



October 3, 2006

THEATER REVIEW | 'EURYDICE'

A Comic Impudence Softens a Tale of Loss

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

NEW HAVEN, Sept. 29 — Love and grief, life and death are both endless and tentative, fixed and mutable in the strange world of “Eurydice,” the devastatingly lovely — and just plain devastating — theatrical gloss on the Orpheus myth by the inventive young playwright Sarah Ruhl.

As realized, impeccably, by the director Les Waters and a talented team of actors and designers for the [Yale Repertory Theater](#), Ms. Ruhl’s quirky contemporary meditation on a much-meditated-upon story has some of the subliminal potency of music, the head-scratching surprise of a modernist poem and the cockeyed allure of a surrealist painting. It’s pretty funny, too.

Oh, yeah, and it may just be the most moving exploration of the theme of loss that the American theater has produced since the events of Sept. 11, 2001, although Ms. Ruhl began work on the play before that terrible day.

All this may come as a surprise, since Ms. Ruhl is still unknown to most New York theatergoers. “Eurydice” has already been seen in Madison, Wis., and Berkeley, Calif., and Ms. Ruhl’s fantastical domestic comedy “The Clean House,” a [Pulitzer Prize](#) finalist in 2005, has been produced just about everywhere but New York, it seems. (Happily, that oversight is being corrected by [Lincoln Center Theater](#) this fall.) Ms. Ruhl has also just been awarded a [MacArthur Foundation](#) “genius” grant.

But let’s not hold that against her, please. I even hesitate to sing this play’s praises too loudly, lest a backlash spoil her belated entree into the city’s theater scene. I should also warn that Ms. Ruhl’s offbeat style, which mixes colors and tones in ways that can be delightful but occasionally jarring, requires some re-education for audiences used to the contemporary theater’s steady diet of naturalism and relatively straightforward demarcations between comedy and drama.

As it happens, re-education is one of the primary themes of “Eurydice,” in which love is seen as an continuing process of remembering and reconstructing, of looking back — even when the act of recollection brings anguish. You probably recall the basic narrative of the myth, which famously turns on a backward glance. Orpheus goes on a rescue mission when his beloved Eurydice dies, venturing into the underworld to retrieve her by charming the gods with his sweet music. Granted permission, he disobeys an admonition not to look back, and loses her again, this time forever.

The tale, which has inspired at least three significant operas, a couple of classic movies and a Balanchine ballet, is an enduringly appealing story of the tremendous power of love, and of its fragility. Despite its

tragic ending, it also whispers a comforting suggestion of connections surviving even the seemingly absolute separation of death.

As the play's title suggests, Ms. Ruhl's interest lies with Eurydice, who has the worst of it, dying twice as she does. The story's scope is widened to embrace not just romantic love — which comes in for some gentle mockery — but also the bond between a father and a daughter, depicted here as a force as elemental and sustaining as that other, oft-rhapsodized kind.

On her wedding day, Eurydice (Maria Dizzia) wanders away from the happy celebration to take a drink of water. She's head over heels in love with Orpheus, but it has already been established that they speak slightly different languages: he's all about music, she's into books. "I always thought there would be more interesting people at my wedding," she says, apologetic but a little dispirited. Enter a friendly but ominous figure, holding out the promise of a letter from her father, who happens to be dead.

The divide between life and afterlife is a little porous, it appears, although mail service is spotty. (This is the first she's heard from Dad.) Unable to resist the lure of loving words, Eurydice follows the stranger to his high-lying loft apartment and — oops! — falls to her death.

Once she enters the underworld, via an elevator in which it rains, the play acquires a gripping and sustained emotional potency. It's like a dream in which strange events take on unaccountably powerful meaning. On her way to the underworld, Eurydice has been forced to swim through a river that brings forgetfulness (the Lethe of lore, presumably, although it is not named). She fails to recognize her father, who is quietly overjoyed at her arrival (and played with elegant gravity by Charles Shaw Robinson). Thinking he's a porter, she asks him to see her to her room.

There aren't any in the underworld, it seems. But a simply breathtaking moment follows, as her father methodically builds Eurydice a place to live, constructed only of a long piece of string. Mr. Robinson imbues this odd task with a lifetime of paternal tenderness, and poignancy, too, since that love cannot be proffered to a young woman who thinks her father is a hotel employee.

Ms. Ruhl's dialogue is variously cryptic, operatic, aphoristic and bluntly funny, an admixture that admittedly has a few lumps. If you prefer your drama to proceed along neatly laid out narrative and linguistic paths, her free-associating imagination may give you the fidgets. But if the play's powerful emotional core draws you into its strange currents, you may find yourself taken to heights of emotion (sad depths, really) that theater too rarely achieves. (Maybe it was all the water imagery, but I fought off tears for half the play, not always successfully.)

"Eurydice" is ultimately about the painful choice that comes with the passing of joys and pleasures: whether to remember, in sadness, or to forget, and achieve a calm but emptier equilibrium. Under the affectionate tutelage of her father, Eurydice regains her memories of earthly love. But when Orpheus channels down to retrieve her, after firing off a barrage of love letters to her from above, she has to choose between her husband and her father. Both alternatives involve loss, of course.

“Eurydice” acknowledges and honors the inevitability of loss, yet its vision of an afterlife alive with odd charms is delivered with such warmth, humor and theatrical imagination that the play is hardly a dirge. (Its mixture of visual allure, playfulness and emotional clarity recalls the best work of the director Mary Zimmerman, in particular “Metamorphoses,” which also used the Orpheus myth.) Beautifully designed by Scott Bradley (sets), Meg Neville (costumes) and Russell H. Champa (lighting), it is played to perfection by Mr. Waters’s cast.

Ms. Dizzia has an enchantingly light touch as Eurydice; Joseph Parks is a beguilingly goofy but ardent Orpheus; Mark Zeisler makes much of his two sinister comic roles; and Carla Harting, Ramiz Monsef and Gian-Murray Gianino delight as a chorus of stones dressed like Victorian ghouls who keep trying to persuade Eurydice and her father to shut up and forget: death is easier that way.

So is life, often enough. But Ms. Ruhl’s magical play about the joys and trials of living and dying invites the happiest kind of commemoration. Like all fine poems, songs and paintings, it’s a love letter to the world that deserves to be remembered for a good long time.

EURYDICE

By Sarah Ruhl; directed by Les Waters; sets by Scott Bradley; costumes by Meg Neville; lighting by Russell H. Champa; sound by Bray Poor; choreography by John Carrafa; dramaturgy by Amy Boratko; production stage manager, James Mountcastle. Presented by the [Yale Repertory Theater](#); James Bundy, artistic director; Victoria Nolan, managing director. Through Oct. 14. At the Yale Repertory Theater, 1120 Chapel Street, New Haven, (203) 432-1234. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes.

WITH: Maria Dizzia (Eurydice), Gian-Murray Gianino (Loud Stone), Carla Harting (Little Stone), Ramiz Monsef (Big Stone), Joseph Parks (Orpheus), Charles Shaw Robinson (Father) and Mark Zeisler (Nasty Interesting Man/Lord of the Underworld) .

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Curiouser and Curiouser! Ruhl Wrecks Eurydice With Whimsy

By John Heilpern 6/19/07 5:55pm



It was the mighty Kenneth Tynan who said that among the things he could live without in the theater are Everyman characters with pretentious names like “Mr. Adam” or “Mr. Zero.”

I wonder how he might have felt about Sarah Ruhl’s interpretation of the Orpheus/Eurydice myth with its “The Nasty and Interesting Man,” and its Greek chorus of human stones named “Loud Stone,” “Big

Stone” and “Little Stone.”

Methinks I see the rakish Tynan making a dash for the exit the moment he finishes reading his playbill. When it comes to anthropomorphic fantasies (not to mention a “Nasty and Interesting Man”), I confess I’m of like mind, though Ms. Ruhl’s *Eurydice* has already received critical acclaim as a poetic masterpiece.

Tynan also maintained that he could live without all plays in which circus tents symbolize the human condition, and Ms. Ruhl’s drama offers us today’s avant-garde equivalent—a symbolic bathhouse (as in the watery productions of Mary Zimmerman), with sound effects and exposed pipes (as in David Leveaux’s *Electra*), together with pseudo-Beckettian characters imprisoned in a wasteland, or hell (as in artsy-fartsy shows too numerous to mention).

Ms. Ruhl also throws into her *Eurydice* mix a pastiche of Lewis Carroll, a fairy-tale intrusion of the Big Bad Wolf (her junior Lord of the Underworld), outtakes from *The Wizard of Oz* and more than an echo of Caryl Churchill’s magic realism and Edward Albee’s absurdism.

That’s an awful lot of dramaturgy for one Greek myth. Ms. Ruhl’s previous New York outing was with the award-winning *The Clean House*, an anemic social comedy with serious undertones about love, passion, cancer, housecleaning and Matilde, a wise Brazilian maid who’s in search of the perfect joke —“The perfect joke,” she muses, “is somewhere between an angel and a fart.”

You could have fooled me. But this is the way Ms. Ruhl thinks.

In re-imagining what is one of the greatest love stories, she's keeping company with Titian, Monteverdi, Balanchine and Cocteau. And Updike, too. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice touches all hearts. When Eurydice suddenly dies, the heavenly music of her bereft lover moves even stones to tears as Orpheus woos the gods to return her to him. They're both given a second chance. But Orpheus is warned not to look back at Eurydice as she follows him out of Hades and back to life. He looks back and loses her forever.

This is surprising and disappointing news to relate: I'm afraid that not even for an instant does Ms. Ruhl convey a sense of the eternal, aching love of the myth. Sad to say, she reduces everything—including anguish—to whimsy.

A harsh verdict was inevitable from the outset, when her two charmlessly coy protagonists (Joseph Parks' Orpheus and Maria Dizzia's Eurydice) first appear, romping in 1950's swimming costumes. Why the 50's? Well, why not? Weren't those innocent times (sort of)? At the lovers' wedding, they sing the Andrews Sisters' song with the lyric "Don't sit under the apple tree / with anyone else but me." It's meant to be fun and *quirky*, though neither cute quirkiness nor straining jokes are the point of the original story.

The atmosphere of Ms. Ruhl's vulgarized version is relentlessly "off-beat"—just as the set designed by Scott Bradley is deliberately off-kilter. The two lovers reveal surprisingly trivializing differences for tragic heroes: Eurydice adores books, but Orpheus doesn't see the point of them. He lives for music; she can't carry a tune, and so on. Worse: The two actors playing them have been encouraged by the playwright or the director, Les Waters, to act like children.

Ms. Dizzia's shrill, smiley Eurydice is the most blatant offender. But the play itself isn't winningly childlike any more than its modish peculiarities are dreamlike. Striving unnaturally for enchantment and wonder, this is a depressingly faux-innocent piece.

The lovers (and others) speak "poetically," alas. "I'm going to make each strand of your hair into an instrument," Orpheus announces archly to Eurydice. "Your hair will stand on end as it plays my music and becomes a hair orchestra. It will fly you up into the sky."

"Won't I fall down when the song ends?" she asks.

How old are they again? Ten? The infantilization of tragic adult love is at one with our juvenile times, encouraging easy, easy tears. Ms. Ruhl promises better things with her introduction of the heroine's dead father, however. (Her Eurydice not only dies twice; she has a father complex.)

The emphasis is on the fate of Eurydice and predominantly on what the story has to tell us about the necessity and pain of memory. Books have no meaning in Ms. Ruhl's underworld, for example, nor

memory itself. The white-haired, nostalgic gent known as Father is played with enormous empathy by Charles Shaw Robinson. He might be Polonius making a guest appearance in a children's fable.

"Everything in moderation," he advises his daughter in one of his many letters from Hades (which she never receives). "Cultivate the arts of dancing and small talk."

The dead dad is also something of a rebel in Hades, where he refuses to forget the past and disobeys the chorus of Beckettian stones. The petrified trio are dressed as ghostly Edwardians and walk slowly in a constipated sort of way. These stones intone. They speak in unison, as classical Greeks like to do. "Being sad is not allowed!" they cry. "Dead people can't sing!"

Loud Stone solemnly explains to Eurydice that the official language of Hades is quiet, "like if the pores in your face opened up and talked," a labored simile that Ms. Ruhl, or Loud Stone, admires so much it gets repeated twice.

Trouble begins when a strange man—known as Man—tries to seduce Eurydice on her wedding night by taking her to his penthouse on the pretext of giving her a letter from her dead father. She flees and accidentally falls into the afterlife, arriving in Hades with an empty suitcase via an elevator that rains. It's *Alice in Underland*.

Much happens: Eurydice mistakes her dad for a porter. He builds her a room of string (though rooms are banned in Hades), and begins to give her back her memory. "I Got Rhythm" is sung. Orpheus drops a big book down a manhole, which lands in the underworld where the bewildered Eurydice stands on it in her bare feet. Father knows best. He reads aloud a verse from it:

"We two alone will sing like birds in the cage " That's a bit much, I think, quoting Lear's pitifully tender words to Cordelia. But, still. *King Lear* adds a touch of *class*. The evil Lord of the Underworld is portrayed as a bratty child on a red tricycle, incidentally, and he later proposes marriage to Eurydice (who seems to accept).

Curiouser and curiouser. Sillier and sillier! Orpheus desperately tries to contact Eurydice by dialing 411.

"What? No, I don't know the country. No, I don't know the city either," he shouts urgently into the phone. "I don't know the street You can't enter a name without a city? Why not? Well, thank you for trying. Wait, Miss—it's a special case "

When at last Orpheus rescues the love of his life from Hades, you wonder why he bothered. As they leave, he looks fatally back as always—but Ms. Ruhl has added a stunning twist, a brave new interpretation. In a syncopated tiff, Orpheus now blames her lack of rhythm for the tragedy. It links,

you see, to Eurydice's inability to carry a tune in the opening scene.

"Remember—I tried to teach you—you were always one step ahead of the music," the foiled Orpheus bickers.

"I could never spell the word rhythm," replies Eurydice, ever the enigma. "It is such a difficult word to spell."

There's more spinach to come from Ms. Ruhl. But by now, even as the pores of your face open up to talk in a mysterious tongue, I trust you get the picture.

topics: [AT THE THEATER](#), [MARIA DIZZIA](#), [SARAH RUHL](#)



Updated: Wed., Jun. 20, 2007, 5:00 AM

NEW TAKE ON TIMELESS TALE IS A NEAR MYTH

By FRANK SCHECK

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WHAT is it about the Orpheus and Eurydice myth that inspires such tomfoolery these days? A few months ago, choreographer Mark Morris' opera production at the Met featured a heavenly chorus that included Mae West, Chairman Mao and Princess Diana.

In Sarah Ruhl's lowercase-titled version that opened Monday night, "eurydice" feels reconfigured for Generation Y. Imagine Lindsay Lohan and Adrian Grenier in the central roles, and you'll get the idea.

The story of the ill-fated heroine (Maria Dizzia) and the musician (Joseph Parks) who loves her enough to follow her into the underworld, only to lose her again, is presented as sketch comedy. As rendered by Ruhl - the MacArthur-

winning playwright whose "The Clean House" treated its weighty themes of life and death with a similarly cutesy self-consciousness - the story lacks the emotional resonance even of Craig Lucas' contemporary myth "Prelude to a Kiss."

In "eurydice," the would-be menacing Lord of the Underground (Mark Zeisler) rides a bright red tricycle festooned with tinsel, the title character reaches the afterlife in an elevator with an apparently malfunctioning sprinkler system (an undeniably nifty stage effect featuring that old theatrical standby, a deluge), a Chorus of Stones (Gian-Murray Gianino, Carla Harting, Ramiz Monsef) comes across like a vintage vaudeville trio, and the soundtrack includes songs such as a cover of Nirvana's "Come as You Are."

The timeless story still manages to exert its thematic force, and some of the aspects of this rendition, especially Eurydice's relationship with her loving and equally dead father (a terrific Charles Shaw Robinson) as he tries to make her transition more comfortable, are very moving. Director Les Waters' colorful production has many imaginative aspects, and the youthful leads, especially Dizzia, are highly appealing.

But despite its theatrical ingenuity and fleeting moments of beauty, this "eurydice" ultimately fails to do justice to its source.

EURYDICE *Second Stage Theatre, 307 W. 43rd St.; (212) 246-4422. Through July 21.*

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THE NEW YORKER

THE THEATRE

GODS AND DOLLS

Sarah Ruhl reimagines the Orpheus myth.

BY JOHN LAHR

JULY 2, 2007

At the theatre these days, we are rarely asked to play. Producers, who live or die on the accuracy of their reading of the public mood, have registered the current climate of fear and exploited our need for succor. The glut of movies-into-musicals and refurbished revivals is a kind of “Pimp My Mind” of theatre. Audiences are happy to pay top dollar to see what they already know; it’s the unknown that petrifies them. Sarah Ruhl’s “Eurydice” (at the Second Stage, under the direction of Les Waters), a luminous retelling of the Orpheus myth from his beloved wife’s point of view, is exhilarating because it frees the stage from the habitual. Watching it, we enter a singular, surreal world, as lush and limpid as a dream—an anxiety dream of love and loss—where both author and audience swim in the magical, sometimes menacing, and always thrilling flow of the unconscious.

Scott Bradley’s set powerfully conjures up Hades: a cavernous shower room, where the echo of dripping water and shimmers of glinting light bounce off hand-lettered aquamarine tiles that cover the walls. Over time, the tiles take on meaning: they are the petitions of the dead to the living—undelivered letters to the bright, silent world above. This deceptively simple and gorgeous stylization mirrors Ruhl’s literary attack: an exercise in imaginative freedom, in which riddle and reality coexist, as light as a game and as grave as a decision. Ruhl’s theatrical voice is reticent and daring, accurate and outlandish—“the voice that comes from *there*, a *there* that is always *here*,” as Octavio Paz wrote of Elizabeth Bishop.

Ruhl shows her whimsical hand in the play’s first beat. The lovers sit on a beach—Orpheus (Joseph Parks) in Bermuda shorts, Eurydice (Maria Dizzia) in a cotton sundress. With a



Maria Dizzia and Joseph Parks make their way out of the underworld in “Eurydice.”

flourish, Orpheus gestures to the sky. “All those birds? For me? Thank you,” Eurydice says, adding, “And—the sea! Now? It’s mine already? Wow.” When Orpheus throws in the sky and the stars, Eurydice suggests that he’s being “perhaps too generous.” The droll lines play on the gush of romantic idealization; Eurydice is a girl who really *has* found her god. Both inhabiting a myth and commenting on it, Ruhl walks a tightrope between the mythic and the mundane. In her retelling, Eurydice is perky and pragmatic. When Orpheus ties a string around her fourth finger to memorialize their love, she prompts, “Maybe you could also get me another ring—a gold one—to put over the string one.” Orpheus, for his part, is a slightly goofy-looking artist, always in his own head, hearing the melodies that make him the greatest musician in the universe. Eurydice can’t carry a tune; she is, however, a reader, with an appetite for argument, which grates on Orpheus’s notion of originality. When Orpheus confides that he has just written a song for her, he adds, tartly, “It’s not *interesting* or *not-interesting*. It just is.” For him—and, one suspects, for Ruhl—expression is an end in itself.

As lovers do, the young couple swear their allegiance; they marry; they dance and sing to “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree.” Then Eurydice, enticed by a Nasty and Interesting Man (Mark Zeisler), who claims to have a letter from her deceased father, wanders off. Her disappearance turns out to be from life itself. “I was not lonely,” she says later, in a brilliant speech describing her death, “only alone with myself, begging myself not to leave my own body, but I was leaving.” Ruhl concentrates on Eurydice’s experience, not Orpheus’s: there is no demented wandering, no boy’s own subjugation of the guards, no ghoulish dismemberment by Thracian maenads. Eurydice’s descent into the underworld is ingeniously indicated by illuminated tiles, which chart her arrival like that of an elevator. When a door in the upstage wall opens, Eurydice is revealed in a downpour, carrying a suitcase and an umbrella, water sluicing onto the tiled floor and over the lip of the stage. The stunning image establishes both the geography of the place and the state of her consciousness, which is being leached of the past. (In Ruhl’s underworld, each lost memory is signalled by a ping.) At first, Eurydice is bemused by her forgetfulness; she can’t recall Orpheus’s name. “I know his name starts with my mouth shaped like a ball of twine,” she says. “Oar—oar. I forget.” The moment is as punishing as it is poetic. Identity is memory; when memory disappears, the self dissolves and love with it.

Here this nothingness is foreshadowed by a chorus called the Stones (Gian-Murray Gianino, Carla Harting, and Ramiz Monsef)—a trio who speak and move in unison, a sort of vaudeville of vacancy. They can’t feel; they can’t cry; they can’t think. “‘Father’ is not a word that dead people understand,” they tell Eurydice’s father (Charles Shaw Robinson), when his daughter fails, at first, to recognize him. “Eurydice” speaks in perfectly pitched images as well as words.

It's as if we were gazing at the shadows of a grief beyond language. When Eurydice first arrives in Hades, she insists on finding a place to sleep, not realizing that no one sleeps in the underworld; her father tries to contain her distress by building her a room out of string—a sensational piece of theatrical magic that suggests both a room and the emptiness that fills it.

Although she knows that Orpheus is coming for her, Eurydice confides some ambivalence to her father. “This is what it is to love an artist,” she says. “He is always going away from you. Inside his head there is always something more beautiful.” Nonetheless, when Orpheus arrives, she follows him. In Bray Poor's evocative soundscape, as Orpheus leads his wife up to the surface, the sound of water dripping gives way to the honking of car horns. Then, as the myth foretells, Orpheus turns at the last minute to look at Eurydice; suddenly, they begin to recede from each other.

“There is never any third act in a nightmare,” the critic Max Beerbohm said. “They bring you to a climax of terror and then leave you there. They are the work of poor dramatists.” Not in this case. Somehow, this subtle production works the trick of imagining the unimaginable. When, at the finale, Orpheus is in the underworld and can no longer hear the music of the spheres, that small moment of silence is spectacular, full of both woe and wonder.

Love and unresolved Oedipal issues are also the subject of “Rabbit,” by Nina Raine, who directs as well (part of the Brits Off Broadway festival, at 59E59), a comedy whose crackling wit deservedly won Raine last year's London *Evening Standard* Theatre Award for Most Promising Playwright. Here a superb ensemble of British actors channels the music of upper-middle-class bitchery, in a deceptive and hilarious game that reveals a lot about the frail and defensive souls who use frivolity as a form of offense. Bella (the outstanding Charlotte Randle), at her twenty-ninth-birthday party, to which she has invited a few twenty-something friends and former lovers, tries to kill her heart with deep dish and drink. “Well, there are only two glasses in a bottle, really,” she says, studying an empty. She is obsessed with sex and sass; the play cross-cuts between her butting heads with her stubborn dying father (the expert Hilton McRae) and with her friends.

A press representative by trade, she punches below her weight in the workplace, but when it comes to mockery she's a heavyweight contender. “Take your hands off, I don't like being blind,” she says to Richard (the superb Adam James), an old flame who still carries a torch for her, when he covers her eyes as he enters. Of course, with her cauterizing wit, Bella is the one who blinds herself to feeling. The play is a hilarious demonstration of how language can spin a web of ignorance around terror. Both as a writer and as a director, Raine has a sinew that is impressive. Her men give as good as they get, especially Richard, a barrister by profession, who

contends with sodden but rousing conviction that the problem in the war between the sexes is that women treat men “like a sex object.” He goes on, “I hate the way that you women reduce sex in this way. . . . You reduce it to the banal. You reduce it to . . . ‘bumhole.’ . . . It ruins everything. Where can *love* fit in with that? Romance?” The play doesn’t give us the answers, but it raises the questions with terrific brio. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: RACHEL DOMM

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June 19, 2007

THEATER REVIEW | 'EURYDICE'

The Power of Memory to Triumph Over Death

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

The most famous unheeded advice in the history of Western literature may be the admonition given by the ruler of the underworld to Orpheus, when that grieving youth went down to retrieve his wife, Eurydice, from the depths, and the lovers began their journey back upward.

It was something along these lines: “Hey, fella, remember: Don’t look back.”

Spoiler alert! He did.

From this woeful act of disobedience a whole universe of art has been spun over the last couple of millenniums, poems and operas and ballets in the double digits by now, even a classic movie or two. No doubt somewhere on YouTube, a Greek-myth-loving geek with a Webcam has done a two-minute goof on the tale.

In her weird and wonderful new play, “Eurydice,” the gifted young writer Sarah Ruhl has adapted this mournful legend with a fresh eye, concentrating not on the passionate pilgrimage of Orpheus to retrieve his bride but on Eurydice’s descent into the jaws of death. What she finds there, and what she learns about love, loss and the pleasures and pains of memory, is the subject of Ms. Ruhl’s tender-hearted comedy, which opened last night at the [Second Stage Theater](#) in a rhapsodically beautiful production directed by Les Waters.

I suspect that “Eurydice” will get under your skin either in all the right ways or all the wrong ones. I first saw the play, in this production, at [Yale Repertory Theater](#) last fall, and its hallucinatory imagery and emotional allure have remained with me. Encountering it again, I staggered out of the theater in the same state of sad-happy disorientation that I recall from my initial viewing.

Ms. Ruhl’s theatrical vision is an idiosyncratic one. She is not a journalist of domestic life, as so many playwrights today seem to be, but an adventurer who is not afraid to blend the quotidian and the fantastic, deep feeling and airy whimsy. The plot of Ms. Ruhl’s surreal comedy “The Clean House,” seen at [Lincoln Center Theater](#) earlier this year, sometimes turned on jokes told in Portuguese that were left untranslated. Likewise, much in “Eurydice” could mystify theatergoers used to reclining on the comforting cushions of linear narrative and naturalistic dialogue.

The fabled creatures of “Eurydice” may look like people you’ve seen on the subway, but they speak in images plucked from the blue sky of their mythic imaginations. You might almost wish there were

subtitles here, alerting you to the inner meaning of the lyrical, illogical and, yes, sometimes overly quirky dialogue. (The most sensibly spoken characters onstage are probably the blunt-spoken chorus of stones, strange creatures with pea-green faces, in Victorian garb, who keep telling Eurydice to shut up and get used to being dead.)

But to be moved by “Eurydice,” you just need to tune in to the play’s insistent heartbeat, the rhythmic threnody woven by its language, its subterranean feeling and its strangely potent imagery. Ms. Ruhl sees her plays as much as she hears them — a rare gift among playwrights — and some of the most striking moments in the play are wordless ones.

Take, for instance, the tender, wrenchingly sad vision of Eurydice’s dead father, who can watch his daughter’s progress from the underworld below, miming the act of walking her down the aisle on her wedding day. He nods proudly at the guests on either side, gives her an encouraging smile, offers her up with a mixture of resignation and worry and joy. And he is utterly alone. As performed with impeccable simplicity and grace by Charles Shaw Robinson, this small vignette is among the most desolate and moving moments I can remember seeing on a stage.

Eurydice, played with radiant open-heartedness by Maria Dizzia, falls to her death just after marrying Orpheus. She descends in an elevator to the underworld, but her reunion with her father is bittersweet. The dead are dipped in the waters of forgetfulness, and Eurydice has lost all that she once knew, her husband’s name, much of her own history, language itself. She takes Dad for a hotel porter.

The helpful stones, played with pop-eyed intensity by Gian-Murray Gianino, Carla Harting and Ramiz Monsef, insistently bray at Eurydice that death is much easier if you take refuge in the easy solace of forgetting. (Life is that way, too, of course.)

But “Eurydice” movingly suggests that commemorating life, its pleasures and problems, its transience and pain, is the only way to triumph over death and loss. Eurydice’s father helps restore her memory, anecdote by anecdote, and her vocabulary, word by word, rebuilding the universe of the world they have lost in the prison of death.

At one point he reads to her from “King Lear”: “We two alone will sing like birds in the cage.” “Eurydice” is on one level an ode to the sustaining power of the love between father and daughter. (Ms. Ruhl wrote it after the death of her father.) It considers, too, how hard it is for two human beings to achieve the harmony of perfect romantic love.

Orpheus, played with a fine, fierce ardor by Joseph Parks, is, of course, a composer; Eurydice hears music mostly in words. When he descends to fetch her back, Eurydice faces a painful choice: to re-enter the world above, where imperfect human love and the potential for pain awaits, or remain below where she is beyond its reach? Either choice involves risk and loss.

Mr. Waters and his design collaborators have framed Ms. Ruhl’s play with uncommon sensitivity and stylistic sympathy. (In a less felicitous production, I can imagine the play cloying into preciousness.) Scott

Bradley's tilted vision of the underworld as a slightly dilapidated spa, wallpapered in letters written from the dead to the living, perfectly matches the writing's off-kilter tone. The shimmering, dank lighting by Russell H. Champa echoes the quicksilver changes in tenor.

And the selection of music likewise parallels the emotional currents without overwhelming the breezy playfulness of the dialogue. (Arvo Pärt's haunting "Spiegel im Spiegel," for piano and violin, is used to particularly fine effect.)

"What happiness it would be to cry," Eurydice says when she enters the underworld and discovers that she's lost her grasp on emotional response, along with her memory. Perhaps more than anything else, the eerie wonderland of "Eurydice" evokes the discombobulating experience of grief and loss, the desperate need to move on and the overwhelming desire never to let go — to turn and look back just one more time.

EURYDICE

By Sarah Ruhl; directed by Les Waters; sets by Scott Bradley; costumes by Meg Neville; lighting by Russell H. Champa; sound by Bray Poor; production stage manager, Michael Suenkel; stage manager, Stephanie Gatton; associate artistic director, Christopher Burney; production manager, Jeff Wild. Presented by [Second Stage Theater](#), Carole Rothman, artistic director; Ellen Richard, executive director; in association with Berkeley Repertory Theater and [Yale Repertory Theater](#). At Second Stage Theater, 307 West 43rd Street, Clinton; (212) 246-4422. Through July 21. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

WITH: Maria Dizzia (Eurydice), Gian-Murray Gianino (Loud Stone), Carla Harting (Little Stone), Ramiz Monsef (Big Stone), Joseph Parks (Orpheus), Charles Shaw Robinson (Father) and Mark Zeisler (The Nasty and Interesting Man/Lord of the Underworld).

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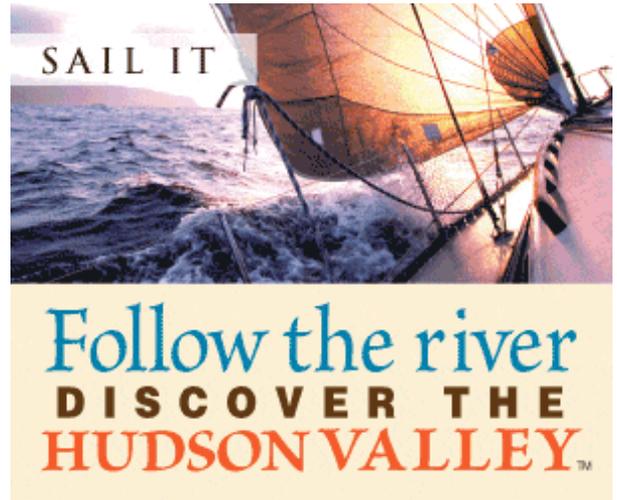
Target Margin makes ancient Greek texts lively; Sarah Ruhl gives *Eurydice* the death blow

Michael Feingold

published: June 19, 2007

Whatever the shortcomings of their civilization, the ancient Athenians obviously did something right. Otherwise, the literary remnants of their life wouldn't continue to have such a grip on us, two and a half millennia later. We may question the Greeks, argue over them, snipe at their customs, struggle to reinvent their works, and wonder to what extent they actually believed their myths; the one thing we can't do

is get away from them.



Details:

The Argument and The Dinner Party

By David Greenspan and Target Margin Theater
The Kitchen
512 West 19th Street
212-255-5793

Eurydice

By Sarah Ruhl
Second Stage
307 West 43rd Street
212-246-4422

The Greeks were interested in direct experience. As a result, their philosophy tends to have an immediate connection to reality; it isn't abstract or high-flown, like so many later approaches to thought. For them, philosophy was a branch of natural science: It strove to explain the hows and whys of human existence just as one might explain how to construct a lever-and-pulley system or how to navigate by the stars. Though compared to us they could hardly be called a materialistic people, material phenomena were the beginning and end of their speculations; the goal of their metaphysics was always to improve or enhance their sense of being in reality.

David Herskovits's Target Margin Theater, which has been working through some of the obscurer corners of tragedy in its season dedicated to Greek thought, has now reached a transcendent finale by putting onstage two of the most familiar specimens of Athenian philosophy, Aristotle's *Poetics* and Plato's *Symposium*. Given that the Greeks viewed philosophy frankly as a branch of public entertainment, linked to oratory, Herskovits's choice is not so unreasonable as it might appear to us, who've pretty much banished philosophy from our stage except for an occasional Shaw revival.

The first half of Target Margin's double bill is another of those pieces of sheer astonishment, merging theatrical flamboyance and intellectual audacity, that have become synonymous with the name of David Greenspan. Who else would have imagined the Western world's keystone work of dramatic criticism as a piece of dramatic art in itself? Greenspan streamlines *The Argument*, as he calls it, sticking to the passages on the essence of tragedy and its difference from comedy, and dodging the lesser details in which fifth-century Athenian practice is too different from ours for the

lecture to be informative. But can "lecture" be the right word for something that's such breathtaking fun? Passion—the artist's passionate faith in the value of art—provides the molten core not only of Aristotle's view of drama, but also of Greenspan's delivery. And he knows, to a hairsbreadth, how and when to vary the passion with irony, with analytic lucidity, and with sly, anachronistic zingers to keep you alert. This is an Aristotle anybody would be glad to study with.

After the lecture, the party: A symposium, to the Greeks, was a sort of philosophic game of Twister for the elite; the word literally means "drinking party" (*syn-*, with; *potion*, to drink). Hetairae, those educated Greek geisha girls who were among the few women the era permitted to be articulate in public, were always present; the point of the exercise was to see which guest, speaking on a set topic, could sustain rationality longest before the alcohol took over and the whole thing degenerated into a sex orgy.

Plato's imaginary assemblage of Athenian intellectual heavyweights cannily makes the chosen topic love itself, though not in the fleshly sense common to most symposia. In his version, the only woman who speaks (in flashback, within someone else's speech) is the priestess Diotima, who describes the transcendent union of flesh and spirit. The overall movement of the dialogue is toward a love—in Plato, strictly a male-male phenomenon—that goes beyond physical attributes and involves the sense of well-being that comes with the imparting of wisdom. With typical Platonic irony, this concept unreels as a confession by a drunken intruder, the least cerebral person present, the warrior Alcibiades.

There have been many attempts to stage the *Symposium*. Herskovits, retitling it *The Dinner Party*, sets it among today's downtown artists, at a boozy fiesta celebrating an Obie won by a solo performance artist. The analogy has its shaky moments, and the text, a collective creation which clearly could have used a supervising playwright, sometimes lapses into desultory chitchat that would make Aristotle groan in irritation. But Herskovits catches the woozy, visionary atmosphere that links our own smarter parties to the ancients', and in the best-known passages—Aristophanes' fable of the genders, the Socrates-Diotima discourse, Alcibiades' confession—the company seems to step aside and let something far greater than themselves take over. Steven Rattazzi, Stephanie Weeks, Mary Neufeld, and Greig Sargeant make particularly strong contributions to this expansion of the spirit. And Greenspan, as the high-flying, plastered intruder, supplies the perfect frosting for this ideational layer cake.

Many modern playwrights have tried to breathe new life into the Greek myths. Until Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice*, I never saw a writer make such active efforts to snuff the life out of one. Ruhl clearly doesn't believe in the myth, and displays no interest in its possible meanings. Nor does she, particularly, believe that playwriting involves any obligation to hold the audience's interest; she changes her story's ground rules every few minutes, with a tiresomely whimsical fecklessness that suggests she urgently needs to attend Greenspan's lectures. Les Waters's production has some beautiful visual moments, but, interestingly, the cast suffers from the same pompous this-is-meaningful-poetry delivery that poisoned last year's much inferior production of Ruhl's *The Clean House*. What makes this wanly promising novice an artist to be canonized by the MacArthur Foundation and *The New York Times*, I can't fathom. What was it Picasso said about artists who succeed because they look modern but smell of the museum?

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Posted: Mon., Jun. 18, 2007, 4:00pm PT

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Off Broadway

eurydice

(Second Stage Theater; 296 seats; \$65 top)

By DAVID ROONEY

A Second Stage Theater presentation in association with Berkeley Repertory Theater and Yale Repertory Theater of a play in one act by Sarah Ruhl. Directed by Les Waters.

Eurydice - Maria Dizzia Loud Stone - Gian-Murray Gianino Little Stone - Carla Harting Big Stone - Ramiz Monsef Orpheus - Joseph Parks Father - Charles Shaw Robinson Nasty and Interesting Man, Lord of the Underworld - Mark Zeisler



Maria Dizzia and Charles Shaw Robinson take to the underworld in Sarah Ruhl's 'eurydice,' a reworking of the Greek myth.

Following last season's Lincoln Center Theater production of "The Clean House," the belated discovery of Sarah Ruhl on New York stages continues apace with "eurydice," the distinctive young playwright's 2003 reimagining of the Greek myth about love that transcends death. Previously seen at Berkeley Rep and Yale Rep, the production is exquisitely staged by director Les Waters and an inventive design team. Ruhl's wild flights of the imagination, some deeply affecting passages and beautiful imagery provide transporting pleasures, yet this early work is only partly satisfying, its Freudian meditations and stiff lyricism too often at odds with its heartfelt emotions.

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Ruhl's breakthrough play, "The Clean House," established her as an exciting new voice in American theater by keeping one foot firmly planted in naturalistic presentation and narrative logic while the other danced gracefully in freewheeling magic realism. The anchoring compassion that made the play so rewarding is no less evident in "eurydice," but it's clouded by mannered writing that's less mature, veering frequently into poetic preciousness -- starting with the lower-case title.

There are also two problematic performances. Ruhl has shifted the perspective of the much-traveled Orpheus myth from the grief-stricken composer (Joseph Parks) to his beloved, bookish Eurydice (Maria Dizzia), the rapture and pain of their romantic love now vying for supremacy with the heroine's unbroken ties to her deceased father (Charles Shaw Robinson).

While the intention appears to have been to make Eurydice a contemporary woman with the soul of a flower child, Dizzia has the clipped upward inflections of the current dim generation, which undercuts the character's intelligence. It points up the dumb choices that seal the fate of this daddy's girl and doom poor lovestruck sap Orpheus. Dizzia is achingly moving at times -- particularly in a heartbreaking letter in which she relinquishes her love for Orpheus and provides instructions for his future wife. But in a performance steeped in artificiality, she creates hurdles that impede empathetic involvement. She's not a natural flake like, say, Mary-Louise Parker, and the beatific smile pinned to her face for much of the play betrays a certain strain.

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Despite being somewhat sidelined as Orpheus, Parks is utterly disarming in the dogged perseverance of his love, refusing to acknowledge the boundaries that separate earthly existence from death.

All the performances are characterized by a deliberately non-naturalistic approach, at times pushing Ruhl's fanciful writing over the edge. This is particularly the case with Mark Zeisler's grating turn as the Lord of the Underworld, who lures Eurydice on her wedding day to his high-rise apartment, from which she plummets to an untimely death.

The depiction of hell not as a standard-issue fiery pit but as a cool, aquamarine-tiled Roman bath (shades of the spa set for David Leveaux's "Nine" revival) is a brilliant stylistic stroke, constructed at an odd tilt by designer Scott Bradley. "We make it real nice here, so people want to stick around," says the infantile underworld ruler, who enters his watery domain on a tricycle to a blast of Guns N' Roses. Bray Poor's textured soundscape of water, wind and music and Russell H. Champa's ravishing lighting add considerably to the evocative setting.

The combination of Greek mythology with water imagery to explore enduring love inevitably recalls Mary Zimmerman's superior "Metamorphoses." But Waters and Ruhl conspire to create original, at times breathtaking, stage pictures -- some elaborate, others arrestingly simple.

Eurydice and later Orpheus descend to hell in an elevator whose downward path is marked by light panels in the rear wall, opening to reveal a torrent of rain that washes across the stage. Similar panels illuminate letters that travel between life and the afterlife. Observing from below ground, Eurydice's father tenderly mimes walking her down the aisle on her wedding day, later dancing a jitterbug with an imaginary partner during the reception. When his daughter joins him in the underworld but fails to recognize him, her memory and communication skills erased during the river crossing of her journey, he lovingly builds her a room in which she can feel safe, using only a ball of string. That wordless sequence is the play's most transfixing moment.

If the quirks sometimes feel cumbersome -- as in the vaudevillian chorus of talking Stones (Gian-Murray Gianino, Carla Harting, Ramiz Monsef), outfitted like Tim Burton-esque Edwardian zombies - when it all connects, the melding of stylistic flourishes and bold theatricality with humanism and an unapologetic romantic streak makes Ruhl's work invigorating.

That mix is neatly captured by Robinson in a gracious performance that conveys both the sadness of death and the joy of spiritual reunion. Despite the admonishing voices of the Stones and the Lord, urging forgetfulness, her father remains determined to guide the dead Eurydice to an understanding both of her present circumstances and her past life and love on earth. His gentle cushioning of the chasm dividing sorrowful memory from untroubled oblivion gives the drama a depth of feeling that helps counter its florid self-consciousness. Paternal/filial love here ultimately trumps its romantic counterpart, even if both are irreversibly colored by loss.

Echoing the sweet, sad music with which Orpheus gains entry to the underworld on an ill-fated mission to retrieve his bride, it's the wrenching pain of remembering, of clinging to something as fragile as love even beyond the seeming finality of death, that courses through Ruhl's imperfect but poignant play.

Set, Scott Bradley; costumes, Meg Neville; lighting, Russell H. Champa; sound, Bray Poor; production stage manager, Michael Suenkel. Opened June 18, 2007. Reviewed June 14. Running time: 1 HOUR, 25 MIN.

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