approaches to the subject, style, and form with which they are working. John Morreall explains that “The core concept in incongruity theories is based on the fact that human experience works with learned patterns. What we have experienced prepares us to deal with what we will experience” (*Comic Relief* 10). This seems to apply to comedy itself: the label of comedy is based on learned

patterns and experiences as well. This is the sort of comedy that Mac Wellman might scoff at, complaining that the comic is “now mostly a musty relic of obviousness, obvious incongruity, the Already known [perfected] humor of the GEEZER” (8). So when Ruhl and Callaghan stray from those expectations, they may unintentionally perpetuate the narrative that “women aren't funny.” But their refusal is not a failure or absence of the comic. Rather, it is an expansion of it – a reach beyond the humor of the GEEZER.

Too often, conventional wisdom intones, “*Qui sent, pleure; Qui pense, rit* (Who feels, cries; who thinks, laughs), or Horace Walpole's observation that “this world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel” (*Comic Relief* 31). But, over and over again, writers like Ruhl and Callaghan beg to differ. Like Bergson, they “shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. [They] regard it, above all, as a living thing” (61). In the hands of innovative writers like these, the potential of comedy is constantly evolving. Even with all their emotional weight and stylistic strangeness, the plays I have addressed in this dissertation – and countless others written by other funny women – remain funny. At the same time that they bring their audiences to tears, they inspire gales of laughter and amazed chuckles and disbelieving chortles. John Morreall notes that “Negative emotions like fear, disgust, and anger are also reactions to what violates our mental patterns and expectations” (*Comic Relief* 12-13). And while he argues that humor invites amusement in place of those emotions, Ruhl and Callaghan invite those emotions to pile into the car for a long, sweaty road trip with laughter as the navigator.

After engaging just five plays by only two playwrights, it feels safe to state that there is no universal *écriture féminine* at work in the DNA of plays by women.¹⁰⁹ The robust variety of approaches to narrative, genre, diction, and comic devices grows with each page written. And, with that knowledge, the potential for continuing this study is vast. Both Ruhl and Callaghan have other noteworthy plays that could certainly be brought into this conversation in an expanded version. Following the beautifully melancholy Tilly and her friends on their path toward transforming themselves into almonds in Ruhl's *The Melancholy Play*, or the recalcitrant eleven-year-old Janice as she attempts to blow up herself and her mother on Christmas morning in Callaghan's *Crumble (Lay Me Down, Justin Timberlake)* would yield still more approaches to comedy. And both playwrights are still producing new work. Furthermore, there are the numerous other writers whose exceptional comic voices deserve to be studied and understood. Deborah Zoe Laufer's *Out of Sterno* is "a wickedly funny yet touching" (Brandenburg) story of a shut-in housewife who becomes a manicurist specializing in household appliances on the way to becoming her own assassin. Of Young Jean Lee, Wexner Center for the Arts director of performing arts Charles Helm remarks that "She deliberately has these curve balls [...] You start to wonder, 'Is this supposed to be funny? Do I have permission to laugh?' And it forces you to question where you are relative to the questions she's posing" (Bent 30). In Bekah Brunstetter's bizarre meditation on motherhood and wifeliness, *You May Go Now*, the "marvelously perverse humor [...] goes way past the expected to rip through the gut while you're laughing" ("About"). Like Ruhl and Callaghan and so many others, these writers are finding insightful, strange, and exciting roads into comedy at every turn.

¹⁰⁹ Refer to my discussion of *écriture féminine* in Chapter 2.

The conversation around the power of women's comic writing in the theatre can and should continue. The immense subversive potential of comic inversion is powerful and exciting in the hands of reality-shaping playwrights such as Ruhl, Callaghan, and their contemporaries. In my own small contribution, I have been able to highlight Ruhl's dissection and re-appropriation of comic devices from joke structure to stock characters to repetition, all in service of a complex interplay of the comic and tragic. My exploration of Callaghan's plays reveals the playwright's wicked dance along the razor's edge of benign violation that challenges the implicit safety of aesthetic distance. Established perceptions of the comic serve as jumping off points for discovery and innovation, providing stylistic monkey bars from which adventurous writers can swing freely. As the definitions of the comic open to include more devices, ideas, emotions, and writers, there is no revelation of an *écriture féminine* that unites them all under the single umbrella of women's comedy. But with each page written and appropriately recognized for its contribution to comedy, Cixous's words echo through the canon, inviting these women "to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter" (Cixous 888).

APPENDIX: Full Transcript of Interview with Sheila Callaghan

On Tuesday, November 19, 2013, I sat down over skype with playwright Sheila Callaghan to talk about her work. A prolific mid-career playwright, Callaghan has received the Susan Smith Blackburn Award, a Cherry Lane Mentorship Fellowship, a Princess Grace Award for emerging artists, and several other awards and fellowships, and in 2010 she was profiled by *Marie Claire* as one of 18 women who are changing the world. Her work has been produced at Clubbed Thumb, Woolly Mammoth and Actors Theatre of Louisville, to name only a very few of her prominent associations. Currently living in Los Angeles, Callaghan is a writer on Showtime's *Shameless*, and is still cranking out plays.

Jennifer Goff: If you just could talk to me a little bit about what excites you about playwriting, what kinda got you started, what's your approach, just a little about you.

Sheila Callaghan: I always, I read a lot as a kid and I wrote a lot, and I had little a bit of a middle child complex, so, attention seeking kind of a person, and so I sort of naturally fell into theatre in I guess middle school. I enjoyed acting, I wasn't terribly good at it. I have a lot of manic energy, and so it tends to you know devour a lot of the air around me. – So , uh but I loved the aspect of the stage that was inclusive and the dynamic created between the performer and the audience and the, the kind of very particular relationship that you have with an audience that starts in the beginning of the show and ends at the end of the show, and this intimacy that was created limited – and I also love working with other performers backstage and building something as like a gift to give to people. I mean this is as I you know move throughout the theatre, these are the things that I kept coming back – it's nourishment – and um writing – I mean I always expected to be a poet or a novelist or something – because I was so in love with the written word but the more I – you know, I got my degree in literature – and the more I pulled away from the viscera of the theatre, the more I longed for it you know. And so there was some point I made a conscious decision in college – to try to smash both of my loves together and start writing for the stage. Which I'd always seen them as separate, like oh here's my literary side and here's my performer side. But, so, right after college I got a degree in playwriting and was sort of disillusioned a little bit by that, because you know school is a lot different than real life.

JG: So they say.

SC: Yeah. And also I was in a program that wasn't particularly built for professional theatre writers. It was in LA. So I was interested in being in LA because I was also interested in writing for film and TV, but I got my playwriting degree, so playwriting out here as you might imagine isn't nearly, doesn't nearly have the same kind of, you know, uh, import as it does in other schools and especially in New York. So I just went back to New York, I'm an east coast girl. Went back to New York and spent my time building a career in theatre there and that was and continues to be nourishing, incredibly nourishing to me.

JG: What makes you laugh?

SC: My kid right now, saying stupid shit. (laughter) Um, I don't know, I'm a hard person to make laugh, honestly. Because I feel like, huh. You know what makes me laugh? The internet –like, that absurd, strange humor that in the past 5-10 years has become like untenable to some people, insider-y to other people, um surprising, because you're never really sure what's gonna pop. And so I think actually, being surprised is what makes me laugh... and people falling. Well I guess there's an element of surprise there too. I don't like people getting hurt, but people falling. I know that sounds ridiculous. But I also like, uh, character based humor when we're talking about I guess dramatic writing, or even novels. But I do have a hard time laughing, because most things I just don't find surprising.

JG: How would you define comedy?

SC: I guess it has to have an element of surprise, you know what, I guess it has to have an element of surprise, it catches you off guard, and it tells you the truth about something in a way that you hadn't see it before. I mean I feel like Amy Schumer as a comedian, as a female comedian who's very contemporary, she has this really incredible way of getting at female comedy which, it feels incredibly feminine, incredibly female based, doesn't alienate kind of like you said before, because it's not... it is addressing women's issues without addressing women, it's addressing people and it's getting at human truths – And Louis CK has a similar thing for men, although it's not perceived as male comedy because he's a male comedian and you're a male comedian it's just like the baseline comedy level, right? But with Amy, she's doing almost the exact same thing with almost a kind of similar tone – absurd, surprising, truth-telling, um, way of approaching comedy. I feel like, that's how I would define the comedy that speaks to me. Which is almost sometimes not funny – does that make sense? It's almost too truthful. Like sometimes I'll be watching, um, it's similar in tone to um, like um, fake news like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert – that like, they have a little bit of remove, and they're telling truth in the guise of not parody, but satire, but it's getting at something deep and serious. But disarming you and surprising you in the way that it comes at it. So I feel like, that's not all comedy. Some comedy is just people beating each other on the head with sticks. But that's not the comedy I like.

I wanted to just say this. It's really, I feel ill equipped to talk about comedy because I don't feel like I'm a comedy writer, especially now being out in LA and writing for a TV drama, but that has comedy, and then I also wrote for a TV comedy that had dramatic bents – so tonally I feel like comic doesn't describe my work, but funny might. If that makes sense. In comic work the goal is to make people laugh, in funny work, I think the goal is to make people see, or see truth, you know, and if you happen to laugh at the absurdity of what's being presented to you, then I think that's what makes it humorous, at least in my work, and what I like to watch. So I hope that answers your question.

JG: What is the role of the funny or the comic in these plays, or do you even see them as comic?

SC: Well, you know, when I try to write descriptions for publishers if they decide to publish the plays, I always write comic or comedy in them because I feel like there are laughs in them, but I

don't see them as comedies, because their purpose isn't to make people laugh, and I feel like that's what defines a comedy in the way that we see it traditionally, um, but... I guess I know that these are funny because people laugh at them. I have like a, I have a terrible fear of boring my audience and so one of the ways that you can make sure that they're at least attentive, it's by hearing them laugh, right?. And so if I have an audience of people who are at least engaged enough to vocalize it then I know that at least they're not bored, and so there's this part of me that I feel like is like a little bit of a laugh whore. Like if I can, at least like oh it's not fast enough, it's not funny enough, I need more jokes, I always feel like I need more jokes. Or sometimes I'll, you know, do that at the expense of um good taste. Because um I just want to make sure that people are still with me. And I think it's a little, I don't know, it's a little, I wouldn't say it's cheap, but I think it's an insecure way of approaching an audience, just, you should just trust that they're with you. But there were some nights when I was so sure when we were doing *The Rape Play*, that um people were hating it, and they were super quiet because they weren't laughing at any jokes, and it wasn't that, it was they were having the experience that I would be having which is this is funny, but it's true. And I don't know where I fall on the side of Wanting to laugh at something that feels raw and be implicated in you know, the villainy of what is being shown, you know? So it's complicated. So I guess my humor is an effort to make people see, and engage people and not have them be bored. Or at least, like, you know, it's a good way of being political too, right? Like, you get a little bit of aesthetic distance from something so you're more able to talk about, 'cause people don't want to be taught how to think they want to find their own way there— and if they're caught off guard, it's a way of disarming them so they can be more receptive to anything, to a different point of view, something they're not used to.

JG: Would you describe yourself as a political playwright?

SC: No, but I would say that some of my work is political. I write straight up stories too. I mean, I wouldn't say that *Crumble* is political at all. But *Women Laughing Alone with Salad* is definitely political, *The Rape Play* is definitely political, *Roadkill Confidential...* enh, I dunno. I mean, I guess I can set out to write a political play if I want, and then if I want to tell a story I can do that too, it just depends on the subject I guess. I just wrote this straight up romantic comedy that has no, like it's devoid of point of view on anything but love, it's love! It's love! And I was thinking of Sarah actually as I was writing it, because I'm like, sometimes I think about why she's so popular, and her stuff is humorous and light and winning and interesting linguistically and interesting theatrically, but it's just got this huge beating heart in the middle of it, and so many people find so much relief in that and uh so I wanted to try to write something like that. But um, yeah, I mean that's off topic, but yeah.

JG: Your plays tend to have a lot of kind of really dark, raw, tough stuff in them, that as you pointed out, it's still funny, but funny in a very strange way. Where does funny intersect with this darkness for you, do you think?

SC: Well, I mean I've been in theatre that feels brutal for the sake of being brutal and I like that just fine, but I also think unless it's done really delicately, it runs the risk of brutalizing without effect, you know. People just feel like what was the point of that. I feel terrible, what am I

learning? Why have I put myself through this, just to feel like shit? What are you telling me about the world, right? I feel like if you put humor, if you lace humor throughout that kind of brutality, you're pulling people out enough so they don't have to ask those questions, you're giving them a tiny little bit of perspective, tiny little bit of relief um so that they're able to answer that question why am I being put through this – or ask the right questions. Because you never want to have an audience – I don't ever want to have an audience walk out saying what the fuck was that about. I want them to feel like that raised a lot of questions, and I'm interested in what it means. But not like that was pointless, why did you hurt me? You know? I mean, I still feel like you know some of my work might do that. Not everybody gets everything, right? I mean, somebody like Sarah's work is like it's going to be liked by more people because it loves people, you know? And it challenges people in a way that people want to be challenged, and I love that experience too. But um, but I also love the experience of being brutalized. If I can laugh through that it makes the brutality even more stark, you know? Just pure brutality, right? You're going to get weary of that in a while, but if it's got spikes of I wouldn't say lightness, but um, not even levity, but just hysteria, you know? Then you're like released so that you can fall back down and be like okay, alright, okay, I had a little rest, I'm coming back down, where am I? Where are my feet? Instead of just like sinking back down into the mud. I mean, I don't know if this is helpful, but I think that's what, when I'm watching the stuff, this is how I feel.

JG: What has been your experience of other people's reactions to your work – reviewers and audiences?

SC: I don't get reviewed terribly well, honestly not in New York at least. I feel like, I don't quite understand why. I mean I feel like. I don't know. Do you know David Adjmi's work? He's a complicated writer that his work tends to be messy, and it doesn't fall into um, any sort of formula that we feel comfortable with, but it also doesn't go way way way outside the boundary of narrative storytelling as we know it. So it's really hard to get a handle on, and therefore he gets incredibly complicated reactions, which therefore don't necessarily always bend toward praise and a warm reception. And I feel like my work has a similar thing, because I feel like it's a little messy, it's a little angular, it doesn't necessarily set out to please or to answer the questions it raises, and so people always tend to have a complicated reaction to it. But I get a lot of writers, Writers tend to like my work, or at least respect it. I get a lot more positive affirmation from my peers than I do from the press. And from students, young students who've been introduced to me by their teachers, which is really rewarding. I mean I guess I'd rather have that.

JG: Based on these responses, Do you think that they're missing what you're trying to do, or are they missing what you find funny, or is there kind of a disconnect in what you're doing with comedy and what they're seeing, do you think?

SC: Well I think they don't maybe, they don't really trust the comedy because it's um, they don't – I don't want to say they misunderstand because I feel like that's a cop out a little bit, like oh they didn't get it, you know. I mean maybe they got something that they didn't like or

they wanted a simpler answer or they thought that I didn't have control over my material. Which I think is actually a bigger frustration for theatre critics is when they feel like the writer doesn't have control over their material, they get frustrated by the experience of watching. And often I don't necessarily have complete control over the material because I'm not trying to rein it in, I'm trying to detonate it and then see what falls. And I think that's what the humor in my work tries to do is continually make small detonations into what I'm exploring so that it continues to open up. Which, you know, if you're trying to get a definitive answer from a piece of art um, you're going to be disappointed. And uh, I'm not saying that artwork that offers definitive answers is disappointing, but I'm saying that artwork that doesn't set out to have definitive answers is going to be disappointing if you're expecting it. And I don't know that, at least in New York, theatre critics' approach to work is all that inclusive. Feels pretty narrow to me. You have experimental, and you have traditional, and anything in the middle is difficult to discuss, especially for papers who are trying to retain their readership, you know?

JG: I've read a couple of reviews of some of your work, that I just felt like they weren't seeing the same play that I was reading sometimes, and I haven't actually seen any productions of your work.

SC: I often feel that. But also like, it's about context. Like, sometimes I get poor reviews because the writer has been tipped off that I'm a TV writer, and they're bringing that information. Sometimes they're tipped off that I'm a downtown darling and that aggravates them. Or sometimes they have no idea that I'm not a new playwright, and they will approach my work with that. I mean, there's just such a disconnect in voices approaching anybody's canon in theatre unless you have a champion very early that alerts the world that you're somebody worth paying attention to, and I haven't had that. So um, you know, I'm not lamenting it, it's just what happens when there are so many writers and so much to watch and so many critics. So um, so I think not knowing how to come to the work is also a problem in perception, but that's fine I mean whatever a lot of people aren't going to know how to come to the work, I just can hope that at least 50% of the people get it, and the other 50% don't hate me.

JG: You mentioned poetry and originally kind of thinking of yourself as a poet, and I certainly think your plays are poetic. What is the function of poetry and the poetic in your work?

SC: Well, I mean language is disarming, right? When you have a little turn of phrase that that is, it reveals something about the way that you view the world or the way that language works even. I mean, if you think about it, you know, How much language do we have in our world in our vocabulary as English speakers, as American English speakers, as East Coast American English Speakers, and our relationship to language is so quotidian, right, and then to still find surprise in the way that words describe things to me is magical – like that's my huge language fetish, is when you can still make words sound new. Kinda like the way Gertrude Stein was doing in the 20s? Earlier? That time, when Gertrude Stein was around. Yeah, so if I can manage to evoke that in theatre, if I can experience it in theatre, I find that thrilling, just thrilling.

You use language every day, can you still make surprises about it, surprises out of it, I should say.

JG: It's interesting that your discussion of comedy centers around surprise as well.

SC: Well, The kind of comedy that I like is language-based I think. There's a couple of you know sight gags that I do. You said you're studying *Roadkill Confidential*? There's a very notable sight gag in that where the guy drops his pants and he's wearing American flag boxers, but every time I see that I'm like that's so cheap! It's so cheap, it's not the kind of, I mean it delights me, but it's not the kind of comedy that I strive for, if I do strive for comedy, I would strive for like linguistic, complicated you know forays rather than sight gags. They're just not that interesting.

JG: There's nothing wrong with a sight gag.

SC: No, but There's one that's got a little more longevity, you know? A sight gag, you're like boom and over.

It's all surprises to me, because it's all about language.

JG: So, I'd like to talk to you a little about your new play, *Women Laughing Alone with Salad*. It's a commission, right?

SC: Yeah, it's so interesting because you like are one of the only people that have, that know this play. Like literally like I just finished it and it hasn't event gotten like a public reading yet. It had like a semi-public reading at new dramatists, but um, I think I'm gonna have a reading at the public and people are talking about it now, but it's still so new. But yeah, so we can talk about it.

JG: It was commissioned by whom?

SC: University of Maryland, Baltimore County. So they do this thing every year, or they were doing this, called Grrrl Parts – G R R R L or maybe there's one less R in there – where Susan McCully who's this power house of a feminist theatre artist type, um, she commissioned these mid-career playwrights to come down and write short plays for her, um, for the girls in the theatre department, because there just weren't enough. And so she commissioned a short play from me, and I wrote three monologues based on this internet meme. And then – I didn't get to see them 'cause I was on my show out here. So I asked how they went, she said great, she loved them, and I'm like well you know if you ever wanted to commission a full length play from me on this theme, I think I could write one. And so she did, and then I went and developed it with them. And I had my collaborator Kip Fagan who I worked with on *The Rape Play*, and I thought this was up his alley and we've been collaborating on it. So that's kinda how it came about as a commission.

JG: I kind of don't know what to ask about it. Where do you think you are in the process of this? I have your first draft is what it says.

SC: Yeah, It's a production draft, I think. I think the questions that are unanswered are gonna continue to be unanswered in it. It's a little messy, but I think it's that kind of a play.

JG: What are you trying to do with this play? I think it's fascinating, and I wish I could see it.

SC: Yeah, I don't know. That's a great question. I guess I'm just trying to make people think about the way women are – the complicated bombardment of images we get and our complicated reaction to it – and taking the blame off men, and taking the blame off women, or putting the blame on men and women about what we allow ourselves to consume in terms of um media and advertising and how we let it define ourselves and how we let it define the people we love.

JG: It just seems like this is, of the ones I've read of yours, the most based in parody. Is there a particular role for parody, or an approach that you're writing to parody?

SC: I didn't set out to write a lot of parody, but I came at it with a lot of anger, and I think I think a mockery, like there's a mockery in there. But it doesn't I don't think feel as angry as *The Rape Play* because I'm not mocking something specific, like that one I was targeting a certain kind of male writer, and here I'm just sort of targeting society, and nobody, and everybody. So that might be where the parody comes in. So like if *The Rape Play* was a mocking voice, this is a like maybe more parodic... is that a word?... parodic voice because I think its target is more diffuse.

JG: What would you say – this is sort of a really kind of annoyingly academic question. What ends up being kind of the dramatic function of comedy in your plays? I guess we've kind of talked about that a little.

SC: I guess it reveals character. I don't know – it's difficult to say, it depends on the work. I don't know if it reveals character, or sometimes it reveals truths. My TV work it reveals character. I mean, I don't want to use the word truth, I keep using the word truth. It reveals Point of view – my point of view about what the truth of the world is.

JG: *Crumble* is, it seems to me, kind of the most sort of straightforward maybe more accessible mainstream accessible sort of play of the ones that I'm looking at. Like, I see less in here that would confuse my 70 year old professor.

SC: Oh my God, your professor is 70 years old?

JG: Yeah.

SC: He's gonna love these plays if you make him read them.

JG: He has read *Crumble* and actually really did enjoy it, and suggested it for our season for next year.

SC: Oh my god, that's awesome.

JG: 'Cause there are some obviously where you're really pulling at the bounds of kind of what's expected from theatrical structure and narrative and character, then this is one where you're sort of aside from the character of the apartment, sort of giving us a pretty expected, but, they fit into expectations that we are comfortable with. Where does your kind of view of those sort of kind of tropes and expectations that are sort of always hanging around you when you sit down to write a play?

SC: Well, I mean, not to be glib, but I just don't like to be bored, I don't like to bore myself. And like, if I'm writing, like I don't always get bored by conventional narrative in the theatre. I love it sometimes. Like I just saw *Wait Until Dark*. It's like, You know, it was a movie and then they adapted for stage and they did such a good job with genre there, and I was really into it, so if it's done well and awesome then I love it, but when I'm writing it I just get so bored. And so just my urge to keep planting these little detonations and triggers just comes from my own restlessness I think. I know that's a really simple answer, but uh, I don't know that I have a better one honestly. I tried to write more conventional work. That one I guess my challenge was to write a Christmas play, because I didn't think I could do it, you know? So I guess it's sort of still grounded a little bit in conventional characters and conventional narrative structure because I think what I was detonating was the idea of a Christmas play. As being warm, fuzzy and generous. So, that might be why the narrative relaxed a little bit into something that felt familiar because the thing that I was making unfamiliar had less to do with the story and more to do with the genre idea.

JG: Would you say that there are rules in your plays? I mean obviously each play would have different rules, but, rules of the world, rules of how the play happens, rules of how things are detonated. What are the rules... are there any of your plays that have really specific rules that step out to you – this is a rule in this play, this is how the world works in this play.

SC: I don't know – I mean I feel like I find that it's sort of instinctual for me – I don't think I ever - the only thing that actually really felt like I had strict rules was when I adapted *Ulysses*, the book

JG: No small task

SC: Little Tiny little book. And I updated the uh, I set it 100 years from when the original novel was set, I put it in New York and I reversed the genders of the two main characters into um women. But I um I maintained the structure pretty specifically like chapter by chapter by chapter, so that was it. But I think each of the plays have some rules and I can tell you what they are once I'm done with them, I don't really set out to have rules, I just kind of feel where the play lives and try to contain it.

JG: Looking at them with hindsight, the hindsight of having written these plays, are there any that turned out to have worlds that functioned a very specific way, that kind of wave a flag and say this world is different, one of these things is not like the others.

SC: Well the one that I think, there's two I guess; they're not ones that you're reading. One of them is *Lascivious Something* which is set in the 80s in the Mediterranean, and so that kind of was saturated with this overindulgent, kind of tonally indulgent atmosphere and that was something that felt conscious while I was writing it.

And then, *We are not these hands* that is a world where the younger girls, it's two girls in a dystopian society that's being gentrified, I won't say gentrified, but Globalization is taking place and the western world is encroaching on it and they're experiencing sort of the growing pains of that and they have their own language, they have this street language that is completely invented, and an academic comes into their world and basically tries to rescue one of them, and they're very poor and he's not, and he has his own language, and so the rules of that world feel very tight and unfamiliar. Um, so I guess those two are the ones that feel like own thing more specifically.

A lot of my work I think is contemporary in a very specific way.

JG: How so?

SC: Well, not these two plays and not *Crumble* but *Women Laughing Alone with Salad* for sure, *The Rape Play* for sure, *Roadkill* a little more, a little less I mean than those two— but it is — um I don't know I mean, I don't quite know how to - the world is our world, but a little tweaked. It's like um our plugged in electricity voltage world, you know. So like, the language that the girls in the Rape play have kind of a lingo that feels I guess youthful and contemporary but of a like internet world.

And *Women Laughing Alone with Salad*— it feels like these people are contemporary. I mean, you know what's interesting, we did a reading of it out here, and we did it with an all-black cast — and it's so interesting how the world seemed to shift a little bit, like it was all with people of color. The jokes still landed and it still felt contemporary, but it also felt, um, bigger. I don't know why. But I guess 'cause it felt like white girl problems, you know, I'm so fat, you know, that kind of thing. But then when you cast people of color, it changes the context a little bit. And the world opened up a little more I guess is my point.

JG: Here's kind of a terrible question to ask a playwright about their own work, but these four plays that I'm specifically focusing on, what do you find funny in them? Like what are your favorite little gems in them or the things that you're like this is definitely the most upsetting and bizarre and hilarious and it shouldn't be but it is, or what do you find, what are you most attached to from a comic standpoint in these plays.

SC: I think the moments that make me feel the most uncomfortable watching them. So in *The Rape Play* there's two moments. There's one that's the dinner table scene — I love watching that one because I feel like it's so uncomfortable to watch. And then the grenade in the snatch scene.

In the *Women Laughing Alone with Salad* play – It's the scene where the women are eating the vegetables and the guy's doing smooth jazz over it, that makes me, like I don't actually laugh when I watch this, I'm just like AAAAAHHHH!!! 'Cause I like it feels just so on the nose, it digs really hard into something. Like it goes into the hell mouth of this experience, and like way too deep than you really ever want to be and it's super awkward, um, and I like that, I like that feeling, being too deep.

And um, *Roadkill Confidential* – I don't know, that one's a tougher one. I don't know that there's a single moment that I feel awesome about. I have a more complicated relationship with that play though because I don't think it was entirely successful as a play.

JG: Why is that? If you don't mind my asking.

SC: I don't quite know honestly, but I feel like it was saying all this stuff about our relationship to violence and our relationship to art and our relationship to fame, but I think I actually didn't have enough of a point of view to have the voice of the play be strong enough. That was a case when I didn't have control over my material I would say. Although I liked the material I was trafficking in, I think I had a, my point of view was a little bit diffuse. So when I think about that play, I don't know that it even has any of those moments I'm talking about.

JG: There's the whole discussion of the hitting animals dance, and there's a point where you specifically are saying it's a dance and it's funny, and then later you say we're getting this dance, but it's not funny anymore. Where it's kind of a real progression for that character from funny to awful that was interesting to me, anyway.

SC: Well I think the humor in there is visual which is, it doesn't kind of I think that's probably one of the reasons why, you know, the humor in the play, in *that* play a lot is visual because it was attempting genre a little bit. So it was more of a tone thing. And more of like um, an experiential thing rather than a linguistic thing. So it's not my sweet spot, I think.

JG: Fair enough. How about *Crumble*?

SC: What makes me uncomfortable in *Crumble*? The daughter makes me really uncomfortable – when she's masturbating and when she's um playing with her dolls. And when she's saying goodbye to stuff. 'Cause it's supposed to be kind of funny, but it's also really hard to watch a little girl go through that. It's trying to find humor in grief, which I think is one of the hardest things to do, and also one of the most poignant if you can manage it.

I hope it was helpful, it's weird, because I don't like to talk about my work honestly, because I feel like I don't really know, I've done enough of it to know like I can see patterns at some point, but like I said I don't see myself as a comedy writer so it's very strange to be talking about myself in terms of humor. 'Cause I don't, I know what I like to watch, and I hope that I'm actually able to write it. So but thank you, I'm very flattered that you're doing this. It feels weird.

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ABSTRACT**“IF MORE WOMEN KNEW MORE JOKES...”:
THE COMIC DRAMATURGY OF SARAH RUHL AND SHEILA CALLAGHAN**

by

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May 2015

Advisor: Dr. Mary Elizabeth Anderson**Major:** Theatre**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

Conversations around women and comedy are few, and tend to swirl around the tired question of whether or not women are funny. Conclusions usually range from, “They’re not” to a few token funny women whose exceptional wit proves the rule that, in fact, women are not funny. Or, if women are funny, they have a specific, feminine brand of humor that has an almost genetic set of differences from men’s comedy. In this dissertation, rather than outlining an essentialized poetics of "women's comedy," I identify two prominent women writing comedy for the theatre today. Drawing on comic, dramatic and feminist theory resources, I proceed through my study giving two remarkable playwrights – Sarah Ruhl and Sheila Callaghan – a chapter dedicated to illuminating each of their respective comic universes, and acknowledging its place in an increasingly complex network of what this contemporary moment may accept as comic. Building on close reading, interplay with established theory, and my personal experiences interviewing one playwright and producing the work of the other, I examine the

comic devices at work in their plays, and the ways in which they follow or differ from the rules that have historically excluded these writers from this sort of recognition.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

I am a native of Alaska, a product of Colorado, a devotee of Oregon, a friend of South Carolina, a lover of Michigan, and a resident of Maryland. Prior to my doctoral studies at Wayne State, I earned a BA in Drama & English from University of Portland and an MA in Theatre from University of South Carolina. I have worked on stage, behind the scenes, and in administrative roles at theatres including Portland Center Stage, Paula Productions, The Warehouse Theatre, Centre Stage - South Carolina, The Upstate Shakespeare Festival, and The South Carolina Children's Theatre. While in South Carolina, I co-founded The Distracted Globe Theatre Company – dedicated to classic comedy and comedy about the classics. I also spent four years as Chief Curiosity Officer for national Naming and Identity firm Brains on Fire, where I developed and led consumer insight and strategy development. I have two brothers, two nieces, a sizable extended family, an exceedingly fun fiancé, and four hilarious cats. A director, actor, singer, musician, scholar, writer, and teacher, I am devoted to the power of a good story, however it may be told.