

PLAYFUL CONVERSATIONS: A STUDY OF SHARED DYNAMICS BETWEEN
THE PLAYS OF PAULA VOGEL AND SARAH RUHL

by

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Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Paula Vogel, playwright and educator, has blazed a trail in American theatre, opening new avenues for female playwrights. In 2005 Vogel's student Sarah Ruhl burst onto the scene with her play *The Clean House*. As one of the most produced playwrights of 2005, Ruhl has been celebrated as the new voice of American theatre. There are similarities, as might be expected between teacher and former student, but some of the similarities suggest something more: a dynamic shared between Vogel's and Ruhl's plays which suggests an ongoing theatrical conversation and may suggest directions for future American drama.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As an aspiring writer, a young Paula Vogel lamented the fact that she knew of no female playwrights from whom she could draw inspiration.¹ Through her own tenacity Vogel found her way in to playwriting, cutting her own path and tackling taboo topics with a mix of humor and drama. She has become the very inspiration for which she was looking for a new generation of playwrights. Since the 1980's Paula Vogel has challenged her audiences with plays that are provocative not only in content but also in their form and style. But, Vogel has also put her skill as a playwright and her knowledge of the theater to work as a professor of playwriting at Brown University from 1985 to 2008. During that time she trained some of America's brightest new playwrights, the likes of which include Bridget Carpenter, Adam Bock, Pulitzer Prize winner Nilo Cruz, and Sarah Ruhl. Of all Vogel's students at Brown, Sarah Ruhl stands out, not only because she has been one of the most produced playwrights since 2005, but also because she, like Vogel, speaks in a theatrical language that is all her own.

Although Vogel and Ruhl are both known for their unique theatrical voice, there are similarities between their respective plays, as one might expect from a teacher and her former student. But, possibly more interesting is the seeming reciprocity between their plays in style, content, and form. The purpose of this research will be to describe a dynamic interacting between the plays of Paula Vogel and Sarah Ruhl. The concept of "dynamic" utilized in this research will be used to describe textual or theatrical activity, dialogue, actions, events, or processes that appear to suggest interplay between the plays of Vogel and Ruhl. The works of these two playwrights have many similarities, but more importantly, the plays appear to be in dialogue with one another, echoing the works of other playwrights but then ultimately reflecting back to Vogel and Ruhl. A close investigation of a dynamic between the plays of Vogel and Ruhl has the potential to elucidate the ways in which Vogel has influenced one of her most successful students. Another benefit in studying a dynamic in the works of Vogel and Ruhl may be an enlightening as to how Ruhl has influenced the work of Vogel. In Christopher Bigsby's book, *Contemporary American Playwrights*, Vogel states in regards to her own work, "If

you try to explore the boundaries of what you are doing it will always take a gap in time until somebody decodes you."² Identifying a dynamic between the works of Vogel and Ruhl might also suggest that the decoding of Vogel in popular theater opened the door for Ruhl, with her similar dramaturgy, to gain acclamation relatively quickly on the American stage. Ruhl said of her own success, "I don't know what to make of all this. I haven't done any animal sacrifices. I haven't made any Faustian bargains. I don't know why the theater gods are choosing to smile on me right now."³

Vogel first gained the public's attention in 1992 with *Baltimore Waltz*, a play that follows a dreamlike European tour of a woman, who is dying of the HIV-like Acquired Toilet Disease (ATD), and her brother. *Baltimore Waltz* put Vogel on the radars of the American theater but it was by no means her first play; it was, in fact, her twenty-second. It was not until 1998 that Vogel gained national notoriety for her Pulitzer Prize winning play *How I Learned to Drive*, about a young woman and her incestuous relationship with her uncle. *Baltimore Waltz* and *How I Learned to Drive* are Vogel's most well known works, and they typify Vogel's methods as a storyteller. In both of

these plays Vogel concentrated on two societal issues, pedophilia and AIDS during the 1980's respectively. Vogel's plays all deal with subjects that are not typically discussed openly in public settings. Her plays put a human face on these loaded societal issues, forcing an audience to confront the grayness of things usually viewed in more concrete terms.

As early on as elementary school Vogel had been drawn to the theater and its power to move people. When Vogel began doing theater in her sophomore year of high school she said she felt at home. But, that same seduction of bodies on stage that drew her to the theater also kept Vogel from wanting to be an actor, as she was terrified of exposing her own body.⁴ Because of the gender politics of the 1960's, she didn't consider directing an option, so Vogel happily spent three years stage managing in high school. While in high school, Vogel was involved in student politics and had aspirations of becoming a career politician. But, as a senior in high school, Vogel had her first intimate experience with another young woman. At that point she knew that because she was not willing to hide her sexuality that she would have to give up her aspirations to be in politics, as she said in an interview with David

Savran in regards to her sexuality, "I can never stop doing this. I can never not have this be part of my life."⁵ By that time she had begun to write, and had high hopes of writing musicals for the Broadway stage.

At the end of the text for Vogel's 2003 play *Long Christmas Ride Home*, in a section titled, "Notes From Carl," Vogel says that it was Carl who was to be the writer in the family.⁶ With encouragement from her brother, Vogel decided to go to college even though it was not financially possible for her family. Vogel received a scholarship from Bryn Mawr, where she attended for two years and wrote her first play, a musical version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.⁷ Vogel transferred to Catholic University for the last two years of her undergraduate degree, continuing to write despite the lack of female playwrights to serve as role models for her. Vogel's next step in pursuing her passion for writing was applying to the only playwriting MFA playwriting program she knew of, Yale School of Drama. Vogel was not accepted into Yale. Nor was she dissuaded from her dream of becoming a writer; Vogel applied and was accepted to the Ph.D. program at Cornell University. During Vogel's second year she was able to teach, which opened a whole new world to her, "I went into that room and I

realized that I was as exhilarated by the teaching as I had been by the actual writing”⁸ Vogel used her time as a Ph.D. student to build a theatrical vocabulary with which to base her writing. Vogel taught herself how to write plays without the formal education she would have received in the playwriting program along side Wendy Wasserstein and Christopher Durang, two contemporaries of Vogel’s that were admitted to Yale School of Drama the year that Vogel applied.

The exhilaration Vogel felt as a teacher during her Ph.D. program would continue in 1985 when she was hired at the age of 33 as a playwriting instructor at Brown University. Many talented playwrights went through Vogel’s classes at Brown and she used her connections in the professional theater world to catapult some of them to the stage. Considered one of the country’s leading playwright educators Vogel, like a “junior agent” to her promising students, passed along her students’ plays to her producer and director colleagues. In 1995, just three years after Vogel’s play *Baltimore Waltz* proved to be a success, Sarah Ruhl, then a junior at Brown, took Vogel’s playwriting class as a “lark,” inexorably changing the course of Ruhl’s life.

Sarah Ruhl had no intentions of becoming a playwright when she entered Vogel's class; Ruhl was planning on becoming a poet, because as she said, "I was serious about poetry, maybe because it seemed more painful."⁹ Vogel was immediately taken by Ruhl, 20, who wrote a ten-minute play about a dog waiting for his deceased master to come home¹⁰. Ruhl had just recently lost her father; Vogel, who had just three years earlier gained success with *Baltimore Waltz*, a play about the death of her brother, took the play home to her partner and they were both moved to tears by a reading of the dog play. After returning from a semester in Europe, Ruhl proposed an idea to Vogel for a play about the passion play of Oberammergau, which Vogel encouraged her to write. In 1997 *Passion Play: A Cycle* had a workshop performance at Providence's Trinity Repertory Company.

Compared to the twenty-year slow burn of Vogel's early career, Ruhl's career spontaneously combusted when in 2004 she was awarded the Susan Smith Blackburn Award for *The Clean House*. Then, in 2005, she was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for the same play. Vogel said of Ruhl, "She's going to become her own vocabulary word"¹¹ The Ruhl style has steadily gained popularity and continued with *Dead Man's Cell Phone* in 2007 and in January of 2009

In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play) premiered at Berkeley Rep.

In regards to her former student, Vogel said, "I'm holding my breath hoping that we are equal to the task of being audience members for her mind."¹² Vogel knew all too well about having an audience that was not quite ready for her work. In 1980 Vogel submitted her play *The Oldest Profession* to theaters only to find that this play about geriatric prostitutes was offensive; in fact, it was suggested by some that she abandon her playwriting career altogether. It seems that at the precipice of her career, Vogel's audience was not equal to the task of being her audience members. Although it is impossible to understand the exact mechanisms that made a successful career blossom, if it were not for the work of Paula Vogel there likely would be no Sarah Ruhl. The sensibility Vogel brings to the stage is unconventional, nonlinear, and uses defamiliarization strategies to explore controversial issues¹³, and what is truly interesting about these descriptions of Vogel is that the same language is used to describe the work of Ruhl¹⁴.

The works of Vogel and Ruhl have a reciprocity deeper than a simple relationship between teacher and student;

theirs are two entirely unique voices that have started a conversation in the American theater. In the remainder of this chapter, in an effort to establish a baseline of sorts from which to compare the plays of Vogel and Ruhl, I will be investigating how Vogel and Ruhl's plays converse with the works of other playwrights. By gaining an understanding of how Vogel and Ruhl reference the works of other playwrights it will be possible to better understand their specific creative processes and what dynamics exist between their plays. In subsequent chapters I will be looking at and comparing several aspects of Vogel's and Ruhl's works and considering the ways in which the plays interact.

Chapter Two will investigate how Vogel's play *Baltimore Waltz*, and Ruhl's play *Eurydice* each undertakes the theme of using the stage to "speak" to a departed loved one. Because *Eurydice* received its first workshop production twelve years after Vogel wrote *Baltimore Waltz*, I will be inquiring specifically as to any conversational aspects from Ruhl's play to Vogel's play, which might strongly suggest an active dynamic.

Chapter Three will deal take a look at a humanizing balance of characters. Working from a word Vogel herself uses in describing her own work, I will ask: how do Vogel

and Ruhl use audience empathy to reexamine inhuman characters? I will be looking at Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, and *Hot N' Throbbing*, and Ruhl's *The Clean House*, and *Passion Play*; in these four plays Vogel and Ruhl both create characters that an audience knows we are supposed to hate. However, both Vogel and Ruhl write in such a way that forces an audience to empathize with even the most detestable characters. This empathy has the effect of engaging the audience in an exploration and journey that extends past the confines of the theater.

Arena Stage artistic director Molly Smith said of Sarah Ruhl, "This is someone with a breathtaking theatrical imagination,"¹⁵ which highlights a quality Ruhl shares with Vogel. Chapter Four will explore the particular ways in which Vogel and Ruhl use stage directions that take advantage of the collaborative characteristic of theatrical creation. Their stage directions are simultaneously explicit and vague, which allows for director, designer, and actor interpretation. I expect to find distinct dynamics at work between Vogel and Ruhl's use of theatrical techniques in crafting the world play, as well as establishing defamiliarizing dialogue, and plot construction that serve the ultimate themes of the play.

Paula Vogel's recent appointment as "Eugene O'Neill Professor of Playwriting" and Chair of the Playwriting Department at Yale School of Drama further concretizes her position as one of the country's foremost playwright and playwright educators. With Sarah Ruhl's 2007 premier of her acclaimed *Dead Man's Cell Phone* and the 2009 Berkeley Rep production of *In the Next Room (or the Vibrator Play)*, it appears neither of these women are near reaching a pinnacle in their career. While it is impossible to predict the ways in which Vogel and Ruhl will continue to influence the theatrical world, but, it may be helpful to American theater studies to examine the distinct conversation and exchanges occurring between these two prominent and prolific American playwrights.

Borrowing-

Once, while attending a party, Ruhl found herself surrounded by doctors. She overheard from one of them a lament about her Brazilian maid not wanting to clean the house because she was depressed and even after the maid was medicated she still would not clean. The audacity of this doctor outraged Ruhl and thus was planted the seed for Ruhl's *The Clean House*¹⁶. In the introduction to her book,

The Playwright's Muse, Joan Herrington states in regards to playwrights, "What we learn about their most fertile imaginations will not enable us to 'understand' the playwrights; rather, it will enable us to see, for a moment, our world as these writers see it."¹⁷ This is, according to Herrington, the who, what, where, when, why, and how, of what stimulates playwrights to write. While Vogel and Ruhl allow audiences to gather their own meaning from their plays, they are both open about their inspirations and muses for the creation of their works. A better understanding of how Vogel's and Ruhl's plays interact with the works of other playwrights will give a baseline from which to compare the dynamics conversing specifically between the plays of Vogel and Ruhl.

In the script of *Desdemona: A play about a Handkerchief*, Vogel wrote a note to the director that states, "DESDEMONA was written as a tribute (i.e., "rip-off") to the infamous play, SHAKESPEARE THE SADIST by Wolfgang Bauer."¹⁸ Vogel obviously wanted the directors of *Desdemona* to be aware of what she saw as a connection that might not otherwise be apparent. The similarities between Bauer's and Vogel's plays are minute and considering the relative obscurity of *Shakespeare the Sadist*, Vogel might

not have wanted to leave the connection up to the discovery of a clever dramaturg.

Desdemona's most apparent similarity to Bauer's play is that Vogel wrote the play as a series of thirty cinematic "takes."¹⁹ Bauer's script calls for forty-nine cinematic takes with a "4-5 second blackout" separating the takes.²⁰ Vogel clearly stipulates that there should be no blackouts between the takes. Bauer's blackouts function not only to symbolize a cinematic cut but also to intimate a progression of time. Bauer suggests that a director fill the blackouts with familiar images from film such as the MGM lion. Bauer's play is only eighteen pages long and even with a four to five second blackout between scenes would be performed in just over thirty minutes. Vogel's *Desdemona* is substantially longer with a running time of closer to ninety minutes, which may be a reason for not including blackouts between the scenes. It is most likely that Vogel knew the same "take" effect could be reached by the lapse in action and dialogue that is extant in *Desdemona*. Bauer's metatheatrical reenactment of the Swedish porn as well as the cinematic obsession of the characters, gives an obvious connection of stylized production to the content of the play. It is unclear why Vogel would choose to use the same

cinematic style, especially, as Bigsby points out, the first moment of the play, Desdemona's handkerchief being dropped in a spotlight, is thoroughly theatrical²¹.

Shakespeare the Sadist is a disjointed story about three movie-obsessed male friends, Gerry, Peter and Bill, and how they try to find something to do for the evening. Sonia, Gerry's girlfriend, is also present in the scene. At the start of the play she expresses her aversion to Gerry and Peter's seemingly older and trashier friend, Bill. Bauer, in a note to the director, says that Bill's hair needs to be reminiscent of the balder depictions of William Shakespeare. Sonia's dislike of Bill seems to suddenly fade as she finds out ". . . he's great at screwing."²² Sonia begins to show an interest in Bill, leading the play in the direction of a pornographic male fantasy, including the reenactment of a Swedish porno film that Gerry and Peter go to see, which stylistically presents a sadistic sexual encounter culminating in a decapitation.

Vogel's *Desdemona* never reaches the sexual magnitude that Bauer's work does. But, Vogel still allows her characters, as is typical of her work, to celebrate their sexuality. Vogel borrows lightly the topic of sadism in a scene in which Bianca teaches Desdemona how to feign a

beating from the clients who pay to abuse the prostitutes. In this scene Vogel is ironically foreshadowing Desdemona's very real demise by Othello's abstracted thoughts of being cuckolded.

The exploration of Desdemona's sexuality is more a response to Shakespeare's *Othello* than it is an emulation of Bauer's infamous play. Vogel lamented the fact that when first reading Shakespeare's *Othello*, she was crying for Othello, a man who was "supposedly cuckolded,"²³ and Desdemona, who is objectified as a source of deceit, exists only in the context of her relationship with Othello. Vogel's play attempts to rectify what she viewed as an injustice to Desdemona by making her, Emilia, and Bianca the subjects of the play, apart from Othello, Cassio, and Iago, the men who define them in Shakespeare's play.

Vogel's inversion of character turns the chaste Desdemona into a sexually bold woman, whose biggest fear is to be trapped with the same man in the same place for her whole life. As a favor to Bianca, so she can go out with Cassio, Vogel's Desdemona moonlights as a prostitute, which Desdemona praises as an enjoyable night. Vogel, in response to Iago's seemingly unfounded entrapment of Othello, draws comparison to the size of two men's penises; Desdemona

cajoles the virtuous and prudish Emilia to admit to Iago's diminutive stature, while at the same time being demanded to mend the ever-tearing crotch of Othello's drawers.

Vogel truly takes advantage of Shakespeare's *Othello* through the public's knowledge of the story. In the last scene of the play, Desdemona is making plans to leave Othello and return to Venice. Desdemona has only just discovered that Emilia was the one who stole Desdemona's handkerchief, which leads Othello to suspect Desdemona in an affair. Emilia has also divulged that she has seen Othello spying on Desdemona, watching her from the shadows and smelling her sheets for the essence of another man. The play ends with Desdemona in fear for her life and Emilia brushing her hair as she prepares for bed. Vogel needs not say what happens after the lights fade. The story of Othello is well known, and Vogel allows the knowing audience to understand that as Desdemona sleeps that night Othello will suffocate her with a pillow.

While Vogel's penchant for inverting the subject of traditional plays from male to female is evident, it is unclear why she would choose to even reference Bauer's play other than her interest in the idea of Bauer's use of the cinematic take. On the other hand, Vogel's play *The Oldest*

Profession is an exemplary case of Vogel's desire to create a re-envisioning of another author's work. David Mamet's play *The Duck Variations* was Vogel's inspiration for her writing of *The Oldest Profession*²⁴. It might seem that the typically misogynistic Mamet would be a prime subject for Vogel's efforts to reverse societal and gender roles of male playwrights, but Mamet's *The Duck Variations* is his least sexist play.

Mamet's play consists of two old men on a bench in the park bantering about ducks, weather, and habitat. It was the repetitive style and geriatric characters of Mamet's play that interested Vogel in drawing inspiration from *The Duck Variations*.²⁵ The plays both take place on a bench in a park on a sunny day. While Mamet's play hides its social and political commentary in the cantankerous conversation of the old men, Vogel's *The Oldest Profession*, first read in 1981 at the Hudson Guild in New York City, is from the first line of stage direction, an overt commentary on the impending election of Reagan, "A sunny day in October one week before the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980."²⁶ *The Oldest Profession*, like all of Vogel's plays, deals with the marginalized of society; in this case the characters are elderly, female, and prostitutes. The characters are

faced with an aging clientele who are dying or are so wracked with dementia that they cannot remember to pay after services have been rendered.

As the play progresses, one by one the characters pass away and the following scene is adjusted for the absence of the missing character. Vogel said this play was also prompted by her thoughts of her grandmother who had suffered a recent heart attack. Vogel named the youngest of the five characters after her grandmother, who was the youngest of five sisters (a choice that so appalled Jon Jory, who had commissioned the play at Actor's Theater of Louisville, that he and Vogel ceased their working relationship)²⁷. As well as the name of the character, Vogel used personal stories from her five aunts to color in the stories of five women in *The Oldest Profession*. Vogel also inserted her own life into the play. All of Vogel's plays have autobiographical elements to them and by setting *The Oldest Profession* against the backdrop of Reagan and the dominant Republican party's politics, Vogel created a play that reflects her own marginalized positions in society as an artist, a female playwright, and a lesbian. With the National Endowment for the Arts disappearing, Vogel drew comparisons between the Reagan administration's attitude

towards artists and prostitutes, both groups considered outcasts by those in positions of power, and neither of which received public assistance, in spite " . . . of all our years in public service," one of Vogel's characters jests.²⁸

Contemplating the devaluing of art in the early 1980s Vogel draws comparisons between the value of the sexual currency her characters trade in, their low placement in society, and the high price our society places on youth, beauty, and the female body. As with *Desdemona* Vogel diverged from her inspiration and places females as the subjects of *The Oldest Profession*. Similarly, Vogel turns characters upside down to achieve an absurd or defamiliarizing effect, as she turned the chaste *Desdemona* into a prostitute and presented five geriatric prostitutes, creating characters that are in control of themselves and their sexuality.

Vogel borrows from other playwrights to reframe familiar situations with women as the subjects, to comment about gender and societal roles, to bring marginalized groups to a prominent place on stage, and to talk about otherwise hushed controversial issues. In a similar way, Ruhl has used the *Oberammergau Passion Play* to start

conversations about different roles people have been asked to play throughout history. Ruhl was prompted to write *Passion Play: A Cycle* by a term spent in Europe, as well as a childhood book of Ruhl's that told an account of the Passion Play of Oberammergau and how the man who played the Christ was so holy as to become the living embodiment of the Christ and how the woman who played Mary was "as pure as the Virgin."²⁹

Passion Play: A Cycle is an epic play, told in three shorter plays about an English town in 1575, a German town in 1934, and Spearfish, South Dakota in 1969, 1984 and the present. Each of the towns is putting on their own Passion play. The first part of the play takes place in an English town of 1575, which was during a time just before Queen Elizabeth was to outlaw passion plays to halt religious unrest. A virtuous fisherman plays Jesus and his cousin, a fishmonger, plays Pontius. The man who plays Pontius wants nothing more than to play the part of Christ. Christ's virtue prevents him from being with the adoring Mary, but it allows Pontius the perfect opportunity to manipulate his way into Mary's life. After Mary becomes pregnant with Pontius, an immaculate conception is fabricated so Mary can maintain her role as the Virgin mother. Tragically after

Mary drowns herself out of guilt because she thinks she will no longer be able to play the Virgin Mary, Queen Elizabeth rides into town and outlaws performances of the Passion. The second part of *Passion Play* happens in a small German town in 1934. Ruhl shows a town that is putting on a more anti-Semitic version of the Passion with great excitement. Hitler comes to the play, praising the performance and speaking of the virtue of Pontius who refuses to kill the Christ until he is forced by the popular outcry of the Jews. As the second part ends, Eric, the young man playing the Christ, joins the Nazi party out of fear of being found out as a homosexual and his first order is to take the town's only Jewish resident, an orphan girl, to a concentration camp. The third part of the *Passion Play* takes place in Spearfish, South Dakota. The passion play was brought to Spearfish in 1940 by a German immigrant who played the Christ for many years. In 1969 the man who plays Pontius goes to Vietnam while the man playing Jesus, his brother, stays home and gets Pontius' wife pregnant. When Pontius returns from Vietnam he has a three-year-old daughter at home and posttraumatic stress disorder in his mind. The Spearfish passion play has made some changes too: professional actors now act some of the parts

in the play and the play is directed by a young draft dodger. On his campaign trail, in 1984, Ronald Reagan makes a stop in Spearfish to see the passion play. While there Reagan gives a speech spreading red fear and makes a call for spiritual revival in the United States to protect the American people from destruction.

Each section of the play deals with themes of betrayal, shame, political coerciveness, and as Celia Wren put it, "the disturbing seduction of theater itself."³⁰ In the introduction to the play, written in 2007, Ruhl is implicit in the political mythos of the passion play, she says, ". . . I realized that little is more American than the nexus of religious rhetoric, politics, and theatricality. Especially at the present moment, when it seems as if we are in the midst of an unacknowledged holy war, conducted by a man [then President George W. Bush] who feels himself to be appointed by God."³¹ The original passion play of Oberammergau is performed every ten years as a way of protecting the town from the plague through religious devotion; Ruhl's *Passion Play* is attempting to prevent a different plague, a plague of over-zealous religious devotion that Ruhl felt was destroying society.

Ruhl knew that there was power in the passion story. It is a proclamation of her skill and guts as a playwright to metatheatrically use the passion to prompt audiences to question the pervasive ideologies of religion, socially constructed roles, and dynamics of power. With as much effectiveness but less explicitly political methods, Ruhl's *Eurydice* is a retelling of the ancient Greek story of a musician, Orpheus, and his lost love, Eurydice. The original tragedy followed Orpheus as he married Eurydice, lost her to the bite of a snake, trekked to Hades to bring her back to life, only to lose her again.

Ruhl tells the story from the point of view of Eurydice, moving her in to the position subject, allowing her to exist independently of a male. In the original story, Orpheus must lead Eurydice out of Hades, but because of a stipulation from the Lord of the Underworld he cannot turn around and look at her, otherwise she will die again and he will not be able to retrieve her. Tragically Orpheus fears for Eurydice's safety and turns to check on her, forcing her to die again and sink to Hades. Ruhl's version is further complicated in that Eurydice meets her father in Hades and he helps her remember her lost memories, most important of which is her love for her father. When Ruhl

was twenty her father passed away and *Eurydice* was a way for her to have one last conversation with him.³² There are some that will never be able to see past the thwarted romance of this story, but Ruhl's play is ultimately about the love of family. The true tragedy in *Eurydice* is not when Orpheus loses Eurydice on the path out of Hades, but instead it is when Eurydice returns to Hades to find that her father, broken hearted by having to say good-bye to his daughter again, has dipped himself in the forgetful waters of the river Styx.

Through her writing Ruhl debunks the mythos of the thwarted passions, by establishing very early on in *Eurydice* that Orpheus and Eurydice may not be such a good couple. Ruhl creates a Eurydice that is intrigued with the world around her, likes interesting people and talking about interesting things. Conversely, Ruhl's Orpheus is an idiot savant; he is poor at communicating and for all of his god-given musical abilities his world makes no sense to Eurydice, nor hers to him. But, as I stated before, Ruhl is purposefully drawing a distinction between types of love, specifically away from the romantic love, so she (Ruhl or Eurydice) can have her conversation with her father.

It is possible to see the full effect of making Eurydice the subject of the play when she is forced to die again. Originally, Orpheus is only prompted by his own fear to turn around and thus force Eurydice back to Hades: ". . . Orpheus, afraid that she would fail him, and desiring a glimpse of his beloved, turned to look: at once she slipped back to the underworld" ³³ But in Ruhl's play, Eurydice calls out to Orpheus, prompting him to turn around. Ruhl said she loved the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice but she was struck that no one had looked at Eurydice's experience, "-she's the one who dies and takes a journey before Orpheus." ³⁴ Ruhl's Eurydice may have called out to Orpheus in fear for her own safety because she did not recognize him, or she may have called out because she didn't want to leave her father. Whatever the reason, by having Eurydice call out to Orpheus, Ruhl has freed Eurydice from being at the control of a male. She is the master of her own destiny; she made the choice to follow "A Nasty Interesting Man" with the promise of correspondence from her father and she didn't need to be saved by a man. ³⁵

Vogel and Ruhl both use their positions as female playwrights to move marginalized characters, such as Desdemona and Eurydice, into prominent roles as the subject

of the play. It also seems that Vogel and Ruhl both use their plays as a way to overturn and question normatives regarding gender, feminism, heteromascularity—all roles society expects people to play. One of the key differences in the examples I have given is what exactly either playwright chooses to borrow from their peers. Vogel it seems borrows from the structure—the cinematic take from Bauer and the repetitive dialogic structure from Mamet—but after using the structure, in both cases, Vogel added her own unique characters and situations. Ruhl for the most part borrows characters and situations, reformulating the details to fit her needs. In the example of *Passion Play: A Cycle*, Ruhl uses the main figures from the passion plays, but uses the contrasts and mirroring by the characters that play those figures to open a conversation about roles played in society. In *Eurydice* Ruhl uses the same characters as in the classical myth but changes the subject to the female in order to again examine societal roles and what it means to love. Ruhl and Vogel have both used their plays to contemplate familial love and as a way to have one last conversation with a loved one. We have seen some ways that they use the plays of other playwrights in their work and now we will see how they use *Baltimore Waltz* and

Eurydice to achieve the similar goal of speaking with the dead.

NOTES

¹ David Savran, *The Playwrights Voice* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1999) 269.

² Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 295.

³ Lawrence Goodman, "Playwright Laureate of Grief." *Brown Alumni Magazine* Mar.-Apr. 2007, 18 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.brownalumnimagazine.com/march/april-2007/playwright-laureate-of-grief.html>>.

⁴ David Savran, *The Playwrights Voice* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1999) 267.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁶ Paula Vogel, *The Long Christmas Ride Home* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2004) 80.

⁷ Joan Herrington, ed. *The Playwright's Muse* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 233.

⁸ William Henderson, "Paula Vogel: Driven to Success." *New England Blade* 29 Mar. 2007, 15 Mar 2009 <http://www.innewsweekly.com/innews/?class_code=Ar&article_code=3688>.

⁹ Frank Rizzo, "Passion For Plays: From Teacher and Student to Award-Winning Peers." *Hartford Current* 21 Sep. 2008, 12 Nov 2008 <<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/courant/advancedsearch.html>>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Celia Wren, "The Golden Ruhl." *American Theater* (New York: Theatre Communications, Oct. 2005) 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 31.

¹³ Joan Herrington, ed. *The Playwright's Muse* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 234.

¹⁴ Celia Wren, "The Golden Ruhl." *American Theater* (New York: Theatre Communications, Oct. 2005) 30.

¹⁵ Susan Stamberg, "Playwright Sarah Ruhl Entertains with Big Ideas." *Morning Edition*. Performing Arts. 21 Oct. 2005. National Public Radio. 18 Dec. 2008 <www.NPR.org>.

¹⁶ Wendy Weckwerth, "More Invisible Terrains." *Theater* (New Haven: Yale Press, 34.2, 2004) 31.

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- ¹⁷ Joan Herrington, ed. *The Playwright's Muse* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 1.
- ¹⁸ Paula Vogel, *Desdemona a Play about a Handkerchief* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1994) 4.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ²⁰ Wolfgang Bauer, trans. Martin Esslin and Renata Esslin. *Shakespeare the Sadist* (Cologne: Verlag Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1974) 8.
- ²¹ Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 298.
- ²² Wolfgang Bauer, trans. Martin Esslin and Renata Esslin. *Shakespeare the Sadist* (Cologne: Verlag Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1974) 12.
- ²³ Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 299-300.
- ²⁴ Joan Herrington, ed. *The Playwright's Muse* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 235.
- ²⁵ Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 301.
- ²⁶ Paula Vogel, *The Oldest Profession* (New York: Dramatist Play Service, 2005) 7.
- ²⁷ Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 301.
- ²⁸ Paula Vogel. *The Oldest Profession* (New York: Dramatist Play Service, 2005) 17.
- ²⁹ Sarah Ruhl, *Passion Play: A Cycle* (New York: Bret Adams Ltd, 2007) 2.
- ³⁰ Celia Wren, "The Golden Ruhl." *American Theater* (New York: Theatre Communications, Oct. 2005) 31.
- ³¹ Sarah Ruhl *Passion Play: A Cycle* (New York: Bret Adams Ltd, 2007) 3.
- ³² Wendy Weckwerth, "More Invisible Terrains." *Theater* (New Haven: Yale Press, 34.2, 2004) 31.
- ³³ Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. Charles Martin (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2004) 343.
- ³⁴ Wendy Weckwerth. "More Invisible Terrains." *Theater* (New Haven: Yale Press, 34.2, 2004) 30.
- ³⁵ Sarah Ruhl, "Eurydice." *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2006) 349.

CHAPTER II

SPEAKING WITH THE DEAD

"The play is really dedicated to my father, who died when I was twenty and he was fifty-five... I wanted to write something where I would be allowed to have a few more conversations with him."¹ -Sarah Ruhl

Vogel once said to Ruhl, "The greatest gift you'll ever receive as a writer is the death of your father."² Vogel, having lost her brother, the most important person in her life, knew firsthand the powerful influence of losing a loved one. The dynamic occurring between the plays of Vogel and Ruhl can be observed through their treatment of the theme of speaking with passed loved ones. Vogel and Ruhl have both stated that their plays, *The Baltimore Waltz* and *Eurydice*, are opportunities to have further contact with their late brother and father, respectively. There are similarities and differences between the ways in which Vogel and Ruhl go about furthering their conversations with their departed loved ones and some similarities between

these two plays that suggest Ruhl's work, which was written later, is not only conversing with her late father but also conversing with Vogel's work.

In 1986 Paula Vogel's older brother Carl invited Paula on a European tour and for reasons of time and money Vogel turned down the offer.³ She was unaware at that time that Carl was HIV positive. Carl died from AIDS complications in 1988 in a hospital in Baltimore, which would become the backdrop for her next play. In the summer of 1989, nestled in the trees of the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, Paula Vogel wrote *The Baltimore Waltz*.⁴ In an interview with performance artist Holly Hughes for the *Advocate*, Vogel said she had begun writing *Waltz* sitting by Carl in the hospital during his last stay before he passed.

Vogel and Carl had a close relationship. He was her protector, and when she came out in the 70s, Carl was there to introduce her to the mixed bar scene of DC and to introduce her to all the drag queens.⁵ Carl was possibly, as stated by Hughes, Vogel's greatest inspiration; it is evident in the letters between Vogel and Carl (printed in the TCG publication of *The Long Christmas Ride Home*) that they shared a special bond as siblings and also as writers. Vogel kept all the correspondence with her brother,

"Somehow I must have known that for Carl language would be finite" ⁶ Emphasizing the importance of the letters, Vogel noted that she still has Carl's letters despite her ability to " . . . misplace all essential records" ⁷ Survival was her impetus for writing *Waltz*; Vogel said that while she sat beside her dying brother, he said, "You're writing about this, aren't you?" ⁸ Despite her denial she knew she could never hide anything from Carl.

While Vogel had been involved in the theater for many years and had written almost twenty plays, it wasn't until *The Baltimore Waltz* that she gained widespread attention. *The Baltimore Waltz* is typically referred to as a play about AIDS, ⁹ but Vogel admits that her intent was to be able to have one last conversation with her brother and spend some time with him. ¹⁰ As is often the case with Vogel's work, there are autobiographical pieces intertwined with a revealing of the historicity of a situation, ¹¹ in this case AIDS in 1988. Christopher Bigsby, a professor of American studies at the University of East Anglia, in his book *Contemporary American Playwrights*, noted that Vogel was writing for an audience that was socialized by media to the phrase "innocent victim," ¹² which implied that some who had

contracted AIDS were somehow guilty, and AIDS was a punishment. The defamiliarization techniques Vogel uses in *Waltz* to reach the audience, are meant to re-contextualize a disease that affected all of society, not just a marginalized other.

In the author's note for the published text of *The Baltimore Waltz*, Vogel wrote, "*The Baltimore Waltz*—a journey with Carl to a Europe that exists only in the imagination" ¹³ There are several notes on costumes and set that further this feeling of imagination or dream. Vogel is clear that she wants *Waltz* to take place in a hospital, she said she wants the lights to be, " . . . highly stylized, lush, dark and imaginative, in contrast to the hospital white silence of the last scene." ¹⁴ She asks that all the music, save for the last scene, should be the, " . . . cliché of the European experience as imagined by Hollywood". ¹⁵ And finally Vogel states that, "Anna might be dressed in a full slip/negligeé and a trench coat. Carl is dressed in flannel pajamas and a blazer or jacket [. . .] The Third Man should wear latex gloves throughout the entire play." ¹⁶ Vogel explains that she made these choices as a playwright, because an audience will forget when a device is exposed repeatedly. ¹⁷ Director Anne Bogart, when

directing *The Baltimore Waltz*, thought it would be awkward for *The Third Man* to be wearing latex gloves the entire time. Vogel responded, "If he's constantly in latex gloves we will forget that he is wearing them, and people will gasp at the end of the play when he pulls them off."¹⁸ The "European music", the "lush lighting", and the latex gloves will suddenly disappear in the last scene, replaced with, ". . . the hospital white silence . . ."¹⁹ Vogel prompts her audience to forget the very things they should be paying attention to, and when the audience's attention is brought back, (to the white light, hospital, silence, gloves, pajamas, and a dying Carl) the effect makes more of an impact.

Vogel begins *Waltz* with a direct address from the protagonist, Anna, giving a language lesson. She gives three phrases, one in Dutch, "Help me please," one in French, "There's nothing I can do," and one in German, "Where are the toilets?"²⁰ We then meet Anna's brother Carl, who has just been fired from the San Francisco public library for wearing a pink triangle on his lapel. An audience coming to see this play has most likely heard that they are seeing a play about AIDS, and they will assume that it is the character of Carl who has AIDS, but it is at

this point that Vogel reveals that it is Anna who has Acquired Toilet Disease (ATD). The doctor tells Anna that she was at high risk because ATD is an epidemic among single female grade school teachers. This, of course, is the beauty in Vogel's dramaturgy; as David Savran, a long time friend of Vogel and theater theorist, said, she is able to use humor to cut an opening in the "ideological predispositions of those things that most members of the theatergoing class take for granted."²¹ An audience can laugh at ATD, but at some point, maybe during the play, or maybe some time afterwards, they will realize the seed that Vogel has planted in their minds: having sex is as fundamental a human need as going to the bathroom. Fortunately for Anna, ATD, although terminal, cannot be spread through sexual contact.

The conversation Vogel has with Carl is multifaceted. Vogel said specifically that Carl is not in the play, recognizing that her brother is dead, but she used his name, because it would allow her to literally say and hear the name "Carl" spoken in the present tense.²² It seems that Vogel's conversation takes advantage of the space and time of the theater. Theater as an art can only happen in the here and now, it is an art of the present tense, which

allows Carl, as stated by Bigsby, to become reanimated.²³

But, theater is also an art anchored in "ago." *Waltz* tells what happened and the fact that Carl has died makes the play a reminder of his absence.

One of the other facets of Vogel's conversation with Carl in *Waltz* is that Vogel uses Carl's spoken words as lines for Anna.²⁴ Ever a humorist, Carl wrote a letter to Vogel with suggestions for how his funeral should be performed. The letter is a celebration of Carl's life through his final wishes, including prayers to the creator, a woman cleric, an open casket with Carl's body in full drag, or Carl's body "Bum up" noting that Vogel would know where to put the calla lilies.²⁵ Carl also makes suggestions for music that he thinks is good, such as, "Pie Jesu," "Nearer My God to Thee," and "I Dream of Jeannie."²⁶ In a director's note, Vogel asks that Carl's letter be printed in the playbill. Vogel's request to have the letter printed in the program forces a human connection with the audience. Having read the letter in the program an audience would not be able to ignore the words and the death in the play as merely the work of a playwright. Vogel inserts anecdotal memories of Carl into the *Waltz* by having Anna speak the words of Carl.²⁷ Savran, in his book *A Queer Sort of*

Materialism, asserts that Vogel's gender switching made *Waltz* so effective; a terminally ill heterosexual female schoolteacher "fucking her way across Europe,"²⁸ speaks the words of a gay man dying of AIDS. Vogel uses her "conversation" with Carl to reframe an epidemic in terms that were relatable to a theatergoing public. This reframing is most evident in *Waltz* when the character of Carl says,

I'll tell you what. If Sandra Day O'Connor sat on just one infected potty, the media would be clamoring to do articles on ATD. If just one grandchild of George Bush caught this thing during toilet training, that would be the last we'd hear about the space program.²⁹

Mainstream America saw AIDS as something that was the problem of others. Vogel's life had been touched by AIDS and she knew that it was an epidemic that wasn't going to disappear. In her typified *modus operandi*, takes a dig at the republican government and the Star Wars program.

Much in the same way that Vogel used the mythos of *Othello* to reinvent Desdemona, she also used the public myths about AIDS to shed light on the issues of the times: inequality, ambivalence, and marginalization. Vogel's *Waltz* undermines theatrical realism, and in doing so offers critique of society's prevailing beliefs about AIDS.

But, one of the most poignant aspects of *Waltz* is the great love Vogel expresses for her brother and the immense pain revealed through the writing. Throughout the play there are elementary language lessons. Vogel does not give specific reasons for the inclusion of the language lessons, but it seems they are a comical way to talk about going to the non-English speaking countries of Europe. Or, the language lessons might also be a way to express how a person's grief makes her feel like she is learning to speak a foreign language after losing a loved one. An interesting aspect of the language lessons is that they are all in the present tense until scene twenty-one, where the present, future, and past tense are given of the German word for leave—*verlassen*

The Third Man: Conjugations of the verb *verlassen*. To leave, to abandon, to forsake. The Present tense.

Carl: Are you leaving me alone?

[. . .]

The Third Man: The future tense of the verb *verlassen*.

Carl: Will you be leaving me alone again tonight?

[. . .]

The Third Man: The past tense of the verb *verlassen*.

Carl: Again? Again? You left me alone last night.³⁰

Considering that Vogel said Anna was speaking Carl Vogel's words, it is possible to see that Vogel is in a sense

forgiving her brother for living life fully before he died. As was mentioned above, it was important for Vogel to use Carl's name in the play so she could say Carl in the present tense. But, outside the world of the play Vogel had to learn to speak of Carl in the past tense. The grief of losing a loved one makes speaking of the newly departed like learning a new language.

Sarah Ruhl was faced with almost insurmountable grief after the death of her father in 1994. She found herself at the age of twenty so stricken with mourning that she was unable to even read.³¹ Ruhl turned to writing as her ritual of grieving and her play *Eurydice* was the result.³² Ruhl's *Eurydice* is tragic and was described by Charles Isherwood of the *New York Times* as "Devastatingly lovely—and just plain devastating;"³³ an appropriate quality for a play about death, loss, injustice, thwarted passion, and despair. In an interview with Wendy Wechwerth for the journal *Theater*, regarding *Eurydice* Ruhl said, "I wanted to write something where I would be allowed to have a few more conversations with him,"³⁴ and she did this by using the story and character of *Eurydice* as vehicle for connecting with her late father.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice had always interested Ruhl, but even more so than just being interested in the myth, Ruhl was "troubled" that Eurydice usually takes the position of the object while Orpheus is the subject of the tale.³⁵ The original tragedy followed Orpheus as he married Eurydice, lost her to a snakebite, trekked to Hades to bring her back to life, only to lose her again. Ruhl retells the story from Eurydice's point of view, moving her in to the position of subject, allowing Ruhl to explore the relationship of father and daughter.

In one account of the days following her father's death, given to the *Brown Alumni Magazine*, Ruhl observed that, "The world felt physically darker. I didn't feel like there was much light."³⁶ In an eerie director's note, in the TCG published version of *Eurydice*, Ruhl simply and concisely describes Hades to match her feeling of darkness, "The underworld should resemble the world of *Alice in Wonderland* more than it resembles Hades."³⁷ Ruhl's suggestion of "Wonderland" prevents designers from creating a Christian 'fire and brimstone' Hell, and possibly an Underworld more in line with the ancient Greek idea of Hades—just the place you go when you die. Although Wonderland suggests a certain amount of whimsy, there is

also a dark undercurrent of danger and evil. The Underworld described by Ruhl is created to reconnect Eurydice with her father in a place resembling the dark recesses of memory while avoiding the punitive eternity typically associated with the afterlife.

In Ruhl's play, Eurydice arrives in Hades in a "raining elevator" having had her memory erased by being dipped in the river Styx. Shifting the focus of the story, Ruhl takes the objective of the original myth, Orpheus' quest to retrieve Eurydice from Hades, and makes it a mere subplot; rather, Ruhl focuses her play on the retrieval of Eurydice's memories and on the reestablishment of relationship between Eurydice and her father.

There are two predominant images that Ruhl uses in *Eurydice*: water and empty space. The images of empty space are as much about the space created in one's mind by forgetting, as they are to represent the void created by a death of a loved one. Eurydice's Father makes a room out of string, which seems to suggest forgotten memories that exist vaguely, only in outlines with open empty space in between. The Chorus of Stones tell Eurydice's father, "THERE ARE NO ROOMS!"³⁸ seemingly to suggest that the dead have no memories. This pieced together string room gives

Eurydice a place of comfort, something familiar from life, outlines from which to find pretend definition. Ruhl then shows the audience, using the image of string, that memories for the dead exist in the living. Orpheus uses string to deliver a copy of the *Collected Works of Shakespeare* to the bibliophile Eurydice, who, having forgotten how to read, tries to read it by standing on it.

Ruhl's work in *Eurydice* is not only philosophical and meditative but it is also autobiographical. Ruhl uses her own memories of her father in *Eurydice* as a way to interact with her father again. From the time Ruhl was five, her father would take her and her sister to a pancake house on Saturday mornings, on these outings Ruhl's father, Patrick, would teach his daughters a new word and its etymology. As Eurydice's father helps Eurydice remember he also has to teach her language again, Ruhl uses her childhood memory in this instance,

Eurydice: Teach me another.

Father: Ostracize.

Eurydice: What does it mean?

Father: To exclude. The Greeks decided who to banish. They wrote the name of the banished person on a white piece of pottery called ostrakon.

Eurydice: Ostrakon. Another.³⁹

Eurydice's father teaches her more words, their meaning and their etymology, reanimating on stage important memories for Ruhl of her father.

While *Eurydice* is a meditation on the experiences and conversations Ruhl had already had with her father, Ruhl also uses the play to contemplate the experiences she and her father would never have an opportunity to go through together. In 1994, Ruhl was only twenty at the time of her father's death; she wouldn't be married until 2005 but she was already thinking about not having him be there to escort her down the aisle. Eurydice says that, "A wedding is for daughters and fathers,"⁴⁰ expressing that fathers and daughters become unmarried on the day that the daughter gets married.

In the cases of *The Baltimore Waltz* and *Eurydice* Vogel and Ruhl use memory, language, and setting as the vehicle for conversing with their dead loved ones. But, it is in both plays, that through the use of language there seems to be a conversation happening from Ruhl to Vogel. Vogel's play uses the learning of foreign languages to symbolize what it is like to speak of a loved one after they have died. Ruhl's play concurs with Vogel's, but it takes it one step further; Ruhl's plays seems to say that one's native

language must be relearned after losing a loved one. Does this connection show that there are common feelings for most after a death or is there a dynamic occurring between these two plays?

Another similarity occurring in these two plays is that they both use defamiliarization in their structure. In *Waltz*, Vogel uses the deliberate contrast of different elements of the play (the latex gloves, the lights, the music) to prompt the audience to forget her devices and then using the absence of these things as a way of drawing an audience's attention back to these important items. Ruhl's play is a mix of fantasy and realism, her use of fantastical imagery seems to speak to her audiences, simultaneously to the child and the adult within each of them. The combining of two disparate images, such as the rain in the elevator, or the house made of string, is not only aesthetically beautiful but also functions as a defamiliarizing effect. Ruhl's images never allow an audience to fully settle into the world of the play, hopefully evoking their awareness that what they are seeing are the dark recesses of memory.

Vogel asserts that she cannot write a play without Carl somewhere in it, "Since Carl's death, with every play

I'm writing, I think of the Hirschfeld drawings in which he embroiders a "Nina" somewhere in the picture. There's a Carl embroidered in every play."⁴¹ Ruhl has continued to consider ways in which the living are connected to the dead in her 2007 play *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, in which the socially awkward Jean falls in love with a dead man at a diner and implicates herself in his life by continuing to answer his cell phone. Ruhl considers the ways that technology ties people to the earth long after they have died but ultimately returns to the idea that people must take advantage of their lives while they are living. Gordon, the man who died in the diner, we find dealt in organs harvested from the destitute of the third world. Ruhl's writing creates in the audience a human empathy for an inhumane character. In the next chapter I will be looking specifically at the ways that Vogel and Ruhl create balanced characters who are monstrous by social standards, but through their writing Vogel and Ruhl are able to create characters to connect with an audience through negative empathy.

NOTES

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- ¹ Wendy Weckwerth, "More Invisible Terrains." *Theater* (New Haven: Yale Press, 34.2, 2004) 30.
- ² Lawrence Goodman, "Playwright Laureate of Grief." *Brown Alumni Magazine* Mar.-Apr. 2007, 22 April 2009 <<http://www.browncollege.edu/alumni/magazine.com/march/april-2007/playwright-laureate-of-grief.html>>.
- ³ Paula Vogel *The Baltimore Waltz* (New York: The Fireside Theater, 1992) vii.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.
- ⁵ Holly Hughes, "In the Driver's Seat." *Advocate* (20 January 1998) 99.
- ⁶ Paula Vogel, *The Long Christmas Ride Home* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2004) 79.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.
- ¹⁰ Kathy Sova, "Time to Laugh." *American Theater* (New York: Theater Communications Group, Feb. 1997) 24.
- ¹¹ David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003) 189.
- ¹² Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 311.
- ¹³ Paula Vogel, *The Baltimore Waltz* (New York: The Fireside Theater, 1992) vii.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, ix.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, ix-x.
- ¹⁷ David Savran, *The Playwright's Voice* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1999) 271.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 271.
- ¹⁹ Paula Vogel, *The Baltimore Waltz* (New York: The Fireside Theater, 1992) ix.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

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- ²¹ David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003) 189.
- ²² Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 309-310.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 310.
- ²⁴ David Savran, *The Playwright's Voice* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1999) 279.
- ²⁵ Paula Vogel, *The Baltimore Waltz* (New York: The Fireside Theater, 1992) viii.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, viii.
- ²⁷ David Savran, *The Playwright's Voice* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1999) 279.
- ²⁸ David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003) 196.
- ²⁹ Paula Vogel, *The Baltimore Waltz* (New York: The Fireside Theater, 1992) 9.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.
- ³¹ Lawrence Goodman, "Playwright Laureate of Grief." *Brown Alumni Magazine*. Mar.-Apr. 2007, 22 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.browنالumni magazine.com/march/april-2007/playwright-laureate-of-grief.html>>.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ Charles Isherwood, "A Comic Impudence Softens a Tale of Loss." *The New York Times*. Oct. 2006, 22 April 2009 <<http://theater2.nytimes.com/2006/10/03/theater/reviews/03eury.html>>.
- ³⁴ Wendy Weckwerth, "More Invisible Terrains." *Theater* (New Haven: Yale Press, 34.2, 2004) 30.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ³⁶ Lawrence Goodman, "Playwright Laureate of Grief." *Brown Alumni Magazine*. Mar.-Apr. 2007, 22 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.browنالumni magazine.com/march/april-2007/playwright-laureate-of-grief.html>>.
- ³⁷ Sarah Ruhl, *Eurydice* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2006) 333.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 366.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 345.

⁴¹ David Savran, *The Playwright's Voice* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1999) 278.

CHAPTER III

KEEPING YOUR BALANCE

"How can I seduce both the men in the audience to identify directly, to empathize directly with the female subject, and to retrain women in the audience to identify directly with the female subject?"¹ -Paula Vogel

Theater audiences find themselves in an uncomfortable position when invited to empathize with a pedophile, or merchant of human organs, but Vogel and Ruhl, through the construction of their plays, manage to humanize malevolent characters. Vogel's and Ruhl's characters walk a figurative tightrope, balancing precariously between those two very human traits of flaw and excellence. In doing so Vogel and Ruhl not only intrigue audiences with compelling theater, but also make audiences question their own beliefs and understandings. In this chapter I will be exploring Vogel's play, *How I Learned to Drive*, and Ruhl's plays *The Clean House* and *Dead Man's Cell Phone*.

"Balancing" is a word that Vogel uses to describe her treatment of her play *How I Learned to Drive*, and I contend it is her balancing of characters that makes audiences most uncomfortable in the theater. Vogel asserts that American audiences are accustomed to Hollywood's portrayal of characters, in which there is a clear distinction of who is "good" and who is "bad" which she feels makes for "flattened-out theater."² In an interview with David Savran, a long time friend and leading theater theorist, Vogel spoke in vague terms about what she calls "negative empathy"³ as her way of adding life to the theater. In psychological terms, negative empathy is empathy that is unwillingly felt, or which is felt at the expense of cruelty to another.⁴ It is the continuation of the well-made play, Vogel proposes, that has made American audiences resistant to feeling empathy for the protagonist;⁵ she believes that empathy must come with resistance. Vernon Lee, a nineteenth century author, literary theorist and one of Vogel's inspirations for an aesthetic of negative empathy, maintains there is a joy in experiencing negative emotions, ". . . there is an undoubted pleasure, for instance, even in being annoyed and certainly in being angry."⁶ Lee argues that not only can we get pleasure from

being angry or annoyed but there is also a sort of pleasurable empathy that comes even if a person is at odds with the object of the empathy.⁷ Vogel adds, that the audience's "resistance" to empathy is a characteristic of true tragedy.⁸ Take *Oedipus* for example. An audience empathizes because they know Oedipus is a hero, having saved Thebes, but an audience also understands the full context of the story laid out before Oedipus. Oedipus is not only a hero and a great king but he also exhibits the flaw of hubris, putting Oedipus at odds with the audience as his pride pushes him forward to his own demise.

Bert O. States, a prominent American performance theorist and one of Vogel's Cornell instructors, more fully develops this notion in his book *Irony and Drama*. States, using Shakespeare's tragedies as examples, explains how Lear, Macbeth, and Hamlet, are all dialectical characters, expressing both characteristics of excellence and characteristics of flaws, "a delicate balance of these contradictory qualities."⁹ The balanced characters exhibits "value in dark destiny,"¹⁰ and is truly tragic, in the opinion of States, because it shows the full extremes of what can and will be lost.¹¹ Vogel makes use of similar

contradiction of traits, best seen in the characters of both Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit in *How I Learned to Drive*.

Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* gained her a Pulitzer in 1998 and typical of Vogel's career, stirred controversy over the subject matter. *Drive* opens with a middle-aged man teaching a teenage woman to drive. It quickly becomes apparent in the scene that there is more to this encounter than a simple driving lesson, when the man asks to undo the girl's bra, then fondles and kisses her breasts. An audience that is unaware of the true nature of the circumstances might find the scene objectionable because of the disparity in age. But the situation moves from objectionable to unthinkable when it is revealed that this girl and man are niece and uncle with the offhanded statement, "Uncle Peck—we've got to go. I've got graduation rehearsal tomorrow morning. And you should get on home to Aunt Mary."¹² This sudden turn in the nature of the relationship alerts the audience to the "dark destiny" that will unfold before them.

Drive is often referred to as a play about pedophilia, but Vogel herself said that pedophilia was not even a way she ". . . would be thinking about this."¹³ Vogel was inspired by Mamet's *Oleanna*, which, Christopher Bigsby,

author of *Contemporary American Playwrights*, asserts was intended to create a balance between its male and female characters.¹⁴ Vogel had long been fascinated by Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, which she felt was neutral and balanced between the male and female characters and she wanted to see if it was possible for a woman writer to enter this territory with the same neutrality.¹⁵ But, balance was not Vogel's only motivation for writing *Drive*; it was also with an intention of giving hope to those who had suffered abuses. Her play *Hot'n Throbbing* ends with the female character being killed by an abusive husband, giving those in abusive situations no way out. Vogel's *Drive* was her attempt to assuage the tears of her students who had sat in her office and cried in response to *Hot'n Throbbing*. Though *Drive*, like *Hot'n Throbbing*, deals with abuse of those who are weaker by the more powerful, it does not redress the issues of abuse raised by *Hot'n Throbbing*, because *Drive* deals with sexual abuse, which is not necessarily comparable to physical abuse.

However, *Drive* may be seen more as an indictment of American society's unexamined obsession with the eroticization of children, than it is about pedophilia. Vogel believes that we are all trained by society to be

pedophiles, "The eroticizing of children is all around us. It's on film, on television, it's in those Calvin Klein ads,"¹⁶ and one of the ways she emphasizes this idea is through her music suggestions that call for, "Other sixties music rife with pedophilish (?) reference: the "You're Sixteen" genre hits; The Beach Boys' "Little Surfer Girl"; Gary Puckett and the Union Gap's "This Girl is a Woman Now"; "Come Back When You Grow Up,","¹⁷ Vogel requests music that, for many, will be a recollection of a more innocent time; but upon hearing it in this context will possibly call them to question some of their deeply held beliefs.

It is Vogel's objective as a playwright to beguile an audience and take it somewhere it neither wanted to go nor knew it was going. "I want to seduce the audience," she writes, "If they can go along for a ride they wouldn't ordinarily take, or don't even know they're taking, then they might see highly charged political issues in a new and unexpected way."¹⁸ But, there are those that have resisted the journey Vogel has planned. Rebecca Baldwin, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, said she felt betrayed by a publicly lauded play: "It seemed to me from the outset that this was a play that celebrated pedophilia."¹⁹ Baldwin was so disgusted with the difference in age that she would not

allow herself to go along for the ride regardless of the balanced character Vogel had tried to present. There will always be those who are unable to acknowledge the effect of putting a human face to Peck, but what if Baldwin is right? Does the balance that Vogel claims to achieve fail to address a real issue and instead celebrate predation of youths? Baldwin expressed that awarding Vogel with a Pulitzer was tantamount to honoring Peck for molestation, "Would the pundits of the Pulitzer, the New York critics and all the smiling supporters of this drama still stand behind its presentation of the love between a sensitive child molester and his assenting adolescent paramour?"²⁰ But this may be, rather, the resistance to empathy, that negative empathy, for which Vogel was striving.

Li'l Bit has been raised in a family that doesn't appreciate women for anything but their ability to make babies and satiate a man's needs. Li'l Bit's name, in fact comes from the day she was born and her legs were spread to reveal "Just a little bit."²¹ In one scene Li'l Bit talks about wanting to go to college, learn about Shakespeare and rise above her "cracker background."²² In response, Li'l Bit's grandfather, Big Papa (also named for his genitals), says that, "She's got all the credentials she'll need on

her chest."²³ It is Uncle Peck that stands up for her and supports her in her dreams to go to college. This is the confounding factor in *Drive*; the audience empathizes with Uncle Peck because he is the one person that shows Li'l Bit compassion, but then there is the fact that he has been molesting her, and it is implied in several places throughout the play that Uncle Peck has molested Cousin Bobby too. Vogel has written Peck as the one person who supports Li'l Bit; he is excellence and flaw.

In an interview with Ann Linden for *The Playwright's Muse*, Vogel said, "I think that form is content. I always have thought that form was content."²⁴ And, it is through the form of the play that Vogel's takes the audience on this journey through empathy for a child molester. The fondling that occurs in the first scene, might be enough to make an audience leave a theater without regard for the story that will be told, but because of the specific form Vogel calls for, there are several buffers between the action on stage and the audience's initial resistance. Vogel states in the character description of Li'l Bit, "A woman who ages forty-something to eleven years old,"²⁵ and that the character is written for a forty-something woman to play (Vogel wrote the role of Li'l Bit with Cherry Jones

in mind).²⁶ Baldwin, commenting on the Mark Taper Forum production in which a thirty-five-year-old Molly Ringwald plays Li'l Bit, did not feel the age of the actor was enough of a mitigating theatrical device to contextualize the action, or the supposed empathy an audience should feel for Peck.²⁷ This creates a distance of time, because it is implied that an adult Li'l Bit is looking back on her childhood through memory, much in the same way that Tom Wingfield in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, is looking back at experiences through the objectivity of his memory. Baldwin asks, writing in the *LA Times*, "But what if Li'l Bit was played by an 11-year-old? Picture it, if your stomach permits. Would we still laugh when she makes the joke about mistaking pedophilia for 'learning how to bicycle'?"²⁸ The answer is—No. Of course an audience wouldn't laugh. Vogel is intentional in her structuring of *Drive*; she anticipated that the distance of time would allow some people to open enough to sit through the play and form questions in the process, a strategy that, according to Bigsby, proves successful.²⁹

In the character description for Uncle Peck, Vogel is clear that she wants him to be an attractive man, "played by an actor one might be cast in the role of Atticus in *To*

Kill a Mockingbird."³⁰ There would be a tendency to immediately dismiss Peck as a monster if an audience would be able to visually see him as a hideous man. By making Peck an attractive man an audience must accept that child molesters are not identifiable by their looks and a sexual predator could be a neighbor or a family member, a priest or a teacher. In an interview with Steven Drukman, for the *New York Times* in 1997, before she was awarded the Pulitzer, Vogel made the prediction that Uncle Peck would upset women in the audience because he was not clearly identifiable as evil.³¹ Vogel's portrayal of Uncle Peck is not "politically correct" but she believed that it is necessary to the balance between the characters of Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit in order to stimulate a political discussion.³² But if an audience leaves disgusted during the first scene there is no opportunity for any discussion to take place.

Vogel's understanding of the stage space and her audience is seen in her stage directions of the first scene. The stage is set with two chairs and Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck are in the chairs facing forward and they never actually touch, "Throughout the following, the two sit facing directly front. They do not touch. Their bodies

remain passive. Only their facial expressions emote."³³

Vogel leaves the fondling and the breast kissing up to the imagination of the audience, only insinuating what is taking place between Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck through their dialogue.

The character of Uncle Peck is complicated and there are hints throughout the play that he has suffered abuses of his own. Mark Brokaw, director of the 1997 Vineyard Theater production, believed that Vogel has written Peck, "as damaged"³⁴ as the niece he is molesting. During a dinner with Peck and Li'l Bit, she asks him about the details of his military service, and he responds, "(suddenly taciturn) I . . . I did just this and that. Nothing heroic or spectacular."³⁵ Without any more details about his service other than that he started drinking heavily on his return, there are hints that he had suffered a trauma while in World War II. There is also the hint at the end of the play that Peck was sexually abused himself. Li'l Bit assumes, based on current evidence, that the formerly abused grow up to abuse, and in a direct address to the audience she asks, "Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?"³⁶ and no answer returned. But as is the case with most abuses there are no answers, only more questions.

In the Vineyard production of *Drive* Marie-Louise Parker played Li'l Bit and of the character she said, "I hate the word 'victim'. It's a buzzword people use these days. We're all victims just by virtue of being alive."³⁷ And it is true that it is difficult to see Li'l Bit as a victim of abuse because she has a sense of control through most of the play. It goes without saying that it is impossible to determine if Vogel accomplished her goal of creating a balance between Li'l Bit and Peck because the experience will be different for every audience member. But, not being one to go easy on her audiences, Vogel adds even more confusion to the relational equation by balancing the character Li'l Bit also, and making it unclear as to how much Li'l Bit pushed herself onto Peck. Aunt Mary, Peck's wife, blames Li'l Bit for her husband's problems. In a scene recounted by Aunt Mary we see that Li'l Bit used herself as a bribe for Uncle Peck to stop drinking,

Li'l Bit: We could meet and talk—once a week. You could just store up whatever's bothering you during the week—and then we could talk.

Peck: Would you like that?

Li'l Bit: As long as you don't drink. I'd meet you somewhere for lunch or for a walk—on the weekends—as long as you stop drinking. And we could talk about whatever you want.

Peck: You would do that for me?

Li'l Bit: I don't think I'd want mom to know. Or Aunt Mary. I wouldn't want them to think—

Peck:—No. It would just be talking.

Li'l Bit: I'll tell mom I'm going to a girlfriend's. To study. Mom doesn't get home until six, so you can call me after school and tell me where to meet you.

[. . .]

Li'l Bit: We can meet once a week. But only in public. You've got to let me—draw the line. And once it's drawn, you mustn't cross it.

Li'l Bit draws her lines and Peck adheres to her rules, she gives her consent to everything that happens between the two of them, but it is a consent that means nothing because of the power an adult has over a child. Although, Peck never crosses the lines that Li'l Bit has drawn, he does cross a line that society has drawn, a line that, as an adult, Peck had a responsibility to draw for himself.

Peck has been the one person Li'l Bit has felt loved by and her confusion of erotic love for familial love comes boldly to light in the middle of the play. While Aunt Mary and Li'l Bit's mother are out, Peck takes erotic photos of Li'l Bit. To emphasize the eroticization of youth in our culture Vogel adds a stage direction to show pictures of Li'l Bit interspersed with photos of, "Playboy, Calvin Klein and Victoriana/Lewis Carroll's Alice Liddell."³⁸ Li'l Bit agrees to the photo shoot because she feels her relationship with her uncle is special and she feels she is special to him. When Peck makes a comment about how great these photos will be in Playboy, Li'l Bit comes to the

realization that Peck's concept of the erotic nature of their relationship is not as exclusive as she thinks it is. This is one of the moments where it is evident that Peck holds great power over Li'l Bit; she decides she doesn't want to take erotic photos, but Peck convinces her to take the photos by telling her, "I love you."³⁹ Although there is an "implied consent"⁴⁰ between the two of them, it is evident that Peck is a predator holding all the power over Li'l Bit.

The pathos of the character of Peck claims the empathy of the audience, but it is only a thin veil over the predator that lies beneath. Peck describes a fishing trip he took with "Cousin Bobby." Peck tells in detail what must be done to catch the fish, outlining metaphorically how he preys on young boys and girls. The monologue ends with Peck comforting a distraught Cousin Bobby by taking him to a secret tree house, "But it's a secret place—you can't tell anybody we've gone there—least of all your mom or your sisters. —This is something special just between you and me."⁴¹ It is a necessity to have Peck have interactions with boys as well as girls, to add, as Bigsby puts it, ". . . counterbalance to the assumptions that pedophiles are gay"⁴² with Vogel adding, "it is the age that is the attraction,

not the gender."⁴³ Whatever it is that haunts Peck eventually drives him again to drink after Li'l Bit rejects his advances when she turns eighteen. In seven years he drank himself to death.

In the last moments of *How I learned to Drive* the audience sees Li'l Bit drive off on her own, giving the ghost of Uncle Peck a smile in the rear view mirror, and he returns a nod. While this almost seems to be a condoning of the circumstances (or " . . . a celebration of pedophilia" as Baldwin put it) that have just transpired, it is necessary to the story to show that Li'l Bit has not allowed herself to be a victim. It is understood that those things seen in the rearview mirror are in the past, and Li'l Bit is leaving them behind. Li'l Bit, it seems, has gained control of her life and has gained the ability to not continue the abuse that she suffered. Peck was the one that taught her how to be in control, which eventually led to her destroying him.

Vogel's attempt to balance is possibly what makes some theatergoers so distraught. Some people want to know who is good and who is bad; shows like NBC's *To Catch a Predator*, prey on society's fears of sexual predators and desires for black and white issues, allowing people to play the role of

judge and jury from the comfort of their own living room. People caught on this show are objectified into all flaw, marginalizing them as the feared "other." But, change the channel and you are likely to see a scantily clad teen pop artist gyrating to suggestive lyrics. The balance of character in *Drive* is Vogel's attempt to discuss a societal issue rather than an isolated internal flaw of individuals. This is not to say that sexual predators do not ruin lives, because they do, but *Drive*, like real life, is about a relationship, which means it is always more complicated than simply a difference in ages, or predatory crime. Vogel has created a relationship that includes love, although misguided, misplaced, misused and misunderstood, and she has created characters that are intended to create questions, not give answers.

Sarah Ruhl has certainly not tackled social issues as controversial as pedophilia, but she does have several characters in her plays that would be considered monstrous, whom she presents in ways that cause audiences to empathize with them when justifiably they should despise them. I will be looking at Ruhl's plays *Dead Man's Cell Phone* and *The Clean House* and seeing how in each Ruhl similarly or

dissimilarly, in comparison to Vogel, constructs balanced characters who evoke a negative empathy from the audience.

The illegal trafficking of human organs is certainly on par with the abhorrent nature of child molesting; both are an act in which a person in a position of power takes advantage of another person for their own gain. The titular character of Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Gordon, is a trafficker of human organs. While Gordon is possibly easier to hate than Vogel's Peck, Ruhl uses similar balancing methods as Vogel to prompt negative empathy from the audience. Ruhl explores the ways that technologies, like donor organs, are an abstracted way for the departed to keep a foot in the door of the living.

While sitting in a café, enjoying a bowl of lobster bisque, Jean is annoyed by the incessant ringing cell phone of a nearby patron. The phone continues to ring, and without concern to Jean's pleas to answer, the owner of the phone sits unfazed. Jean confronts the man with the cell phone and after answering his phone and taking a message realizes that he is dead.

Except for the tidbit that she works at the holocaust museum, no back-story for Jean is ever given. Throughout the play the only things known about her are the things

that transpire on stage. From the outset of the first digital trill of a cell phone, it is noticeable that Jean is a peculiar woman. The first indication that Jean is a little off, comes when she answers the dead man's phone and takes a message for him, leaving the audiences to wonder what would lead a sane person to do this. Jean sits with Gordon waiting for an ambulance to arrive and like a child she asks, "How did you die so quietly?"⁴⁴ The loneliness of Jean's life is quickly understood as she takes Gordon's hand in hers and says, "I'll stay with you. Gordon. For as long as you need me. I'll stay with you. Gordon."⁴⁵

Dead Man's Cell Phone is not a play about illegal organ trafficking and it is not revealed until the second half of the play that is what business Gordon was in. *Cell Phone* is about being alone, and more specifically about how in an age of technological connectivity and social networking people are more isolated than they ever have been. Jean "stays" with Gordon far longer than he needs, implying that it is not Gordon's needs she is fulfilling but her own need to connect with anyone. As Jean has inserted herself into Gordon's life as some kind of business associate, she ends up going to dinner with Gordon's mother, wife and brother. While at dinner with

Gordon's surviving family Jean ambiguously describes her and Gordon's working relationship. Although, Gordon's family is grieved by his passing, it is obvious that none of them liked Gordon. Gordon's wife was aware of him having an affair. Gordon's mother hadn't heard from Gordon in far too long, and Gordon's brother felt as though he would never be as good as his brother.

It is the awkward Jean that Ruhl uses to bring balance to the dead Gordon. In a scene that was said to be overly saccharine by critic Charles Isherwood in the *New York Times*⁴⁶, Jean brings items from the café where Gordon died to give them to the departed's family. Jean tells Gordon's family that in the last moments of his life he was thinking of all of them, a lie that not only stuns Gordon's family but ingratiates Jean to them. Gordon's wife, Hermia, is moved by the saltshaker given to her by Jean, "Hermia takes the saltshaker. She is moved."⁴⁷ Gordon's brother, Dwight, is moved by the cup given to him by Jean, despite her reason for the cup, which comes out as a desperate simile, "Because Gordon said you were like—a cup. Because you can hold things. Beautiful things. And they don't—pour out."⁴⁸ But, Jean errs in her explanation of a gift of a spoon to Gordon's mother, by saying that Gordon gave the spoon,

"Because of your cooking."⁴⁹ Gordon's mother storms out of the room, insulted by what she interpreted as Gordon's mockery of her cooking, continuing even in death. Jean's "confabulations" of Gordon bring succor to his family, but it is understood that her actions are a way to bring some sort of meaning to her own life.

As is typical of Ruhl's style she seamlessly mixes fantasy with reality, and at the beginning of the second half of the play we hear from the newly deceased Gordon. Before Gordon's address to the audience, all that is known of him is that he is an unlikable person, he is in some kind of unscrupulous occupation, and he generally has no meaningful relationships with people who were closest to him. At this point in the story the audience cares about Gordon because of the off-kilter family that he left behind. Ruhl thus far has used Jean as a way to weakly establish the "excellence" of Gordon. Although, it is known that Jean is lying about her relationship and knowledge of Gordon she is still establishing value in Gordon. What the audience can gather about the real Gordon, is that he is more likely to be despised in death than mourned. Gordon's direct address to the audience gives confirmation to an audience's assumptions that Gordon is a despicable person,

exposing his flaw, putting a face and a personality, to what has until this point been an object.

Gordon's address to the audience is all in hindsight. He explains the day that he died. The majority of what Gordon says is about the banality of his life. It is at this point that it is revealed that Gordon traffics human organs, justified by his twisted ideas of morality. While the idea of trafficking organs might nauseate most people, Gordon sees himself as a connector of people, he is ". . . the right man to redistribute [the organs]." ⁵⁰ But, as Gordon goes on to tell of the day he died, he makes a connection with the audience, possibly using what Vogel attributes to negative empathy. In the last moments of Gordon's life as he realizes he is having a heart attack, he contemplates who he should call. Gordon doesn't call Hermia because, ". . . he doesn't love you enough to have the right tone of voice on your death bed." ⁵¹ Gordon also cannot call his brother, or his mother, both which he decides against because of his own pride. And interestingly enough, Gordon's mistress, the woman in his life that he is passionate with, is not even given a reason for not calling; suggesting that he does not love her either. The fact that he is utterly alone as he dies invokes empathy,

be it a negative empathy from an audience that is experiencing the fear of death and loneliness along with Gordon. Just before Gordon dies he stares at Jean across the café, she was eating the last bowl of lobster bisque, while he is stuck dying with lintel soup, which itself is a lot like death.⁵² As Gordon's heart begins to kill him, realizing that he cannot call any of his family members or mistress, he angrily focuses on Jean, who had eaten the one thing that might have given him comfort in death. Gordon suddenly finds comfort in Jean, because of her, he is not alone in death,

. . . but the heart keeps on heaving itself up—out of my chest—into my mouth—and I'm thinking—that bitch over there ate all the lobster bisque, this is all her fault—and I look over at her, and she looks like an angel—not like a bitch at all—and I think—good—good—I'm glad she had the last bite—I'm glad.

Jean is Gordon's comfort as he slips into death. Coupling this with the very real mourning of Gordon's mother, Ruhl has created circumstances for the audience to care about a man that up until the intermission had been a monster. Ruhl has also given balance to Jean, because up until this point all Jean's comforting has come as lies. And Ruhl adds balance to her by legitimizing her comfort.

In the very first scene Jean tells Gordon that she will be with him as long as he needs, but what she doesn't realize is that she was with him when he needed. She was his comfort as he died. All of the comfort Jean gives to Gordon's loved ones is not for the sake of the dead, but for Jean, she needs to matter and for her comforting the living for the dead, seemingly evidenced by her job at the Holocaust museum, is a way for her to gain meaning. Jean's intertwining with Gordon's life eventually leads too far as she travels to South Africa, to confront one of the organ traffickers, resulting in Jean being knocked unconscious.

While unconscious Jean ends up in a Sartre-esque Hell with Gordon. He tells Jean that when you die you go to an after life with the person you loved very most in life, "That's right. When you die, you go straight to the person you most loved, right back to the very moment, the very place, you decided you loved them. [. . .] You loved me most, Jean, so you came to me."⁵³ Gordon explains that Jean and he are " . . . two peas in the proverbial pod,"⁵⁴ because they both worked to add meaning to the lives of others, Gordon through his organ-selling and Jean through her work at the holocaust museum and her "stories"⁵⁵ to Gordon's family. This scene is decisive for Jean because

she realizes she does not want to spend eternity with a man she never knew, she wants her eternity to be with Dwight, Gordon's brother, in a stationary store. Jean decides at this moment that she wants to start loving the living instead of the dead.

Dead Man's Cell Phone is an exploration of the ether between life and death. The pictures created by Ruhl were not clear to all, Martin Denton, writing for nytheater.com, said of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* that he was waiting for the ". . . subject of the sanctity of life" and that he felt that Ruhl, "thinks life and death are matters for frivolity, for trivializing, for jokey banter."⁵⁶ It is improbable to think that Ruhl's style would appeal to everyone in the audience. Ruhl's use of jokey banter juxtaposed tragic circumstances is, perhaps, Ruhl's way of generating resistance, and negative empathy in an audience to help to evoke empathy for Gordon and Jean.⁵⁷

Ruhl's most popular play, *The Clean House*, is a story about people searching for happiness, which means that the presented characters are unhappy. Matilde, a Brazilian woman and Lane's maid, hates cleaning, she is depressed and she would be happy to be able to tell a joke as well as her late parents. Lane is a doctor and she really wants to be

taken care of, she feels that she has worked hard to become a doctor and now she shouldn't have to clean her own house. And Virginia, Lane's sister, loves to clean; she has not been allowed to get a job so she cleans her own house, but she is horribly dissatisfied with every aspect of her existence.

The Clean House swirls around Matilde and her desire to live up to her parent's ability as joke tellers. For Matilde the perfect joke encompasses life and death and lies somewhere between ". . . an angel and a fart."⁵⁸ The play opens with direct audience address from Matilde, Lane, and Virginia—all outlining what is making them unhappy, the direct addresses give the feeling of confessional stand up comedy, but there is never a punch line. The quirky Virginia convinces Matilde to let her clean Lane's house. Virginia is the type that loves to clean because there is a clear before (dirty) and after (clean), "If you do not clean: how do you know if you've made any progress in life? I love dust. The dust always makes progress. Then I remove the dust. That is progress."⁵⁹ She is done cleaning her house at exactly 3:12 every afternoon and she gets so much pleasure from cleaning she wants to clean Lane's house too. Early on there are hints of Charles, Lane's husband, having

an affair, when Virginia is folding Lane's laundry.

Virginia finds a pair of sexy black underwear and she and

Matilde are sure that the garment is not Lane's

Virginia: These don't look like lane.

Matilde: No.

Virginia: Too shiny.

Matilde: Too sexy.⁶⁰

There is a look shared between Virginia and Matilde, but nothing more is said.⁶¹ Only a few scenes later, another pair of women's underwear is found, this time red, and Matilde and Virginia speculate as to where and when Charles has been having an affair. Lane rushes into the house and announces that Charles has indeed been having an affair.⁶²

Charles is described by Ruhl as "A compassionate surgeon. He is childlike underneath his white coat"⁶³ and Virginia describes Charles as handsome while she is also bemoaning the fact that her husband and her life have not been what she hoped they would be.⁶⁴ The action of *The Clean House* does not address topics of the same magnitude as *How I Learned to Drive* and *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, in fact, Charles's infidelity to Lane is the most severe indiscretion of the play and might typically incite anger in members of the audience but there are several tactics that Ruhl uses to redirect the audience's reaction to Charles's cheating. While some might argue that euthanizing

of Ana that occurs in *The Clean House* is a political subject analogous with organ trafficking and child molesting, I would argue that it does not bear the same weight in the plot as Charles's affair.

When it is first announced that Charles has been having an affair, as I said before, it had already been hinted at twice in the action of the play, so it is something that the audience has been expecting. Ruhl has set up the scene so that Lane has injured herself right before she announces that Charles is having an affair.

(Lane enters)

(Her left hand is bleeding)

(She holds it with a dish towel.)

Virginia: Lane—what—are you—?

Lane: I am disguising myself as a patient.

Virginia: That's not funny

Lane: I cut myself.

(They look at her, alarmed.)

Don't worry. Even my wounds are superficial.

Virginia: Lane?

Lane: Can opener. I was making a martini.

Virginia: Why do you need a can opener to make a martini?

Lane: I didn't have the right kind of fucking olives, okay? I only have black olives! In a fucking can.⁶⁵

In her crisis Lane has realized much about her life is superficial. Virginia and Matilde assume that Charles has left Lane for a younger woman, which would be some consolation, because it would speak to the shallowness of

Charles. But Charles has left with one of his patients, an older woman to whom he had given a mastectomy.⁶⁶ This is one of the ways that Ruhl balances the character of Charles. The announcement of Charles's affair is a mix of the tragic for Lane and comedic for Virginia, who assumes the other "older" woman must "have substance"⁶⁷ for Charles to have fallen in love.

It is typical of Ruhl's plays to mix the tragic with the comedic. Director Rebecca Taichman notes a balancing ability of Ruhl's that makes *The Clean House* walk, ". . . this delicious thin line between hilarious comedy and operatic-sized tragedy."⁶⁸ And the comedy of the scene quickly goes tragic as Lane notices the "forceful"⁶⁹ arrangement of items on the coffee table realizes that Virginia has been the one cleaning her house for the last two weeks. Lane is struck with the knowledge that Virginia has been cleaning her house and probably knew about the affair before she had, "I don't want my sister to clean my house. I want a stranger to clean my house."⁷⁰ In this moment Lane grasps for any control that she can and fires Matilde. Bill Rauch the director of the Yale Rep premiere said, *Clean House* is ". . . about our completely ineffectual attempt as human beings to create order out of

the chaos of life.”⁷¹ Virginia fitfully spouts the banality of the human existence as she tells about her need to do something for someone else because she cannot stand the repetition of her own life. In the same way that joke telling is all about the timing, entrances are also about timing—enter Charles and his new love Ana.

Throughout the first Act of *The Clean House* Matilde has shared her memories of her parents, which are acted out before the audience. Ruhl’s decision to double cast the characters of Charles and Ana as Matilde’s parents has an interesting effect on the emotions of the audience. Matilde tells that her parents’ love was one that was not rushed into; her father was sixty-three and her mother “. . . was older for a mother.”⁷² Matilde’s parents were unwilling to be married until they found someone they felt was funnier than himself or herself. By having the same actors playing Charles and Ana playing Matilde’s parents, a mirroring effect deepens the audience’s potential for liking Charles and Ana and linking them to a great love rather than a lustful tryst. To emphasize this mirroring Ruhl has included a scene with Ana and Charles that is without dialogue, similar to the scenes of Matilde’s parents:

Ana lies under a sheet.
Beautiful music.

A subtitle projects: Charles Performs Surgery on
the Woman He Loves.
Charles takes out surgical equipment.
He does surgery on Ana.
It is an act of love.
If the actor who plays Charles is a good singer,
it would be nice if he could sing
an ethereal medieval love song in Latin
about being medically cured by love
as he does the surgery.
If the actress who plays Ana is a good singer,
it would be nice if she recovered from the
surgery
and slowly sat up and sang a contrapuntal melody.
When the surgery is over,
Charles takes Ana's sheet.
Underneath the sheet,
she is dressed in a lovely dress.
They kiss.⁷³

This scene without dialogue is followed by a direct address to the audience from both Charles and Ana, describing their love for the other, and how this new love has changed each of their lives.

After an intimate introduction to Charles and Ana using images and their own words, Ruhl returns to where the first act left off with Charles and Ana standing in the hall waiting to talk to Lane. With all the hilarity of a Kauffman and Hart comedy, Charles and Ana's entrance is followed by a flimsy justification that strangely holds up. Charles tells Lane that Ana is his bashert, which is a Jewish term meaning soul mate, and "In Jewish law you are legally obligated to break off relations with your wife or

husband if you find what is called your bashert.”⁷⁴ Charles is not Jewish but he had always remembered hearing a radio program about bashert. When this scene is acted in earnest, it works. Ruhl’s characters are honest and believable. It is conceivable that inexperienced actors would perform this scene divisively, which puts Charles in control of his situation as well as making him a villain. What makes Ruhl’s writing effective in this interaction is that Charles’s is presented as a man who has found his bashert; he, along with all of the other characters, lacks control of his fate.

Ana and Matilde immediately hit it off because Ana, having lived in Argentina, knows enough Portuguese to converse with Matilde. And because Lane has just fired Matilde, Ana asks Matilde to come live with her and tell jokes. Lane becomes extremely resentful that Ana has taken her husband and will now take her maid as well. Lane has lost everything.

Matilde says of all the drama, “Es como una telenovela (It’s like a soap opera).”⁷⁵ And it is like a soap opera. Lane, who it seems should be the subject of the audiences empathy, becomes the subject of disdain, because of her rejection of Matilde and her attitude of class entitlement.

Charles and Ana, it seems, gain the audiences empathy because of their fairytale attitude toward love and their acceptance of Matilde. Although Charles is guilty of infidelity to his wife, Ruhl has written him with an almost childlike wonderment of the world. When it is discovered that Ana's cancer has returned and she is dying, Charles, a surgeon, rejects western medicine, and travels to Alaska in search of a tree to cure Ana.⁷⁶ It is impossible to dislike Charles because he is in love and in his love he is like a child. When it seems that Ana would need him most; when he should be staying by her side as she dies; Charles frantically grasps for any way he can save Ana, "I want him to be a nurse and he wants to be an explorer. Asi es la vida (That's life)."⁷⁷ While it appears that Charles has abandoned Ana, he has really set out on a hero's quest to attempt to save her life. In an ironic twist, after Charles leaves, Lane finds herself caring for Ana.

Lane is the only one that is thinking rationally without the fog of romance in her eyes. While Virginia thinks it is romantic that Charles left to find a new cure for Ana, Lane understands that what Ana needs is comfort not cures, "It's not beautiful, Virginia. There's a woman dying, alone, while Charles chops down a fucking tree."⁷⁸

The empathy of the audience, at this point shifts to Lane. Lane's sense of entitlement is finally explained as she yells at Virginia, "I traded my whole life to help people who are sick!"⁷⁹ The living room of Lane's house looks like a Sam Shepard tornado has torn through it—and Lane takes control of the only thing that she can—she gives up her need for control and allows herself to be truly compassionate to the dying Ana.

The Clean House demonstrates the catch twenty-two of the chaos that we seek to control is the cause of that same chaos. Using cleaning as a metaphor Ruhl presents five characters that are all clutching the strings of their life, trying to retain a sense of control, "It never works, and yet we try to do it all the time."⁸⁰ It is this very real human characteristic, this balancing of the excellence with the flaws, that connects Ruhl's characters empathetically to the audience. Compassion is the emotional heart of the play according to Ruhl and this exemplified in Matilde euthanizing Ana with the perfect joke.⁸¹ And, although an affair, class discrimination, and euthanasia, might make some audience members question the characters of *The Clean House*, it is Ruhl's balancing of excellence and flaws in all of them that allows an audience to empathize.

It seems there is some sort of a connection in the way that Vogel's and Ruhl's plays use balance of characters to elicit empathy in their audiences. Similarities can be seen in the techniques used by Vogel and Ruhl to evoke empathy from an audience for even the most despicable of characters. It appears that there is a dynamic between Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* and Ruhl's *The Clean House* and *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. Using these plays specifically, it is observable that the dynamic at work between Vogel's and Ruhl's plays are in the form of balance of characters. It is Vogel and Ruhl's manipulation of form that is most readily used to allow audiences to care about a pedophile, or an organ trafficker. Both use similar methods of non-linear chronology, distance of time (taking advantage of the malleability of the theater by going forward and backward in time and in and out of fantasy and reality) as well as a mix of tragedy and comedy to cause an audience to question what are commonly thought to be evident truths. The explorations of form will continue in the next chapter as I will be looking specifically at the dynamics between Vogel's and Ruhl's use of unorthodox punctuation and stage directions, and the ways in which they create and use the world of the play to suit their needs.

NOTES

¹ David Savran, *The Playwright's Voice* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1999) 273.

² *Ibid.*, 273.

³ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁴ Victor Nell, "Cruelty's Rewards: The Gratification of Perpetrators and Spectators." *Behavior and Brain Sciences* (Cambridge: University Press, 2006, 29) 211-212.

⁵ David Savran, *The Playwright's Voice* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1999) 274.

⁶ Vernon Lee, *The Handling of Words* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1923) 67.

⁷ Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful* (Cambridge: University Press, 1913) 130.

⁸ David Savran, *The Playwright's Voice* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1999) 273.

⁹ Bert O. States, *Irony and Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971) 44-45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹² Paula Vogel, *The Mammary Plays: How I Learned to Drive, The Mineola Twins* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1998) 12.

¹³ Matt Wolf, "The Week in Review: Interview: Paula Vogel." *The Observer* (24 Jun. 2001).

¹⁴ Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 318.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁶ Steven Drukman, "A Playwright on the Edge Turns Toward the Middle." *The New York Times* (16 March 1997) 2,6.

¹⁷ Paula Vogel, *The Mammary Plays: How I Learned to Drive, The Mineola Twins* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1998) 5.

¹⁸ Steven Drukman, "A Playwright on the Edge Turns Toward the Middle." *The New York Times* (16 March 1997) 2,6.

¹⁹ Rebecca Baldwin, "Impressive Awards Aside, 'How I Learned' Celebrates Pedophilia." *Los Angeles Times* (29 Mar. 1999).

²⁰ Rebecca Baldwin, "Impressive Awards Aside, 'How I Learned' Celebrates Pedophilia." *Los Angeles Times* (29 Mar. 1999).

²¹ Paula Vogel, *The Mammary Plays: How I Learned to Drive, The Mineola Twins* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1998) 14.

²² *Ibid.*, 14.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴ Joan Herrington, ed. *The Playwright's Muse* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 255.

²⁵ Paula Vogel, *The Mammary Plays: How I Learned to Drive, The Mineola Twins* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1998) 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ Rebecca Baldwin, "Impressive Awards Aside, 'How I Learned' Celebrates Pedophilia." *Los Angeles Times* (29 Mar. 1999).

²⁸ Rebecca Baldwin, "Impressive Awards Aside, 'How I Learned' Celebrates Pedophilia." *Los Angeles Times* (29 Mar. 1999).

²⁹ Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 319.

³⁰ Paula Vogel, *The Mammary Plays: How I Learned to Drive, The Mineola Twins* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1998) 4.

³¹ Steven Drukman, "A Playwright on the Edge Turns Toward the Middle." *The New York Times* (16 Mar. 1997) 2,6.

³² *Ibid.*, 2,6.

³³ Paula Vogel, *The Mammary Plays: How I Learned to Drive, The Mineola Twins* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1998) 8.

³⁴ Steven Drukman, "A Playwright on the Edge Turns Toward the Middle." *The New York Times* (16 March 1997) 2,6.

³⁵ Paula Vogel, *The Mammary Plays: How I Learned to Drive, The Mineola Twins* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1998) 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁷ Steven Drukman, "A Playwright on the Edge Turns Toward the Middle." *The New York Times* (16 March 1997) 2,6

³⁸ Paula Vogel, *The Mammary Plays: How I Learned to Drive, The Mineola Twins* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1998) 62.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴² Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 319.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁴⁴ Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2008) 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁶ Charles Isherwood, "A Nagging Call to Tidy up an Unfinished Life." *The New York Times* (5 Mar. 2008).

⁴⁷ Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2008) 39.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁵ Ruhl, Sarah. "Playwrights on Writing: Sarah Ruhl, 'Dead Man's Cell Phone'." *Los Angeles Times* (28 Sep. 2008).

⁵⁶ Martin Denton, "Review of: Dead Man's Cell Phone" *nytheater.com*. 1 Mar. 2008, 22 Jul. 2009 < <http://www.nytheater.com/nytheater/showpage.php?t=dead5709>>.

⁵⁷ Scotty Zacher, "Review: Dead Man's Cell Phone at Steppenwolf." *Chicago Theater Blog* 22 Apr. 2008, 22 Jul. 2009 < http://chicagotheaterblog.com/2008/04/22/review_deadmanscellphone/>.

⁵⁸ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2006) 24.

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- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 10.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 27.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 27.
- ⁶² Ibid., 39.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 7.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 25-27.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 37-38.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 38.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 39.
- ⁶⁸ Celia Wren, "The Golden Ruhl." *American Theater* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Oct. 2005) 32.
- ⁶⁹ Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2006) 41.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 45.
- ⁷¹ Celia Wren, "The Golden Ruhl." *American Theater* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Oct. 2005) 146.
- ⁷² Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theater Communications Group. 2006) 11.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 51-52.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., 60.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., 68.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., 86.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., 98.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., 87.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., 83.
- ⁸⁰ Celia Wren, "The Golden Ruhl." *American Theater* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Oct. 2005) 146.
- ⁸¹ Wendy Weckwerth, "More Invisible Terrains." *Theater* (New Haven: Yale Press, 34.2, 2004) 32.

CHAPTER IV

STAGE DIRECTIONS AND PUNCTUATION

"I try to interpret how people subjectively experience life. Everyone has a great, horrible opera inside him. I feel my plays, in a way, are very old-fashioned. They're pre-Freudian in the sense that the Greeks and Shakespeare worked with similar assumptions. Catharsis isn't a wound being excavated from childhood."¹ -Sarah Ruhl

Paula Vogel gave an assignment to one of her playwriting classes at Brown University, ". . . write a short play with a dog as protagonist."² It was with this assignment that Sarah Ruhl first caught Vogel's attention. Vogel knew that Ruhl, who "possessed a mind that came at aesthetics from a unique angle,"³ and who used kabuki stage techniques⁴ to show the agony of a dog whose master has died, had great potential for achievement in the theater. While Ruhl is known for her emotionally vivid language, without her stage directions and punctuation her plays would not achieve the distinct theatricality that makes

each play a poem of performance. In this chapter I will be looking at the ways that Vogel and Ruhl each use stage directions in their plays to gain more control as playwrights to fulfill their visions. I will be looking at specific examples of stage directions and punctuation from Vogel's plays: *How I Learned to Drive*, *Hot'n Throbbing*, *Baltimore Waltz*, and *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*; I will also be looking at Ruhl's use of stage direction and punctuation in, *Eurydice*, *The Clean House*, and *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. Similarities and dissimilarities between Ruhl and Vogel's use of stage direction and punctuation might be an indication of a dynamic or theatrical conversation occurring between the plays of these two playwrights.

Vogel's play *Desdemona*, as discussed in Chapter One, is conversing with Shakespeare's *Othello*, but more specifically it is using an audience's knowledge of Shakespeare's *Othello* to make them question their understanding. Vogel makes her strongest connections to *Othello* in her prologue, using only stage directions without dialogue,

A spotlight in the dark, pinpointing a white handkerchief lying on the ground. A second spotlight comes up on Emilia, who sees the

handkerchief. She pauses, and then cautiously looks about to see if she is observed. Then, quickly, Emilia goes to the handkerchief, picks it up, stuffs the linen in her ample bodice, and exits. Blackout.⁵

This could be considered a scene but Vogel chooses to call it a prologue. The prologue is set apart from the rest of the play as the one action that is solidly tied to the plot of *Othello*. While it drives the plot of Vogel's play forward it is also a main plot point of Shakespeare's play that is never seen but only talked about. After this "prologue" Vogel's characters diverge from Shakespeare in directions of Vogel's choosing, and it is not until the end of *Desdemona* that the two plays, Vogel's and Shakespeare's, once again converge. An audience that is aware of the story of *Othello*, and understands the role Desdemona's stolen handkerchief plays, might see Vogel's prologue and recognize the action on stage. This recognition serves to juxtapose what an audience thinks they know, with what they are then shown in the scenes that follow.

Vogel's *Desdemona* also converses with Wolfgang Bauer's play *Shakespeare The Sadist*. Both *Shakespeare the Sadist* and *Desdemona* are supposed to play with cinematic techniques. Vogel's prologue is the most cinematic of all of her scenes. Vogel uses the stage directions to direct

the audiences gaze. "A spotlight in the dark, pin-pointing a white handkerchief,"⁶ like the camera of a movie director, says to an audience, "this is what you are supposed to be looking at."

In Vogel's *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, stage directions function differently. The control a playwright exerts over the staging of their own play has often been an item of hot debate for directors, actors, and designers. Vogel employs control in some indefinite ways and gives details in her scripts that are essentially unnecessary to the performance of her plays, but may steer a director or a production team in specific directions. In *Hot'n Throbbing*, Vogel writes under the heading "Music",

I wrote this play in 1993 to several soundtracks: Janet Jackson's "Control" (particularly "Nasty") and Kaoma's "World Beat." Also "Thriller" and "Silence of the Lambs" sound-tapes from horror movies and Frank Sinatra. The main thing is that the music changes from erotic to terrific.

In 1999 I write this to 'Red Hot + Blue'.⁷

Vogel doesn't tell a director or production team specifically what music to use but instead tells what music inspired her to write the play, influencing the production of her play as an open invitation.

Vogel has written *Hot 'N' Throbbing* with two characters, Voice-Over and The Voice, which exist essentially as the inner monologue for Charlene and Clyde. But, Voice-Over (V.O.) and The Voice, are also Vogel's way to give embodiment to what she sees as the male and female desires. Although the Voice and the Voice-Over are always present on stage they really come to life when the red lights come up,

There are two play worlds in this piece. The stage lights and the red lights—reality, constructed as we know it, and a world that sometimes resembles the real—as we fantasize about it.

In the red lights, the living room becomes the film set of Gyno productions, a strip joint, a dance hall. The red light arenas and the living room have this in common: They are stages for performance, for viewing.

Don't believe anything that happens in the red light.⁸

The lights serve to separate the two worlds of the play: the home where Charlene and her family live, and the world where Charlene and Clyde's fantasies exist (under the red lights). Vogel, it appears, does this as a form of control over the ways in which her play, and the action of her play, is interpreted on stage. But, by doing this, Vogel is also creating a world of the play that will cause

directors, actors, designers, and eventually an audience, to ask different questions. Vogel wrote *Hot 'N' Throbbing* with a kind of cinematic control that a film director might try to have over a movie, and she does this using film directions in the narration of the V.O. The narrations serve a dual purpose of describing the erotic movies that Charlene is writing as well as describing what is happening on stage, "CUT TO: INTERIOR. NIGHT. VOICE-OVER: "She was hot. She was throbbing. But she was in control. Control of her body. Control of her thoughts. Control of... him."⁹ As Charlene loses control of the action of the action on stage, her abusive ex-husband, Clyde, takes control, and the V.O. changes her narration to a response of fleeing from danger, "Get out of the house."¹⁰ Vogel was exploring specifically the fine lines that separate love and violence, and erotica and pornography: "If we are talking about the dividing line between eroticism and pornography, it depends on the power position of who is writing."¹¹ Christopher Bigsby, in his book *Contemporary American Playwrights*, notes that Vogel addresses the dominant male position in erotica and pornography and expresses it through the Voice's quoting of influential male writers.¹² In doing this, Vogel not only addresses the current culture

of violence in entertainment, and confronts, by use of the two worlds of the play, the dark undercurrents of popular culture; but, she also acknowledges the theatrical question's of "the real" and the audience's contributions to the violence through embedded fantasy.

Vogel's tight control of the writing in *Hot 'N' Throbbing* also includes the way that she punctuates certain dialogue. At specific places in the dialogue Vogel chooses to use a period after every word, "CHARLENE: This is not about me. You will not fling... the way I. make. A. living into my face every time I. give. you. a. directive."¹³ Adding the periods after some of the words makes an actor give a steady rhythmic reading of the line, putting the same stress on every word that is followed by a period. Or, later in the play, "Do.You.Remember. the last time,"¹⁴ is a frightening line as a drunk and enraged Clyde stands over Charlene, and given the punctuation Vogel used, the job of the actor is problematized. Vogel's punctuation makes an actor possibly question more intensely the way the line will be delivered.

As was discussed in the previous chapter the opening scene of *How I Learned to Drive* shows a sexual encounter between Li'l Bit and Peck. When the audience discovers that

Li'l Bit is only seventeen-years-old and Peck is her uncle, they might be inclined to leave the theater immediately without regard for the story, the characters, explored themes and they would, as Rebecca Baldwin did in the *LA Times*, question the intent of the playwright.¹⁵ This scene would be more accessible in a movie theater because the action is being presented on a screen and the actors are not actually present. But, because this is a stage play and the actors are in the room with the audience, there is an unmistakable and present danger which would make the scene too much for audiences to accept. Vogel said in an interview with Steven Drukman for the *New York Times*, that she never expected *Drive* to be performed; she thought that it would be so difficult for audiences to watch that they would reject it.¹⁶ *Drive's* performability lies, in part, with Vogel's use of stage directions. It is through Vogel's stage directions that she makes the first scene accessible to an audience. Vogel specifically lays out how the first scene of *Drive* should be performed:

Lights up on two chairs facing front—or a Buick Riviera, if you will. Waiting patiently, with a smile on his face, Peck sits sniffing the night air. Li'l Bit climbs in beside him, seventeen years old and tense. Throughout the following, the two sit facing directly front. They do not

touch. Their bodies remain passive. Only their facial expressions emote.¹⁷

Using stage directions, Vogel takes the immediacy of danger out of the scene without removing the characters from a dangerous situation. I would suggest that in dictating how the scene should be performed using stage directions, Vogel has presented a scene that most audiences would not stay to watch, but she has placed the buffer of physical distance between the two characters, similar to the distance a movie theater screen offers. Vogel's stage directions keep Peck and Li'l Bit from touching and thus allow the audience to connect the dots of dialogue and pantomime in their own heads.

In *Drive*, Vogel has taken advantage of a strong metaphor in the American psyche by using driver's education as a backdrop for action. Vogel's stage directions further strengthen the action on stage to the common circumstances of drivers ed. "On Titles: Throughout the script there are bold-faced titles. In production these should be spoken in a neutral voice (the type of voice that driver education films employ)."¹⁸ Vogel makes good use of driving as a metaphor for the dangers of sexual relationships, even weaving it into her non-chronological structure, by making references to shifting gears.

Vogel's first reference to a gear position comes with the driving instructor voice saying, "Idling in the Neutral Gear."¹⁹ Which Vogel seems to use to note to the audience that what they are seeing is informational, that the story isn't really going anywhere at the moment, but that what they are seeing is important to their understanding of the characters. In this particular "idling" scene, Vogel introduces the members of Li'l Bits family and establishes the unhealthy dynamics that exist within the family. Only one scene later, Vogel uses "Driving in First Gear"²⁰ to seemingly indicate that what the audience will be seeing is an encounter that set part of the story in motion. Then, two scenes later, Vogel uses "You and the Reverse Gear,"²¹ to take the story back in time, to build onto the characters back-story.

Vogel's use of stage directions in *The Baltimore Waltz*, is not all that different from her stage directions in her other plays, but deserves attention because of the play's specific use of multimedia. The stage directions Vogel uses in *Waltz* simple until scene nineteen, at this point Vogel starts using the stage directions to complicate the story. Although there have been clues throughout the play that Anna and Carl's escapades in Europe are not quite

as they seem, (such as: Anna and Carl wearing pajamas, the third man wearing latex gloves, or a stuffed bunny being smuggled into foreign countries), it is not until three quarters of the way through that Vogel gives more information to the audience. Carl suggests that he and Anna show slides from their trip of Europe, and while they describe sites and sensations of Europe the slides are of places in Baltimore, Maryland:

Carl: Ah, Saxony, Bavaria, the Black Forest, the Rhineland . . . I love them all. I think perhaps now would be a good time to show the slides.

[. . .]

Carl: Well. Bonn's as good a place to start as anywhere. This is the view from the snug little hotel we stayed in. The gateway to the Rhine, the birthplace of Beethoven, and the resting place of Schumann. (Slide: the view of downtown Baltimore from the Ramada Inn near Johns Hopkins Hospital, overlooking industrial harbor).

Anna: Looks a lot like Baltimore to me.

[. . .]

Carl: Well, then, let's talk about the food. Germany has a more robust gustatory outlook than the delicate palate of France. The Germans positively celebrate the pig from snout to tail. I could not convince Anna to sample the Sulperknochen, which is a Rheingau concoction of ears, snout, tail and feet.

Anna: Ugh. (Slide: a close-up of vender placing a hotdog on a bun and lathering it with mustard. There are canned sodas in a wide variety)

Carl: And of course, everything is washed down with beer. (Slide: Anna sipping a Bud Lite).²²

Vogel has, with the simple coupling of descriptions with incongruent images, keyed the audience into the idea that Anna and Carl have not actually taken a trip to Europe.

As the audience questions and doubts the story they have been seeing, Vogel uses her stage directions to turn the story sharply. The focus and the concern throughout *Waltz* has been on Anna, as she is the one dying from ATD, but near the end of the play there is a sudden change in direction and Carl becomes the focus,

Dr Todesrocheln: WO IST DEIN BRUDER?

(He takes off his wig and glasses and appears as the DOCTOR in the first scene, peeling off the black glove to reveal the latex gloves underneath).

Dr Todesrocheln: You fool! You left your brother in the room alone! WO IST DEIN BRUDER?²³

It is at this point in the play that the audience sees the reality of the situation, Carl is the one that has been sick and the whole European tour has taken place from Carl's hospital room,

(Music: "The Emperor Waltz" plays at a very loud volume. Anna, frightened, races from the doctor's office to the hotel room. We see Carl, lying stiff beneath a white sheet. To the tempo of the Strauss, Anna tries to wake him. He does not respond. Anna forces him into a sitting position, the stuffed rabbit clenched beneath his arm. Carl remains sitting, stiff, eyes open, wooden. Then he slumps. Anna raises him again. He remains upright for a beat, and begins to fall. Anna stops him, presses his body against hers, pulls his leg over the bed, tries to stand him up.

Frozen, his body tilts against hers. She tries to make him cross the floor, his arms around her neck. She positions him in a chair, but his legs are locked in a perpendicular angle and will not touch the floor. She presses his legs to the floor. He mechanically springs forward. Then suddenly, like the doll in E.T.A. Hoffman, the body of Carl becomes animated, but with a strange, automatic life of its own. Carl begins to waltz with Anna. Gradually, he winds down, and faltering, falls back to the bed. There is the sound of a loud alarm clock. The doctor enters and covers Carl with a sheet. Then he pulls a white curtain in front of the scene, as the stage lights become, for the first time, harsh, stark and white.)²⁴

Without dialogue, with only stage directions, Vogel shifts the action of *Waltz* from fantasy to the reality of Carl's death. Drawing from her own personal experience of her brother's death Vogel explores what it is like to mourn a person while they are dying.

Sarah Ruhl's writing also comes from her own personal experience, but dissimilar to Vogel, Ruhl's characters are written without the intensions of actors developing a back-story. "That's how I experience emotions. They come at you so suddenly sometimes. I watch my daughter, who's in the middle of crying, and then you do a little dance for her and she starts laughing."²⁵ Vogel mused that Ruhl's writing is a challenge for some actors, because the emotion comes suddenly and seemingly from nowhere.²⁶

Ruhl's writing certainly affects the acting style in her plays, and Ruhl suggests that it is because the, . . . the emotions transform almost inexplicably,"²⁷ and this makes actors perform in a style that " . . . isn't explicated . . . " and " . . . not psychological."²⁸ The sometimes seemingly unmotivated ebbing and flowing of emotion in a Ruhl play epitomizes Ruhl's dislike of the rationalization that realism does to emotion, "I don't want to smooth out the emotions to the point where you could interpret them totally rationally, so they have a clear reference point to the past."²⁹ Ruhl certainly cannot control whether an actor creates a back-story, but Ruhl writes characters that are alive in a moment and it almost demands actors who also are alive in the moments they are on stage rather than drawing from a back-story. Ruhl, it appears, believes the words she has written to be sufficient for an actor, "I prefer an actor who says, 'My character doesn't have a backstory, so I won't concoct one. I will live as fully in every moment as I can. I will let the language move me, as opposed to a secret backstory of my own."³⁰ And while the idea of that kind of control might appeal to playwrights, it is impossible to keep actors from

"concocting" motivation for the turbulent emotions of a Ruhl play.

Sarah Ruhl's use of stage directions is one way she makes make the very most of theater as an art. John Lahr, writing for *The New Yorker*, said, "Ruhl writes with space, sound, and image as well as words. Her stage directions often challenge her directors' scenic imagination as well,"³¹ but, Ruhl's stage directions also pose a unique challenge for actors. In *The Clean House*, Lane has just discovered that her husband is having an affair, and Ruhl's stage directions read,

Matilde: I think that you're crying.
 Lane: Well—yes. I think I am.
 (Lane cries.
 She laughs.
 She cries.
 She laughs.
 And this goes on for some time.
 Virginia enters).³²

I have noted Ruhl's stage direction in this way to have it reflect as close as possible to the way that the stage directions appear in the script. The stage directions could have all appeared on the same line, or the lines could have been separated by commas. It seems that Ruhl is trying to avoid having her stage directions become a list of directions. Ruhl essentially makes every direction a new paragraph. So, while each direction may be related in some

way to the direction preceding it, Ruhl wants every direction to be treated as a new thought or new emotion coming on intensely and suddenly.

Ruhl's use of stage directions in *The Clean House* goes further than just the performance of the actors. Through her stage directions, Ruhl is able to make the environments of her play come to life. In *Clean House* Ruhl writes, "Note: The living room needn't be full of living room detail, though it should feel human. The space should transform and surprise. The balcony should feel high but also intimate—a close up shot."³³ In the world of the play, the "living room" is at Lane's house and the "balcony" is at Ana's house, the two houses not being in close proximity to each other. But, on the stage in front of the audience the balcony and the living room occupy the same space, a fact that Ruhl uses to her advantage:

Ana and Matilde are up on Ana's balcony.
 It is high above the white living room.
 It is a small perch, overlooking the sea,
 with two chairs, and a fish bowl.
 Through French doors,
 one can enter or exit the balcony.
 A room leading to the balcony is suggested but
 unseen.
 Ana and Matilde are surrounded by apples.
 [. . .]
 Underneath the balcony,
 Lane is in her living room.
 Ana polishes an apple.

Ana and Matilde look around at all of the apples.³⁴

The audience will easily understand that the balcony and the living room are supposed to be geographically parted. But, then Ruhl bends the conventionally understood rules of theatrical space so that the spaces merge. Ruhl questions the "rational" separation of space. The audience sees what they see. That an apple could be dropped straight from the balcony in the living room,

Matilde: We could take a bite of each, and if it's not a really, really good apple we can throw it into the sea.

Ana: Now you're talking like a North American.

Matilde: It will be fun.

Ana: Okay.

(They start taking bites of each apple and if they don't think it's a perfect apple they throw it into the sea.

The sea is also Lane's living room.

Lane sees the apples fall into her living room. She looks at them.)³⁵

Lane's organized and clean living room becomes littered with bitten apples. Ruhl has written two disparate spaces that are now connected by the relation of the characters, and through that, have become symbols of the way Lane's life has been thrown into a chaos, linked to and mixed with separate places.

Ruhl's use of stage direction takes advantage of what the theater offers that other art forms cannot. In her play

Eurydice, Ruhl uses her stage directions to fill time and space for the audience showing Eurydice's entrance to the underworld with visual revelations rather than narration,

The sound of an elevator ding.
An elevator door opens.
Inside the elevator, it is raining.
Eurydice gets rained on inside the elevator.
She carries a suitcase and an umbrella.
She is dressed in the kind of 1930s suit
that women wore when they eloped.
She looks bewildered.
The sound of an elevator ding.
Eurydice steps out of the elevator.
The elevator door closes.
She walks toward the audience and opens her
mouth,
trying to speak.
There is a great humming noise.
She closes her mouth.
The humming noise stops.
She opens her mouth for the second time,
attempting to tell her story to the audience.
There is a great humming noise.
She closes her mouth—the humming noise stops.
She has a tantrum of despair.³⁶

Ruhl trusts the audience to understand what is happening as Eurydice enters the underworld without having to spell it out with spoken exposition, and the parts the audience doesn't understand, Ruhl knows, will incite questions and further draw them into the story. This exemplifies the magic of action and images in the theater to open questions for an audience. In doing this, Ruhl allows audiences to make discoveries and come to understandings instead of being told. Upon entering Hades, Eurydice mistakes her

father for a hotel porter and asks to be taken to her room. To which the Chorus of stones reply, "THERE ARE NO ROOMS."³⁷ Ruhl uses the immediate action and image within the stage-space to express emotions that, if spoken, would not be as poignant,

The father creates a room out of string for Eurydice.
He makes four walls and a door out of string.
Time passes.
It takes time to build a room out of string.
Eurydice observes the underworld.
There isn't much to observe.
She plays hop-scotch without chalk.
Every so often,
the father looks at her,
happy to see her,
while he makes her room out of string.³⁸

In this wordless scene, Ruhl has shown with great care, the love that a father has for a daughter. Ruhl could have had the father tell his daughter how much he loved her, but Ruhl used the visual nature of the theater, to show a paternal love using the immediate time and space of the theater.

Similar to Vogel, Ruhl uses unconventional punctuation to gain a control over the delivery of a character's lines. Charles Isherwood, writing for the *New York Times*, said that Ruhl's dialogue, ". . . is variously cryptic, operatic, aphoristic and bluntly funny, an admixture that admittedly has a few lumps."³⁹ But, Ruhl's lumpy mixture has

precision to it that is belied by the obvious whimsy. Ruhl uses periods as dictation in her scripts, as in this passage from *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, "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."⁴⁰ Ruhl could have certainly written Jean's line as, "I'll stay with you, Gordon", but it would not have served Ruhl's purpose for the line. In this first scene of *Cell Phone* Jean had just discovered Gordon's dead body in a café, and she had only just learned his name by answering his phone. By giving "Gordon" its own sentence Ruhl may be suggesting a number of useful routes; that Jean is enamored of Gordon, that she is treating this circumstance as an introduction, and that she is feeling Gordon's name come out of her mouth for the first time. Whereas a comma between "I'll stay with you" and "Gordon" might have been delivered in a way that would suggest a relationship with Jean and Gordon, which would not have been true to the awkward nature of the scene or to the character of Jean.

Similarities in Ruhl's punctuation and stage directions to those of Vogel's suggest that there is a conversation between Vogel and Ruhl's plays. Vogel and Ruhl, it seems, both use stage directions to do more than

tell an actor where to stand. They both use stage directions to influence the whole of a production with a theatrical openness that invites actors, directors, and the production and design teams to ask more questions with their work. It is also evident that Vogel and Ruhl use punctuation to influence the way an actor uses a line or approaches a character. Vogel and Ruhl's stage directions often seem enigmatic, it is this aspect of their writing that conjures the most profound images and nonverbal moments that for all involved creates more questions rather than providing answers.

The use of stage directions and punctuation possibly stands as the most recognizable similarity between Vogel and Ruhl. Vogel and Ruhl both excel at the use of image and action to tell their stories. But, there is more to Vogel and Ruhl's use of stage directions to tell the story. They both use the potential of the theater as a medium of immediacy and space. The similarities between Vogel and Ruhl are not so concrete as to say that Vogel made specific suggestions for Ruhl's plays, but it does suggest that there is a connection between these two playwrights, a familiarity that is evident in their writing.

NOTES

¹ John Lahr, "Surreal Life." *The New Yorker* 17 Mar. 2008, 18 Nov. 2008 <http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/03/17/080317crat_atlarge_lahr>.

² Paula Vogel, "Sarah Ruhl." *Bomb* Spring, 2007, 15 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.bombsite.com/issues/99/articles/2902>>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lawrence Goodman, "Playwright Laureate of Grief." *Brown Alumni Magazine* Mar.-Apr. 2007, 22 April 2009 <<http://www.brownalumni.com/march/april-2007/playwright-laureate-of-grief.html>>.

⁵ Paula Vogel, *Desdemona a Play about a Handkerchief* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1994) 5.

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ Paula Vogel, *Hot 'N' Throbbing* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2000) 7.

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 71.

¹¹ Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999) 315.

¹² Ibid., 315.

¹³ Paula Vogel, *Hot 'N' Throbbing* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2000) 71.

¹⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹⁵ Rebecca Baldwin, "Impressive Awards Aside, 'How I Learned' Celebrates Pedophilia." *Los Angeles Times* (29 Mar. 1999).

¹⁶ Steven Drukman, "A Playwright on the Edge Turns Toward the Middle." *The New York Times* (16 March 1997) 2, 6.

¹⁷ Paula Vogel, *The Mammary Plays: How I Learned to Drive, The Mineola Twins* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1998) 8.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

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- ¹⁹ Ibid., 13.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 14.
- ²¹ Ibid., 21.
- ²² Paula Vogel, *The Baltimore Waltz* (New York: The Fireside Theater, 1992) 48-51.
- ²³ Ibid., 77.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 78.
- ²⁵ Paula Vogel, "Sarah Ruhl." *Bomb Spring*, 2007, 15 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.bombsite.com/issues/99/articles/2902>>.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ John Lahr, "Surreal Life." *The New Yorker* 17 Mar. 2008, 18 Nov. 2008 <http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/03/17/080317crat_atlarge_lahr>.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theater Communications Group. 2006) 48-49.
- ³³ Ibid., 8.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 70.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 71.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 359.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 366.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 367.
- ³⁹ Charles Isherwood, "Comic Impudence Softens Tale of Loss." *The New York Times* (3 October 2006).
- ⁴⁰ Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2008) 13.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Writing in the *Hartford Current*, Frank Rizzo compared the connections between Paula Vogel and Sarah Ruhl to the double helix of ". . . theatrical DNA . . ." ¹ What Rizzo was emphasizing with a flourish of words comes to more than stylistic similarities between Vogel's and Ruhl's drama. Rizzo's image of genetic connection is important, when we are looking at the dynamic between Vogel and Ruhl, because the expression of genes is an expression that is conversational. A child may inherit a trait, but it is never expressed in the same way that the parent expresses it. And it is also true that when a child reaches adulthood he or she in turn can influence the parent's expression of the same trait.

In the previous chapters I have shown how Vogel and Ruhl are both influenced by other playwrights and some of the ways they integrate that inspiration into their respective work. Vogel, using inspiration from the works of prominent male playwrights, writes plays that center around female characters, recontextualizing the world of the play

and the themes explored. Ruhl's inspiration similarly comes from male playwrights and storytellers, and she uses central female characters to create new contexts for ancient stories. But, as much as Ruhl's plays are influenced by male playwrights of the past, clearly there are certain aspects of her plays that are also directly influenced by Vogel. One of the recontextualizations explored in Chapter One was that of taking a dominate voice and changing it so it would be the voice of the marginalized. While Vogel and Ruhl do this well, there is definitely room for further research, because they are doing it from a position of academic power. Although, Vogel did not gain entrance to the MFA playwriting program at Yale, she was accepted to a PhD program at Cornell. And, interestingly enough the same program that rejected Vogel now employs her as the chair of the playwriting department. Ruhl also was a member of this Ivy League circle, attending Brown University. This is not to say that Vogel and Ruhl, cannot represent the voice of the marginalized. But it does raise the question of what influence their institutions played in their success. Because of the financial resources available at institutions like Yale, Cornell, and Brown,

Vogel and Ruhl had great advantages over their counterparts working at State funded institutions.

Chapter Two, "Speaking with the Dead", focused on Vogel's play *Baltimore Waltz* and Ruhl's play *Eurydice*. Vogel and Ruhl used these plays, respectively, as a way to have a continued conversation with deceased family members. Vogel's theatrical conversation with her brother put him directly on the stage by naming one of the characters Carl and revealing in the final moments of *Baltimore Waltz* that the character of Carl has died from what is assumed to be complications of AIDS. Ruhl on the other hand chose to have a conversation with her deceased father by adapting and retelling the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. Ruhl told her story with the focus on Eurydice instead of Orpheus, by doing this she was able to focus on Eurydice's relationship with her father. A dynamic between these two plays seems to mainly exist in the themes explored and the use of the format of the plays to assist in the telling of the story.

Negative empathy was the focus of Chapter Three, "Keeping Your Balance". I looked at the ways that Vogel and Ruhl are able to evoke in the audience an empathy for detestable characters. *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel's most well known play, and possibly her most controversial,

centers around a young woman and her uncle, who become intimately involved with each other. While there is good reason to hate the pedophilic uncle, Vogel's play construction, character creation, and use of defamiliarizing techniques, creates a story that not only stimulates empathy for a social deviant, but creates more questions about the societal components that incite pedophilia. Ruhl also has written deviant characters with which the audience finds themselves empathizing. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone* Ruhl explored the death of a man who was a trafficker of human organs. Ruhl used the meek and awkward Jean's relationships with the dead man's loved ones as a way to create empathy for a character that obviously deserved no empathy. In *The Clean House*, Ruhl used double casting, dire circumstances, and aspects of absurdity, to create empathy for Charles and Ana, who are having an affair. Vogel and Ruhl use different techniques to achieve a negative empathy for characters that the audience would usually dislike.

Chapter Four, "Stage Directions and Punctuation," looks at the similarities in Vogel and Ruhl's use of stage directions and punctuation. I showed that there are similarities in Vogel and Ruhl's use of punctuation, as a

way of problematizing dialogue and its delivery. I also looked at the ways that Vogel and Ruhl use stage directions to control the tempo of the play, as a way of revealing important information, and as an open invitation to question for actors, directors, and production teams.

I would not suggest in any way that Ruhl is copying Vogel or that Ruhl is necessarily even taking techniques from Vogel. What I mean to suggest through this study is that it is possible to see strong evidence of Vogel's theatrical genetics in the work of Ruhl. Ruhl has said that Vogel teaches her classes in a way that encourages individuality and discourages competition.² Ruhl has also said that Vogel doesn't try to force her "worldview of playwriting"³ on her students, but instead influences them through more subtle means. In the interview with Rizzo, Ruhl commented on Vogel's mode of suggestion, "She will say, 'Read these ten books I think will help you bridge the gap between what you're thinking now and what you might think in two years.' It's an extraordinary kind of mind reading in way."⁴ But this extraordinary "mind reading" of Vogel's has a resemblance to the way that she uses stage directions to influence. As was discussed in the last chapter, Vogel doesn't specifically say, "use this music in

my play" but instead says, "this is the music I was listening to when I wrote the play," which allows Vogel to influence without being controlling.

But, what is also evident in Chapter Four, is that the punctuation and stage directions used by Vogel and Ruhl are a piece of theatre that is uniquely feminine. The use of stage directions and punctuation that act as an invitation to collaborate, is an attribute that is shared by some of Vogel and Ruhl's contemporaries (not all of whom are female, but they do all write plays as collaborators and not as "Authors"), including, Maria Irene Fornes, Charles Mee, Caryl Churchill, and Susan Lori Parks; all of whom are cited by Vogel⁵ and Ruhl⁶ as influences. Ruhl recognizes that existing as a community of writers is a feminine trait,

I don't want to generalize about gender, but often in my experience I've come across an obsessive male concern with literary influence, that fear that you will become your literary father and so you have to 'kill' your literary father in order to make it on your own.⁷

Contrary to the masculine notion of killing your literary father, Vogel, Ruhl, and some of their contemporaries, choose to embrace and celebrate the literary forebears, from whom they have inherited their theatrical genetics.

And this, is possibly where the most important conversations are happening: not on the pages of their plays, but conversations between a community of writers and artists. This flies in the face of the notion of the playwright writing in isolation. And while it is understood that Ruhl gave Vogel plays as was required of her as a student of Vogel, she said in a 2008 interview, "I still give Paula early drafts of my plays."⁸ And Vogel now gives drafts of her plays to Ruhl as well, "I guess one turning point is when Paula gave me a draft of something she wrote: 'The Long Christmas Ride Home.'"⁹ There is, in fact, an admitted conversation between the persons of Paula Vogel and Sarah Ruhl, so any similarities that are perceivable between their works may be because they are editing and commenting on each other's drafts. This support system has undoubtedly helped Vogel and Ruhl grow as artists.

When Ruhl was convinced that she was going to be a poet, it was the encouragement from Vogel that convinced her she could be a playwright.¹⁰ And, when Vogel saw great promise in Ruhl as a student, Vogel said, "I want to work with you."¹¹ Ruhl recognizes Vogel is a catalytic educator in the lives of many new playwrights, "There are so many incredible writers out there right now, and much of it,

Paula, is due to your teaching."¹² And in response, Vogel admits that she helps, "speed them on their journey," becoming a support and role model to up and coming artists.¹³ The interim between Ruhl's first class with Vogel and now, has established Vogel and Ruhl as not only colleagues but as friends,

I think of discussions in booths over tea that became talks in bistros in New York and Los Angeles over wine—a hungry exchange of viewpoint and experience, rushed for lack of time, between two playwrights in the field, and now I turn to Sarah as a trusted and beloved colleague who still has one of the most unique minds in theater I've encountered.¹⁴

Their friendship is further evidenced by the fact that Vogel and her wife Ann Fausto-Sterling performed the Ruhl's marriage ceremony to Tony Charuvasttra.¹⁵

Although Ruhl has a unique theatrical voice, there are ways that her plays seem to be commenting on, or adding to, the conversation of the plays that Vogel has written. One aspect of Vogel's and Ruhl's works that I chose not to explore, but might be an area of further research, is their use of a chorus. I specifically chose not to address Vogel's and Ruhl's use of a chorus in their work only in an effort to narrow my own research.

One area that has potential for future research would be the Brechtian influence on Vogel and Ruhl and other contemporary playwrights. Vogel's and Ruhl's plays work to incite empathy in the audience, which differentiates their work from that of Bertolt Brecht. But, Vogel and Ruhl both make use of Brecht's theories of estrangement or defamiliarization (*verfremdung*). David Savran, in his book *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, said that Vogel has a love/hate relationship with Brecht because of his antifeminist attitudes, as well as,

...some serious reservations about his attempts to distantiate and estrange historical events and characters. She, in contrast, favors a more empathic approach, preferring to lead audiences to sympathize with figures, both historical and otherwise, they might find abhorrent.¹⁶

Ruhl's use of disparate images and language is what gives her distinctive poetry of performance, and even though Ruhl does not identify Brecht as an influence in her writing style, she uses defamiliarization techniques in all of her plays. Tracing the influence of Brecht through the works of Vogel and Ruhl is enough to fill an entire study, and it did not necessarily fit into the thesis of this research, but this is undoubtedly an area that would be beneficial to future studies.

The profession of playwriting is, like many other professions, male dominated. It might seem that the successes of Vogel and Ruhl, along with their female contemporaries, have made progress for woman playwrights, but both Vogel and Ruhl feel the difficulties for female playwrights has not subsided. In an interview with Ann Linden, a feminist theater scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for the book *The Playwright's Muse*, asked Vogel, "Do you see things changing for woman playwrights?"¹⁷ To which Vogel replied, "No, I don't. I see it as enormously difficult."¹⁸ Sentiments that are echoed by Ruhl in *Time Out New York*,

I've had experiences where an artistic director has read a play and said something like, 'There's no plot.' And it was actually very plotted, but it was told from a woman's point of view. Because he identified with the male character, he didn't realize there was even a story. It's a very unconscious sexism, but it's a question of who's in the position of power.¹⁹

As was reported on National Public Radio, Emily Glassberg Sands, a student in economics at Princeton University, conducted research on discrimination against female playwrights. Glassberg Sands found identical scripts submitted to artistic directors were rated lower when submitted with a female name than when submitted with a male name.²⁰ Glassberg Sands found specifically that

characters purportedly written by female authors, were ranked less likable and the plays were deemed to have a lower economic potential.²¹ The unexpected result in this study was that male artistic directors ranked scripts with a female name as high as the scripts with male authors, but female artistic directors ranked scripts written by female playwrights lower.²² I bring up this information because it would be pertinent to a future study. While there is no doubt that Ruhl is a talented playwright, her career may have started so quickly because she had the support of Vogel. It may be significant to know if artistic directors would reject a Ruhl play if it had a different female name. Also, it has been apparent that Vogel has been instrumental in supporting Ruhl, a similar study to Glassberg Sands's could be conducted to find out if there is significance in the support given by playwriting instructors based on gender. And, there is also great need to see what role institutions play in the success of a playwright. Do playwrights that don't attend certain universities experience discrimination? There is potential to understand if there is a monopoly on theatrical markets by graduates of Ivy League institutions.

In 1997, in an interview with David Savran, for the book *The Playwright's Muse*, Vogel was asked "What playwrights do you think are doing the most important work now?"²³ Only two years after Ruhl had taken her first class with Vogel, Ruhl did not make Vogel's list of artists doing important work. Although Ruhl did not make Vogel's list, Vogel was catalytic in the Ruhl's early development as a playwright. With Vogel as her advisor Ruhl wrote *Passion Play* as her senior thesis.²⁴ Vogel gave the encouragement that convinced Ruhl to write plays,

When Paul says, 'I want to see that play [you're proposing],' it has a redoubling effect because you think, 'Oh, it can really be a play.' When Paula taps you and says, 'I think you can do this'- and I've talked with other people who have had this same experience—you can suddenly imagine writing this play and having a life in the theater. It's partly her belief in the future of this invisible thing.²⁵

In the same year that Vogel held the above interview with Savran, Ruhl's *Passion Play* received a performance at Trinity Repertory Theater in Providence, a production that was arranged by Vogel.²⁶ And, eight years later, Ruhl was nominated for a Pulitzer for *The Clean House*. Ruhl admits that without Vogel she never would have even considered playwriting.²⁷ It is apparent that Vogel has become the female playwright role model that she herself never had.

Consequently, Ruhl has brought her new and unique theatrical voice to a new generation of playwrights looking for role models.

While theatre may be seen as an antiquated art, Vogel and Ruhl see theater as a cure for the speed of twenty-first century life. Current entertainment is moving faster now than it ever has before, and it seems that theater, an art that requires an audience to leave their homes, turn off their phones and sit in the dark for hours, is an art form that will soon disappear. But, it is in the retreat and slowing down which happens in the theater that Vogel thinks will keep theater alive:

I believe that's why the theater is actually going to grow in the twenty-first century, because it forces us to slow down. The circadian rhythms are being lost, technology is speeding up, so we have to go somewhere and literally have a one-to-one relationship with the tick-tock of the clock.²⁸

Ruhl agrees with this idea, suggesting that the images of the stage have been replaced with psychology, which she suggests could be corrected with a good old-fashioned sword fight, "We've replaced that physicality with the idea of drama as conflict, with people bickering on stage. I'd rather watch a clash of swords. I mean, an argument, the idea of opposition and dialectic, is very important to me,

but the bickering I could do without."²⁹ That is the future of theater, integrating the past. Returning to Frank Rizzo's image of a theatrical DNA, we can see that the success of Vogel and Ruhl has been to accept the traits that they have inherited and use them to their advantage. This may be a fairly obvious answer, but so often artists will consider the theories and practices of their predecessors as antiquated or useless. The dynamic I have described between Vogel and Ruhl shows a microcosm of theatrical genetics. The future of theater that this study points to suggests a revisiting of the techniques used throughout the history of theater.

It is impossible to know where Ruhl would be if it had not been for Vogel, but what is clear from Ruhl's point of view is that she would not have been a playwright: "Paula Vogel is basically the reason I started writing plays at all."³⁰ And, perhaps more impossible to know is how Ruhl has influenced the works of Vogel. Vogel knows that she is influenced by the work of her students, "I want to learn a different way of looking at theater . . . So when someone [with an original voice] comes along, I am hungry to understand it. I'm in their play world."³¹ There is no way to fully document through a study of this kind the effects

that these individual artists have on each other, but I hope to have demonstrated an observable dynamic between the works of Paula Vogel and Sarah Ruhl.

As Vogel goes into her second year as a playwriting instructor at Yale University, she will continue to draw inspiration from her students as she has from Ruhl. Vogel premiered her newest play, *A Civil War Christmas: An American Musical Celebration*, in December of 2008. The play received glowing reviews from Charles Isherwood of the New York Times, who said it was "...richly detailed and beautifully mounted."³² In February of 2009 Ruhl's play *In the Next Room or The Vibrator Play*, was produced at Berkley Repertory Theater. Isherwood said of Ruhl's newest play, "A fanciful but compassionate consideration of the treatment, and the mistreatment, of women in the late 19th century . . . " adding that it is a " . . . spirited and stimulating (sorry) new comedy."³³ If current success is a measure, these two prolific playwrights will continue to be produced, enriching the theatrical landscape of American theater, and inspiring new generations of playwrights and theater practitioners.

NOTES

¹ Frank Rizzo, "Passion for Plays: From Teacher and Student to Award-Winning Peers." *Hartford Current* (21, September, 2008).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David Savran, *The Playwright's Voice* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999) 286.

⁶ Paula Vogel, "Sarah Ruhl." *Bomb Spring*, 2007, 15 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.bombsite.com/issues/99/articles/2902>>.

⁷ Frank Rizzo, "Passion for Plays: From Teacher and Student to Award-Winning Peers." *Hartford Current* (21, September, 2008).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wendy Weckwerth, "More Invisible Terrains." *Theater* (New Haven: Yale Press, 34.2, 2004) 35.

¹¹ John Lahr, "Surreal Life." *The New Yorker* 17 Mar. 2008, 18 Nov. 2008 <http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/03/17/080317crat_atlarge_lahr>.

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