

THE MILWAUKEE REPERTORY THEATER PRESENTS

By Sarah Ruhl

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Quadracci Powerhouse Theater

EURYDICE



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A study guide for students and educators

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Researched and designed by the Education Department at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding of, and appreciation for, the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of

EURYDICE

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The Rep

MILWAUKEE



SYNOPSIS

EURYDICE is a new twist on the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice: Orpheus, a great musician, falls in love with Eurydice and follows her to the Underworld in order to be with her. Sarah Ruhl's story begins with Eurydice and Orpheus, two young lovers, about to get married. At the wedding, Eurydice neglects her guests and she meets a man who claims he has a letter for her from her father. Against her better judgment, she decides to go to his apartment to retrieve the letter. As Eurydice quickly leaves, she falls down the stairs and dies.

Eurydice enters the Underworld where she meets her father. However, she does not remember who he is; in fact she doesn't remember anything. But, her father is patient and he re-teaches her the meaning of words and about her life. Orpheus grieves for Eurydice and decides to sing a beautiful song in order to go to the Underworld to get her back. The Lord of the Underworld agrees to let Orpheus have Eurydice back under one condition-- Orpheus must walk back to the living and not look behind him to see if Eurydice is following him. Eurydice understands that she must make the difficult decision to either continue her relationship with her father or go back and rekindle her relationship with her husband.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Ruhl has received much recognition and her work has been produced at many theaters around the country, making her a very successful playwright at a very young age. After graduating in 1997 with a degree in English from Brown University, Ruhl took two years off. She did some graduate work at Pembroke College in Oxford, England and spent time in Chicago and New York writing and teaching arts education in public schools before returning to Brown University for her Master of Fine Arts. In 2003, she was the recipient of a Helen Merrill award and Whiting Writers' Award and in 2006 she received the MacArthur Fellowship, an award given to citizens in the United States that "show exceptional merit and promise for continued and enhanced creative work." At the age of 31, Ruhl was a 2005 Pulitzer Prize finalist for *THE CLEAN HOUSE*. Other shows written by Ruhl include *MELANCHOLY PLAY*, *THE CLEAN HOUSE*, *LATE: A COWBOY SONG*, *ORLANDO* and *PASSION PLAY*. What makes her plays so successful and unique is the way she chooses to write them. Her plays celebrate what she calls "the pleasure of heightened things." In them, fish walk, stones talk and weep, a dog is a narrator and a witness to a family tragedy, and a woman turns into an almond. Ruhl says that her characters occupy "the real world and also a suspended state." She follows a nonlinear form of realism and tries to interpret how people experience life.

ADAPTING THE MYTH

The original myth centers on Orpheus. The story Ruhl has created gives the audience a fresh perspective. We are given the opportunity to see the story from the viewpoint of a female and her own journey. By using Eurydice as the main character, the play focuses more on relationships lost and found and memories.

Re-creating stories is a great way to refocus the themes and main points the author wants the audience to take home. Ruhl is not the only author to do this. Jon Scieszka took the story of the *Three Little Pigs* and created *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, re-telling the story from the wolf's point of view. Sharon Draper updated and re-located William Shakespeare's *ROMEO AND JULIET* to create *Romiette and Julio*, which gives the audience the perspective from Latino teens in an urban environment.



One of the many depictions of Orpheus and Eurydice

ACTIVITY: *Generate a list of stories with your class that are familiar to you.*

From one of these stories, create a new story using a different perspective. Write either a short story or a scene and then share it with your classmates. Discuss why you choose this certain perspective.

THEMES IN EURYDICE

EURYDICE offers the audience something more than the original Greek myth. It gives us the opportunity to reflect on the things that matter to us. There are several reoccurring themes in the play—relationships, memories, comfort, loss, and grief—that are relevant to us every day.

We are able to see Eurydice form several relationships in the play. First, we are able to see her with her new husband, Orpheus. While they are deeply in love, she knows that they are different—he is interested in music and she is interested in words. After Eurydice dies, she is given the opportunity to renew her relationship with her father.

We form and develop relationships on a daily basis. There are short relationships with general acquaintances and longer relationships with close friends and family. We have relationships with the people we work with and with people we might not like. Each relationship is different but equally important as well. These relationships keep us going from day to day. They are the support we need to face our fears, troubles, or joyous occasions. Sometimes we lose relationships because we move, have fights or because someone passes away.

DISCUSSION: *On your own, think of all the relationships you have. How did you meet these people? Create a list of these relationships and think about how they help you. Who comforts you? Who makes you laugh? If you had to make the difficult decision of choosing one relationship over another, which one would you pick? Discuss your ideas with your classmates.*

Eurydice has the unfortunate event of losing her memory after she dies. Her father helps her re-learn everything from definitions and meanings of words, to reading and writing, to her childhood and her family. Despite her struggle, Eurydice's memories slowly come back. It is these memories that get her through death.

Memories make us who we are. Whether it's just remembering how to do simple math or what our first birthday party was like, memories mold our life. They can be good or bad, but we hold on to them for a certain reason. Any way you put it, memories evoke emotions in us that create our personalities and behaviors.

DISCUSSION: *Eurydice's father used word associations in order to remember his daughter's name ("E- I remember elephants. U- I remember ulcers and under. R- I remember reindeers...") Think about your memories and how you remember them. Do you associate like the father? Or do certain people help you remember? How far would you go to remember something about your life? Discuss these questions with small groups.*

When Eurydice comes to the Underworld, she is shaken and bewildered. Her father, whom she believes to be the porter, greets her and tries to explain things to her. She doesn't understand what's going on and her father creates a home in order to comfort her. It is this comfort that allows Eurydice to calm down and to accept the help of this stranger.

Comfort is important to us. We are able to do so much when we feel comfortable and safe. We are able to try different things, learn new things and to be ourselves. There are many things that can comfort us. Some people might be comforted by a family member or by a certain object. In rough times we can think about those things and start to feel better. When we are safe we are able to remember more and try new things. We are more willing to take risks and put ourselves on the line.

DISCUSSION: *What makes you feel comforted? Is it a certain object or a certain person? What would you do to comfort a loved one? Would you give them something or help them? What new things are you willing to try when you feel safe? In small groups talk about these questions.*

AN INTERVIEW WITH TODD ROSENTHAL, SET DESIGNER

This interview was conducted by Laura Lynn MacDonald, Literary Assistant for the Milwaukee Rep. She is a Network Member of Chicago Dramatists where she will be taking a Master Class with Sarah Ruhl in November. This interview has been edited for content.

When Sarah Ruhl's imaginative play, EURYDICE, was chosen for The Rep's 2008 season, Artistic Director, Joe Hanreddy, contacted Jonathan Moscone, Artistic Director of California Shakespeare Theater, to helm the show. Jon immediately wanted his former classmate from Yale to design the illusive, other-worldly environment of the play. Todd Rosenthal is a huge fan, as well as a friend of Sarah Ruhl's. In 2006, he designed her Pulitzer Prize nominated play, A CLEAN HOUSE, for The Goodman Theatre in Chicago. We are privileged to have him back for his thirteenth show at The Milwaukee Rep.



LAURA LYNN MACDONALD: Congratulations on winning the 2008 Tony Award for the design of Tracy Letts' play, AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY. When I was watching the Awards, I was particularly struck by the poignancy of Anna Shapiro's words of thankfulness to The Steppenwolf Theatre company for giving her a chance. She said, "Although they don't need to, they make room for you." (Anna Shapiro won the Tony Award for directing AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY). Has there been someone in your life who took a chance on you or mentored you in the early years of your career?

TODD ROSENTHAL: There was a designer I met in undergrad named Timothy Averill, that I was very much inspired by. He mentored me on my productions in college. I liked the way he breathed through his profession - the way he conducted himself - his whole process, from drafting to model building to sketching. I liked the way he visually enhanced the story. And I loved how he brought his knowledge of history and the world to what he was doing. So, it wasn't just about designing a play - it was about highlighting an idea in the play and referencing the world around you. That concept intrigues me and has always stayed with me.

"You know, every year I design the sets and the props for The Big Apple Circus and this year they came back to me and apologized for not liking my idea. And I said, that's all right - that's really helpful - now I'm better able to understand what you do want. The best ideas I've ever had-- have come from really, really bad ideas."

LL: Tell me about working in the world of Sarah Ruhl and how you first approached the design for EURYDICE.

TR: When I talk about "process," it only applies to my craft (drafting, drawing, building models of the set). But, in terms of finding a world for the play -- you're always in uncharted territory. That's especially true for EURYDICE. All I can say is that it's a series of moments... Eurydice travels to the Underworld. At first I was mired in this idea of creating a literal Underworld, this subway - boiler room environment. But then the idea evolved. I recognized the playfulness inherent in this epic love story where there's so much at stake. (In the notes of the play, Sarah defines

the Underworld as more ALICE IN WONDERLAND, than Hades.) So, I started angling things, twisting things... I created this big rake (slanted floor), coming out of a void and people stepping out of the darkness.

LL: Knowing how whimsical and magical the final design of EURYDICE is, I find it very interesting that it had its roots in a dark, literal place.

TR: As a designer, you have to start somewhere. I tell my students, if you think something's dreadful, bring that in - it's useful, because now you know what your set isn't. It's like Edison who tried two thousand ways to make a light bulb and was left with two thousand ways NOT to make a light bulb. I think of lots of crappy ideas but, eventually they lead to something that's decent. I no longer go home at night thinking, god, I got nothing done today! Because I probably got a lot done - even if it was just daydreams and pondering. I now know that the really, really, really bad idea, ultimately leads to the better idea. Like manure to fertilizer!

LL: EURYDICE is the thirteenth set you've designed for Milwaukee Rep. Can you tell me about your history of designing for The Rep, and what keeps bringing you back?

TR: The first show I designed for the Rep was ESCAPE FROM HAPPINESS in 2002. Since then, I've come back to design one or two shows a year. I'm an Associate Professor of Design at Northwestern University and my design studio is based in Chicago - so it's very easy to come up here. What keeps me coming back is the collective of talented artists working here and the variety of theatre that The Rep is willing to put on. I love designing here. They did THE GOAT! What major regional theatre did ENDGAME last year? The Rep deserves to be recognized on the national scale for the innovative company that it is.



A scale model for the set of TRANSLATIONS

Todd Rosenthal has designed many sets for The Rep including:

- ENDGAME
- GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS
- TRANSLATIONS
- KING LEAR
- A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY
- A FLEA IN HER EAR
- THE GOAT
- THE STORY
- SUBURBAN MOTEL
- LONESOME WEST
- ESCAPE FROM HAPPINESS

DESIGN AND EURYDICE



EURYDICE stretches the imagination to the furthest limits. The set, lights, costumes, and sounds are dependent only on what the designers and director can create. The challenge in this: how far can you really go? The play is filled with stage directions that are open for interpretation and are flexible when designing these various scenic elements.

At the very beginning of the play, Ruhl gives this description of the set: “The set contains a raining elevator, a water pump, some rusty exposed pipes, an abstracted River of Forgetfulness, an old-fashioned glow-in-the-dark globe. The underworld should resemble the world of Alice in Wonderland more than it resembles Hades.” While Ruhl gives us specific items, she also gives a broad idea of what she would like the set to look like.

ACTIVITY: *What do you think the Underworld looks like? How might you use lights to convey the location? Would you want them to be dark and eerie or light and hopeful? Draw some pictures or create*

a small model of what you’d like the set and lights to look like and share them with your classmates.

Discuss the above questions and compare and contrast what you’ve created.

When we first enter the Underworld we are introduced to three stones—a little stone, a big stone, and a loud stone. These characters serve as the chorus. The chorus dates back to Ancient Greece and serves as a narrator to provide the audience with a group to relate to and also to provide information about what is happening in the world of the play. Ruhl says this about the stones: “The stones should be played as though they are nasty children at a birthday party. In fact, they might be played by children.” This is the only information we get about them.

ACTIVITY: *Knowing that there are three stones who serve as a chorus, what do they look like to you? Would you dress them as stones, use Ruhl’s suggestion of kids at a birthday party, or do something completely different? Use your imagination to create costumes for each of the stones. Draw them and share these drawings with your class. Discuss your ideas and drawings.*

At the end of the play, Orpheus goes to the Underworld to get Eurydice back. Ruhl gives us these stage directions: “Orpheus stands at the gates of hell. He opens his mouth. He looks like he’s singing, but he’s silent. Music surrounds him. The melody Orpheus hummed in the first scene, repeated over and over again. He keeps singing. The stones weep. They look at the tears, bewildered.” Orpheus created a song so beautiful that the Lord of the Underworld allows him to have Eurydice back.

ACTIVITY: *What makes a song beautiful? If you were creating the song Orpheus sings, what would you want it to sound like? Think about what songs you know. Create a song or find a song that Orpheus could sing to get Eurydice back. Have your class listen to what you’ve created or found and discuss the choices that were made.*

COLLABORATION

Theater is an art form that requires the cooperation and talents of a lot of people. While the audience sees only the actors on stage, there are many other experts that are behind the scenes collaborating to make the show a great success. Along with the actors, there are designers for the set, props, costumes, lights and sounds; carpenters; the director; stage managers; people to promote the show; a literary director to help people involved to better understand the show; technical directors; and many more. Everyone has to work together in order to get a show up and running. But before any of this can happen, the show must be written. Playwrights have to take the first step when it comes to collaboration. While playwrights may have many ideas, they often times seek out the help of others in order to get the creative juices flowing.



Even Sarah Ruhl collaborated with people in order to get her shows written. It started as a student-teacher relationship with Paula Vogel, a world renowned playwright as well as a professor at Brown University. Ruhl took a class taught by Vogel, not expecting to turn from aspiring poet to successful playwright. Vogel took Ruhl under her wing and supported her through difficult events in Ruhl's life and helped shape her poetic thoughts into plays. The two say about this collaboration:

"I want to learn a different way of looking at theater, because you can become entrapped in your own voice," says Vogel. "So when someone [with an original voice] comes along, I am there hungry to understand it. I'm in their play world. And I react the same way a playgoer does, by being in the middle of the experience."

Says Ruhl: "Paula says, 'This is what I'm hearing on Page 33. This is what I think your play is doing. Do you want me to feel that, because that's what I'm feeling.' And the playwright goes, 'Ohhhhh.'" (Hartford Courant)

Without the collaboration between the two, Ruhl never would have found her voice as a playwright. It is important to have someone to talk to and help you out when you need it. Collaboration will get you far in life and allow you to achieve what you never would have thought possible.

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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The Rep Milwaukee
THEATER ♦ TRAINING AT ITS BEST

*“The theatre is so endlessly fascinating
because it's so accidental.
It's so much like life.”*

Arthur Miller

Our lives are greatly enhanced with theater. Studying and viewing it teaches us about other cultures and times, collaboration, work ethic, and imagination. We become more aware of the world around us with these concepts, and in addition to this, more alert to and responsive of human nature. With this improved understanding of what theater can provide for us we are able to gain a better appreciation not only for theater, but for life as well.

VISITING THE REP

The Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater, and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see a staircase on your left. You will take this staircase to the Powerhouse Theater lobby.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains, and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room, and enjoy them outside the theater during intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full “running time” of the play.

**For more information on our education programs and our productions,
please visit our website at www.milwaukeeep.com**