

Resource Pack

A Young Vic / ATC / Drum Theatre Plymouth co-production

Young
Vic

Eurydice

By Sarah Ruhl

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If you have any questions or comments about this Resource Pack please contact us:

The Young Vic, 66 The Cut, London, SE1 8LZ

T: 020 7922 2800 F: 020 7922 2802 e: info@youngvic.org

Compiled by: Adam Penford

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1. SARAH RUHL

Sarah Ruhl was born in Wilmette, near Chicago, Illinois in 1974. Her mother, an actress, introduced her as a child to the theatre and she joined the local Piven Theater workshop where she trained as an actor but soon realised that *"it didn't fit for me. I didn't like being watched"*. Having written short stories and poetry from a very young age, Ruhl enrolled at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, a member of the Ivy League¹, to study creative writing with the aim of becoming a teacher or poet. In 1994 (when Ruhl was 20), her father died of bone cancer and the themes of death and mortality have featured heavily in her subsequent work. Her first collection of poetry, *Death in Another Country*, was published shortly after her father's death, but Ruhl began to focus more heavily on writing plays as a therapeutic method of dealing with her loss: *"There seemed to be no cultural outlet to deal with that except therapy... No cultural ritual to organise my feelings. Theater became that for me."* Upon completing her degree, she remained at Brown University to study for a MFA (Master of Fine Arts) in playwriting under the established feminist writer, Paula Vogel [see Chapter 8]. This also involved a placement at Pembroke College, Oxford University.

Ruhl's first play, *Melancholy Play*, received a workshop production at Brown University in 2001. The one-act show explores the concept of human melancholy as an unconsciously seductive quality and features an unhappy leading character, Tilly, who is irresistible to everyone she meets. One day, Tilly's gloom turns inexplicably to happiness, but her hairdresser inherits her discontent becoming so melancholy she turns into an almond. The stylised nature of this unexpected plot twist set the precedent for Ruhl's future work. Often termed a fabulist², many of her plays have irrational and fantastical elements (such as the talking, weeping stones in *Eurydice*). These heightened, theatrical traits seem to originate from her passion for poetry and disinterest in banal, everyday language. Ruhl herself has termed her plays as three-dimensional poems. She rejects the current preference in Western theatre for naturalistic drama which has been heavily influenced by Freud (Sigmund Freud, 1856-1939, founder of psychoanalysis) and Stanislavski (Konstantin Stanislavski, 1863-1938, creator of the naturalistic

¹ A group of high-achieving universities in North East America.

² A writer of fables, stories which portray animals, plants, forces of nature or inanimate objects as having human qualities.

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method of acting) in preference for a more primitive artistic expression. Ruhl defines her work as featuring “a more medieval sensibility of the humours, melancholia, black bile and transformation.”³ After *Melancholy Play*, later that year, the Piven Theater Workshop commissioned Ruhl to adapt two short stories by Chekhov (1860-1904) - *Lady with the Lap Dog* and *Anna around the Neck*. This was the beginning of an ongoing professional relationship between Ruhl and her childhood theatre group, who have performed many of her works and commissioned other adaptations.

During 2003-4, Ruhl wrote the two-act *Passion Play*. Act One is set in England in 1575 where a small town is staging the Passion, a dramatic representation of the life and death of Jesus Christ, traditionally performed during Lent. Act Two was located in Germany in 1934 where the actor playing Christ in a village’s production of the Passion has sympathy for, and eventually joins, the Nazi party. Despite their different socio-historical settings, both acts explore the relationship between politics and religion. In 2007, Ruhl returned to the play after being commissioned to write a third act. Located in a town in the southern states in 1984, Ronald Reagan visits on campaign for president. Meanwhile, the actor playing Pontius Pilate goes to serve in Vietnam, only to find his role has been given away on his return. *Passion Play* remains the most epic of Ruhl’s plays and she has not ruled out the notion of writing a fourth act. Although acts one and two have already been produced, the whole cycle will receive its premiere in April 2010 in New York.



Ony Uhiara as Eurydice and Osi Okerafor as Orpheus

³ The theory of the humours originated in Ancient Greece when it was believed that the body consisted of four elements: black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood. Only when the elements were balanced could a person be healthy. The theory continued throughout the Middle Ages.

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2003 was a productive year for the playwright who also premiered *Eurydice* [see Chapter 5]; a tragicomedy called *Late: A Cowboy Song* which concerned a woman who, despite being married several times, was still searching for love; and an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's (English novelist, 1882-1941) *Orlando* for the Piven Theater Workshop.

Ruhl's major breakthrough came in 2004 with *The Clean House* which was a finalist in the Pulitzer Prize awards (a US prize for excellence in literature) the following year. Despite the high profile of the Pulitzer Prize, Ruhl has actually defined the turning point in her career as when she won the much lesser-known Susan Smith Blackburn Award. According to her, this marked the point when "*theaters that had the play sitting unread on their desks suddenly wanted to do it*". *The Clean House* was a comedy which centred on a depressed Brazilian cleaner, Mathilda, with hopes of becoming a professional comedian. Her employer, Lane, tries to cure Mathilda's depression so she will stop moping around and actually clean the house, but her own life is in a mess and Mathilda has to search for the perfect joke alone. The play's themes of healing and love also incorporated Ruhl's aforementioned interest in the balance of the humours; of finding a healthy and peaceful equilibrium in life. When the play opened in New York in 2006, the theatre critic Charles Isherwood of The New York Times gave it a glowing review, predicting that "*this is one of the finest and funniest new plays you're likely to see in New York this season*". As the most popular broadsheet in the district, The New York Times has the power to make a play a hit or a flop on Broadway, as opposed to a city like London where readership is divided amongst several publications. Isherwood could be credited (as the playwright herself has acknowledged) with securing Ruhl's successful career. Prior to the Young Vic's *Eurydice*, *The Clean House* remains Ruhl's only play to receive a major UK production, with a national tour last year starring Patricia Hodge for Sheffield Theatre Productions.

In 2006, Ruhl received the MacArthur Fellowship. This award is given to twenty American citizens each year who have been anonymously nominated for their creative accomplishments and future potential. The prize money is \$500,000 and the fellowship is known vernacularly as the genius award. The Fellowship's announcement stated that Ruhl was a playwright "*creating vivid and adventurous theatrical works that poignantly juxtapose the mundane aspects of daily life with mythic themes of love and war*". The same year she wrote *Demeter in the City*, a forerunner to *Eurydice*. The play re-examined the Ancient Greek myth of Demeter (Goddess of Harvest), whose daughter Persephone, was abducted by Hades (God of the Underworld, see Chapter 6). Ruhl relocated the story to contemporary Illinois and re-imagined Demeter

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as a single mother whose daughter gets taken by social services after needles are discovered in their apartment. The play, criticised by some for rendering the original tale unrecognisable, was a modest success but is not revived as frequently as her other works.

The following year Ruhl wrote *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, which premiered in Washington and opened in 2008 Off-Broadway - an umbrella term for New York theatres which are not officially Broadway venues because of their small audience capacity. Despite its fringe location, this project was aimed at a more commercial audience because it starred theatre and film actress, Mary-Louise Parker (*The West Wing* and *Weeds*). The central character answers a ringing mobile phone not belonging to her and is led into a strange world, becoming a comforter and confessor to the deceased man's friends and family. Ruhl's interest in the subject emerged from her fears that technology is taking over our lives and the way we interact with each other - despite appearances, these distant, non-physical relationships mean the population is actually growing more remote from one another.

Last year, *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)* marked Ruhl's Broadway debut. Inspired by Rachel P. Maines book, *The Technology of Orgasm*, the play explored the moment in the age of electricity when doctors, who had previously taken hours stimulating their female patients to cure them of 'hysteria', could use a vibrator to achieve the same result in a matter of minutes. The play appears more naturalistic than Ruhl's previous work. The set consisted of two rooms, the first a doctor's surgery where he administers the aforementioned treatment, and the parlour where the doctor's wife wonders what her husband does that elicits such ecstatic responses. In the process of making his patients happy, the doctor neglects his own wife who eventually breaks into his surgery and tests the apparatus herself. Despite the play's naturalistic period set and costumes, the language frequently veers into poetry; the artistic mark that identifies Ruhl's work. The play received superb reviews and many critics believe it to be her best, and certainly most commercial, work to date. The playwright herself has noted that it is her first play not to feature a dead person. She had previously recognised that her writing was a response to her Father's death and that "when you have a loss like that, I think you keep re-experiencing it until you finally just don't". This latest play suggests that perhaps she has finally exorcised those demons and her future work will continue to explore widening subject matters.

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2. THE WORKS OF SARAH RUHL

Poetry

1994 *Death in Another Country*

Play

2000 *Dog Play*

2001 *Melancholy Play*

2002 *Virtual Mediations 1*

2003 *Passion Play* (extended in 2007 to *Passion Play, a cycle*)

2003 *Eurydice*

2003 *Late: A Cowboy Song*

2004 *The Clean House*

2006 *Demeter in the City*

2007 *Dead Man's Cell Phone*

2009 *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)*

Adaptations

2001 *Lady with the Lap Dog* and *Anna around the Neck* (adapted from Anton Chekhov)

2003 *Orlando* (adapted from Virginia Woolf)

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3. SYNOPSIS

Orpheus and Eurydice are discovered wearing 1950s swimming costumes on their way to the sea. They laugh, dance, and speak of their love for one another. Eurydice tells Orpheus about a book she has been reading, but Orpheus cannot grasp why she likes literature so much. He loves music and has composed a song for Eurydice, but when he tries to teach her the melody she struggles to remember it; she has no ear for music. He proposes to Eurydice by tying a piece of string onto her ring finger and she joyfully accepts. However, when she asks Orpheus what he is thinking about he replies "music".

The scene shifts to Eurydice's father in the Underworld. He writes a letter to his daughter for her to open on her wedding day. It contains practical advice to the couple for a long and happy life. He says that he is the only person in the Underworld who can still read and write; the only one who can recall their life.



Ony Uhiara as Eurydice

Above ground, it is the couple's wedding day but Eurydice is staying away from the party as the guests are boring her. She is hiding by the water pump and regretting that her father is not there: *"A wedding is for a father and a daughter. They stop being married to each other that day."* An Interesting Man appears

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and invites Eurydice to his own party. She declines, saying to the stranger that she must return to her own wedding and exits. The man picks up Eurydice's father's letter from the ground that Eurydice did not notice.

Eurydice's father tries to imagine himself at his daughter's wedding by doing the Jitterbug (a 1930s dance to swing music) with an imaginary partner.

At the wedding, Eurydice and Orpheus are also dancing and having fun. She decides to go back to the water pump, as she is thirsty. Her husband makes her promise to return as soon as possible.



Whilst Eurydice is drinking, the Interesting Man reappears. He tells Eurydice that a letter from her father was delivered to his flat in error. She says that is impossible and he invites her to come with him to see it for herself.

Orpheus arrives at the water pump but Eurydice is nowhere to be seen.

Eurydice and the Interesting Man arrive at his loft apartment; she can see her wedding from the window. She asks to see her father's letter. The man says Orpheus is obsessed with music and has slim fingers, and that Eurydice needs a man with broad shoulders who can look after her. He demands a kiss and Eurydice tells him to shut his eyes. He complies and she slips her father's letter out of the man's pocket. She opens

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the letter and instantly recognises her father's handwriting. She runs for the stairs but loses her balance and falls down them shouting her husband's name. At the water pump, Orpheus simultaneously shouts: "*Eurydice!*"

A chorus of stones, Little Stone, Big Stone and Loud Stone, enter the Underworld and introduce themselves. They tell us that Eurydice died and afterwards Orpheus played the saddest music ever heard. An elevator door opens and Eurydice arrives in the Underworld. She recalls how she was forced to swim in the River of Forgetfulness and can no longer remember her husband's name. Eurydice's father enters to greet his daughter but she does not recognise him and cannot understand his human language as she only speaks the language of the dead. She assumes he is a porter and asks to be taken to her room. The Stones tell her there are no rooms but her father pretends there are and guides her away.

Orpheus tries to write to Eurydice but is not sure what to say. He notes simply that he loves her and drops the letter through the ground.

Eurydice's father makes a room out of a piece of string for his daughter.

Orpheus writes another short letter to his wife, pledging that he will find her.

Eurydice receives Orpheus' letter but she cannot read it. Her father tries to explain it to her and she begins to grasp the sentiment behind it. Finally, she recognises her husband's name and her memory begins to return. She asks her father to remind her of her past but he refuses, telling her that remembering will make her sad and eternity is a long time to be sad. She says she would rather remember but the Stones tell her she is not allowed to be sad and she should act like a stone instead.

Orpheus sends a copy of *The Collected Works of Shakespeare* to Eurydice. At first, she does not understand what the object is, but her father teaches her how to read again. Orpheus tries to contact his wife by telephone but to no avail; he pledges again to find her.

The Lord of the Underworld enters; he looks like a child and rides a tricycle. He tries to seduce Eurydice but she tells him he is too young. He discovers her room of string and she tells him that her father made it for her. He threatens to dip her in the River of Forgetfulness again.

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Eurydice and her father read a letter from Orpheus that states he is going to come for her that night.

Orpheus knocks on the doors of Hades. He sings and, to their amazement, the Stones begin to cry. The Lord of the Underworld appears, and Orpheus says that he is here for Eurydice. The Lord tells him that if he walks out of the Underworld then his wife will follow but if he looks back she will disappear forever. Orpheus says the task sounds simple and the Lord smiles to himself.

Eurydice hears Orpheus arriving. Her father asks her if she intends to leave with him and Eurydice realises her father will miss her. He insists that she goes but reiterates the Lord's rules.

Eurydice hesitantly follows Orpheus, unsure if it is really him and sad about leaving her father. The Stones encourage her to continue and she realises it is the correct decision and increases her pace. Just as she catches up with him, she says his name and the world falls away.

He asks her why she said his name and she replies that she does not know. She starts to move back to the Underworld and he encourages her to remember the times they spent together but she cannot understand him.

Meanwhile, her father dismantles the string room and, encouraged by the Stones, dips himself in the river so he can forget. He falls asleep. Eurydice reappears and asks the Stones where her room and her father are. She tries to wake him and undo his memory loss but to no avail. She begins to cry.

The Lord appears. He has grown in height and looks and sounds more like the Interesting Man from the water pump. He asks Eurydice to be his bride but she tells him that he is still a child. He insists he is grown up and she reluctantly agrees to wed him.

Eurydice writes a letter to Orpheus apologising for calling his name and explaining she was afraid. She tells him to marry again and writes a list of instructions to his future wife about how to look after him. Then she dips herself in the River of Forgetfulness and falls asleep.

Orpheus arrives in the Underworld. He sees Eurydice and smiles. Then it rains on him and he forgets. He sees her letter but can no longer understand it and finally closes his eyes.

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4. CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

Creative Team

Director

Bijan Shebani

Designer

Patrick Burnier

Lighting Designer

Mike Gunning

Sound Designer

Manuel Pinheiro

Choreographer

Aline David

Assistant Director

Mathew Evans

Cast

Eurydice

Ony Uhiara

Orpheus

Osi Okerafor

Interesting Man / Lord of the Underworld

Rhys Rusbatch

Eurydice's Father

Geff Francis

Little Stone

Becci Gemmell

Big Stone

Marsha Henry

Loud Stone

Ben Addis

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5. EURYDICE

Sarah Ruhl began writing *Eurydice* in 2001 whilst studying at Brown University. It opened at the Madison Repertory Theater, Wisconsin in 2003 and first played in New York at the Second Stage Theater in 2007. The Young Vic production is the play's UK premiere.

Ruhl has previously stated that she finds devising plots difficult and prefers to use an existing story which allows her, and the audience, to concentrate on the poetry of the language and the theatricality of the play:

"I like that everyone knows a story I'm telling. There's a kind of structural vibration in knowing what the bones of the story are, but not how it's going to be told. It's the change-ups that are the sticking points."

This classic Greek myth (see Chapter 6) has been re-imagined many times by various artists over the centuries: Titian and Rubens painted it; Monteverdi, Birtwhistle, Haydn and Glass wrote operas; Dante and Auden verse; Anouilh a play; Balachine choreographed it; and Cocteau and Camus filmed it. Ruhl explores the events from the perspective of the female protagonist, Eurydice, as opposed to the traditional perspective of her husband, Orpheus. This reimagining reflects Ruhl's ongoing interest in the function of women in society and their role in cross-gender relationships. All of the artists listed above who have previously tackled the myth are men and have focused on the heroic role Orpheus plays in the story. By altering the perspective, Ruhl forces the audience to consider the reality of Eurydice's fate, how bravely she faces death and living in the Underworld.

Ruhl incorporates the character of Eurydice's father (who is not mentioned in the traditional story) and began writing the play after the death of her own father: *"I think I was trying to have more conversations with my own father by writing this story"*. Ruhl believes that most artists tackle the subject of mortality at some point in their career as humans are so fearful of dying, but acknowledges that her preoccupation is focussed specifically on the tenuous bond between the dead and those they leave behind. By introducing this new character, Ruhl examines not only the romantic love of the traditional tale, but also the love between a father and daughter. In her play, the latter is portrayed as being the stronger of the two and the playwright gently mocks romantic affection. In Ruhl's *Eurydice*, the heroine is reunited with her

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father in the Underworld but eventually has to make the difficult decision of whether to accompany Orpheus back to life or stay with her father. Encouraged by her father, she chooses the former. Orpheus is told that if he looks back at Eurydice before both characters are above ground then his wife will vanish forever. In the traditional story, Orpheus anxiously looks back at Eurydice just as he enters the real world and Eurydice dies for a second time. Ruhl, however, has the character turn because the heroine calls his name:

EURYDICE: Orpheus?

He turns towards her, startled. Orpheus looks at Eurydice. Eurydice looks at Orpheus. The world falls away.

ORPHEUS: You startled me.

A small sound--ping. They turn away from each other, matter-of-fact, compelled. The lights turn blue. They walk away from each other on extensive unseen boardwalks, their figures long shadows.

EURYDICE: I'm sorry.

They continue to walk on long lines away from each other, looking ahead.

ORPHEUS: Why?

EURYDICE: I don't know.

This ending could be interpreted as Ruhl suggesting that Eurydice's bond with her father is stronger than that with her husband. The playwright has previously acknowledged that she is fascinated that such a small look can metaphorically encapsulate a lifetime of remorse and regret.

Although the exact cause of Eurydice's death varies from source to source (see Chapter 6), Ruhl introduces a 'nasty but interesting man' who lures the character to his apartment and attempts to seduce her. Eurydice flees and falls down the stairs to her death. By updating the event to a contemporary scenario in a modern and familiar location, the playwright helps the audience connect to the narrative and view Eurydice as a recognisable character. Her other addition is a chorus of talking stones; Big Stone, Little Stone and Loud Stone. Ruhl instructs that they "*should be played as though they are nasty children at a birthday party. In fact, they might be played by children*". These roles have been played by various combinations of male and female actors in the play's American productions, and are intended to be genderless. They fulfil the function of a traditional Greek chorus (see Chapter 7), commenting on the

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action and offering advice and judgements on the leading character's choices and decisions. Ruhl also intends them to be humorous, supplying light relief in play full of pain and loss. Whilst acknowledging the concept as absurd, she hopes they make the play more visceral. Ruhl has become notorious for her poetic but vague stage directions - she describes the set in *Eurydice* as resembling the world of *Alice in Wonderland* rather than a traditional interpretation of Hades (see Chapter 6). Whilst many audiences find this irreverent approach to the original source material makes the production more accessible, not all critics agree. One American headlined his condemning review with "*Curiouser and Curiouser! Ruhl wrecks Eurydice with Whimsy*".

Ruhl's *Eurydice* is most commonly labelled a tragedy in accordance with its main narrative thread and the categorisation of the original Greek myth. However, critics have struggled to fully commit to this definition, as they do with most of her plays, due to the humour she incorporates. Despite disappointing a few American critics, who felt her style imposed too much on the narrative, the majority of reviews were outstanding. Her championing critic, Charles Isherwood (see Chapter 1), called it a "*magical play about the joys and trials of living and dying*" and "*the most moving exploration of the theme of loss that the American theater has produced since the events of Sept. 11, 2001*".

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6. THE MYTH OF ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

Ruhl's *Eurydice* is only the latest in a long line of recent versions of the classic myth of Orpheus and Eurydice which have been produced in various artistic forms over the last two centuries (see Chapter 5). However, the fable has a much longer history of being imagined dating back to when it first emerged in Ancient Greece. The first surviving version of the story has been attributed to Plato (Greek philosopher and writer, around 400 BC) although the character of Orpheus was first mentioned briefly two centuries earlier. Following various Greek versions, the Romans inherited and expanded the story, most noticeably by Virgil and Ovid [Roman poets, around 50 BC]. However, the basic elements of the myth extend beyond western culture; several traditional stories echo the relationship between the central characters and / or the fundamental plot. Izanami-no-Mikoto and Izanagi-no-Mikoto in Japan, Savitri and Satyavan in India, Itzamna and Ix Chel in Mexico, and Lot and his wife in the Book of Genesis are all variations. Whilst elements of the western myth vary between writers, the central narrative remains the same.

Eurydice

Eurydice was either a daughter of Apollo (the God of the Sun) or an oak nymph (a beautiful spirit creature), depending on the source. As portrayed in Ruhl's play, her husband, Orpheus, was an exceptionally talented musician, who deeply loved his wife. As Eurydice danced through the meadows, she was chased by a satyr (a goat-like creature, associated with fertility) and fatally bitten by a poisonous snake. Other versions of the tale state that Eurydice was actually chased by Aristaeus (a son of Apollo) or fell into the snake pit because she was dancing with naiads (a type of water nymph) on her wedding day, (suggesting an element of infidelity, and her death as a punishment). Orpheus was devastated at the death of his wife and played such transcendent music that all the Gods wept and granted him permission to travel to the Underworld to retrieve her. Once there, Orpheus played his lyre⁴ to soften the hearts of Hades and Persephone (Gods of the Underworld) who allowed him to take Eurydice back to the upper world. As in Ruhl's version, a condition of him leading Eurydice out of the Underworld was that he could not look back at her before they were both above ground. Just before she stepped into the sunlight he could not resist turning, either out of anxiety because he could not hear her footsteps or because he could no longer resist gazing at her face (varies between versions), and she vanished forever.

⁴ A stringed musical instrument which looks like a harp but is played like a guitar.

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Orpheus

Depending on the source, Orpheus was the son of Calliope (the muse of heroic poetry) and either Oeagrus (the king of Thrace, located close to modern day Turkey) or Apollo. According to legend, Apollo gave Orpheus his golden lyre and his mother taught him to sing. He features most prominently in Greek mythology in his own tale of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, but also plays a minor role in the epic Greek poem, *Jason and the Argonauts*, written by Rhodius in the 3rd century BC. Orpheus assisted Jason in his quest to find the Golden Fleece (the legendary coat of gold taken from a winged ram) by playing his lyre to drown out the beautifully seductive songs of the Sirens who were trying to lure the Argonauts' boat onto the rocks. Many other stories concern Orpheus' death. Ovid [48BC - 17 or 18 CE] wrote that he spurned women after Eurydice's death, taking instead young male lovers, and was stoned to death by a tribe of rejected females. Greek playwright Aeschylus (believed to have been born around 525 BC) wrote that Orpheus abandoned all Gods except Apollo towards the end of his life and was killed by followers of Dionysus (see Chapter 7). This version was expanded by other writers who tell that when the followers tried to wash Orpheus' blood off their hands in the River Helicon, the river sank underground and never reappeared. A religious Orphic cult was established as early as 400 BC in his honour and existed until the beginning of the Roman Empire in 27 BC.

The Underworld

This refers to various realms in Ancient Greek mythology which were mainly located underneath the earth, or sometimes in earlier mythology, beyond the horizon. Orpheus was the only mortal who was allowed to leave the Underworld alive (Hercules also escaped but is classified as a divine hero and therefore not mortal). The Underworld was ruled by Hades and Persephone (see below) and it consisted of several areas. In front of the palace of Hades and Persephone sat three judges; Minos, Rhadamanthus and Aeacus, whose role was to decide each soul's fate. If a soul was deemed evil it was sent to Tartarus, if good it went to Elysium. If unable to categorise, the judges returned the soul to wander eternally in the Fields of Asphodel.

Hades

Hades was the God of the Underworld and is often misrepresented in modern depictions. He was not the equivalent of the grim reaper, the devil, or even death itself (which was represented by the God Thanatos) and was not evil; instead his role was to maintain the balance of his kingdom, though he was often

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portrayed as stern and unpitiful. He was the son of Cronus and Rhea, both Titans (the most powerful of Gods). Upon reaching adulthood, Hades joined with his sisters (Demeter, Hestia and Hera) and brothers (Zeus and Poseidon) and challenged the Titans for rule of the world. The three brothers received gifts from the Cyclopes (giants with single eyes in their foreheads): Zeus the thunderbolt, Poseidon the trident and Hades the helmet of invisibility. Hades snuck into the Titans' camp using his helmet the day before battle and destroyed their weapons. The divine war lasted ten years and the younger gods were victorious. Drawing lots to divide their world, Zeus won the sky, Poseidon the sea, and Hades the Underworld. Hades had a black chariot pulled by four jet-black horses and sat on an ebony throne. Ruhl's character, the Lord of the Underworld, does not draw particular influence from the traditional depiction of Hades; her character is more comparable to contemporary personifications of the devil in popular culture.

Persephone

Queen of the Underworld, Persephone was the daughter of Demeter and Zeus. Ruhl's play, *Demeter in the City*, is a modern updating of how she became consort to Hades (see Chapter 1). Demeter had rejected Persephone's many suitors and hidden her daughter away; however Hades burst through the earth and surprised Persephone, taking her against her will to the Underworld. The grieving mother, who controlled the harvests, brought life on earth to a standstill whilst she desperately searched for her missing daughter. Fearing the earth might die, Zeus eventually sent Hermes to retrieve Persephone. Hades agreed to release her on the proviso that she had not eaten anything whilst in his realm. Persephone had eaten four seeds so Hades subsequently forced his wife to spend four months each year in the Underworld, the world becoming lifeless for that period. This corresponds with the Mediterranean summer which is barren with droughts, unlike the other seasons in which plants flourish because of the high rainfall.⁵

River Lethe

The Underworld contained five rivers each with a different meaning: River Acheron, sorrow; River Cocytus, lamentation; River Phlegethon, fire; River Styx, hate; and River Lethe, forgetfulness. When souls arrived in the Underworld, they had to bathe in the Lethe to erase their human memories and it is this river which Ruhl alludes to in *Eurydice*. Eurydice's father at first refuses to dip himself in the river as he does not want to forget Eurydice, but when she chooses to follow Orpheus he complies to escape the

⁵ Sources vary: some say that the period of time Persephone remained in the Underworld corresponded with the Mediterranean summer; others that it corresponded to winter.

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pain of memory. When Eurydice returns after her failed escape he can neither see nor hear her. Several sources state that the Lethe flowed through the cave of Hypnos (God of Sleep) and the water's murmuring could induce sleepiness. Virgil wrote that it was only once the dead had been immersed in Lethe and could not remember their former lives that they could be reincarnated.

Charon

To enter the Underworld, the deceased had to cross the River Akheron in a rowing boat operated by Charon who charged an obolus (small coin) in payment. Many Greeks buried their dead with a coin in their mouth so they could pay Charon. Souls who could not afford to pay, or had no friends to place the coin, had to wander the Fields of Asphodel for at least 100 years before being granted entry to the Underworld. Artistic depictions of Charon vary from an old man, to a skeleton, or manly sailor.

Cerebus

The guard of the gates of the Underworld is Cerebus, a huge three-headed dog whose role was to prevent mortals from entering the realm and the dead from leaving it. Cerebus' heads represented the past, present and future, or birth, middle-age and death. In the myth of Hercules, the hero had to capture the hound alive as punishment by King Eurystheus for killing his own wife and children in a fit of madness - the last and most dangerous of his twelve tasks. Hercules met Hades in the Underworld and asked to take Cerebus. Hades agreed but only if he could overpower the beast without weapons. The hero succeeded, but Eurystheus was so scared he told him to take the creature back to the Underworld in return for his freedom. Cerebus has become a popular character in fiction and features in Milton's *Paradise Lost* [English poet, 1608-1674] and most recently, in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* where he is named Fluffy.

The Twelve Olympians

The principle Gods in Greek mythology were called the Twelve Olympians because they were said to dwell on top of Mount Olympus.

Aphrodite - Goddess of Love

Apollo - God of the Sun

Ares - God of War

Artemis - Goddess of the Hunt

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Athena - Goddess of Wisdom

Demeter - Goddess of the Harvest

Dionysus - God of Pleasure

Hades - God of the Underworld

Hepheastus - God of Fire

Hera - Goddess of Marriage

Hermes - God of Travel

Hestia - Goddess of the Home

Posiedon - God of the Sea

Zeus - King of the Gods

As well as these Twelve Olympian Gods, there were many other Gods and immortal beings that were worshipped, such as Gods of the countryside, the Titans, the Furies and various spirits.

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7. GREEK THEATRE

Not only is Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* based on an Ancient Greek myth, it also contains theatrical techniques which were first invented by including a chorus, heightened language and episodic form (a story told from key moments occurring over a span of time). Although Ruhl's stylistic references to Ancient Greek theatre are more explicit and therefore easily identifiable, the form of Western theatre as a whole can be traced directly back to the Ancient Greeks' creation of the art form over 2000 years ago.

The Greeks introduced theatre, as we now recognise it, around 550 BC in Athens which was then a powerful city-state⁶. Athens held a twice yearly festival to honour Dionysus, the God of Wine, who was also linked to fertility, and held a playwriting competition as part of the celebrations. The Festival was a symbol of the cultural, military and political authority of the city-state and was soon exported to various colonies and allies to further exhibit this power. The Festival plays were performed in verse with accompanying music and lasted up to twelve hours. The first recorded winner of the competition was Thespis (birth date unknown) who took the existing form of sung narrative ballads about the Gods, which were then performed by one storyteller, and distributed lines to various actors so they each played a particular role in the tale and spoke rather than sang. The extent of Thespis' role in the history of theatre is disputed, but he was the first known person to formalise this into a stage technique. For this reason, he is often credited with creating acting as a discipline, hence the term 'thespians', a modern name for actors. It was at this time that masks were introduced into plays, something that has become eponymous with Greek theatre, as a way of allowing the same actor to play several different roles without confusing the audience. Although no actual masks still exist, (they would have been made from decomposable material), there are several depictions of their use in paintings on vases which have been recovered.

Forty years after Thespis, Phrynichus won the playwriting prize at the Festival with a play based on the tragedy of a town called Miletus (on the western coast of Anatolia, now Turkey) which had been ransacked by the Persians in the previous century. This was the first known play written about an historical event rather than based on a myth - the original piece of political theatre. Contemporary sources recorded that after watching *The Fall of Miletus* "the whole theatre fell to weeping" and Phrynichus was fined a thousand drachmas and forbidden from presenting the play in the future. This did not prevent the playwright from pushing the boundaries of theatre however - he was also the first

⁶ An independent state within a larger country.

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dramatist to portray female characters on the stage (but not female actors, who were not allowed to perform in most cultures until the 17th century). Alongside the leading actors was a chorus which could contain up to fifty members and whose role was to speak aloud the thoughts of the characters to aid the audiences' understanding of the play. The head of the chorus was the only member who could interact with the leading actors. The chorus spoke in unison (as Ruhl's Stones often do in *Eurydice*).

In 480 BC, Athens was destroyed during a Persian invasion. When it was rebuilt, the Greeks formalised their love of theatre by building new, larger amphitheatres with stone seats (they had previously been wooden). This trend spread and amphitheatres carved into foothills appeared across the empire. At the back of the stage was a wall behind which the actors could change costumes and wait to enter. They also began to introduce stage elements still used in the theatre today including trapdoors, painted backcloths to illustrate place, and cranes which lifted actors to give the impression they were flying. These new venues could hold an audience of up to 1,500 and had superb acoustics (better than most of our contemporary venues) as their dynamics were worked out to high mathematical standards. They also started to write comedies as well as the existing genre of tragedy, although they never merged the two, viewing them as completely separate entities.

Ruhl is often praised for her sense of theatricality and this derives from her interest in the theatre of the Ancient Greeks. Paula Vogel, a major influence on the playwright (see chapter 8), recently remarked: *"When you put a chorus on stage, as in Eurydice, there's a focus on theatricality. There's no way you can be in that intimate, fourth wall realism once that happens".* *Eurydice* contains events that happen suddenly, surprising and sometimes confusing its audience, and this is Ruhl's attempt to emulate the disorder and unpredictability of real life. *"I try to interpret how people subjectively experience life. Everyone has a great, horrible opera inside him. I feel that my plays, in a way, are very old-fashioned."* Classical Greek tragedies have always been a terrific source material for great, horrible operas.

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8. THE INFLUENCES OF SARAH RUHL

Paula Vogel

Ruhl studied playwriting under Paula Vogel at Brown University and this mentor has had a major influence on how she approaches the discipline. Vogel and Ruhl are now firm friends; Vogel recently remembered her first encounter with the young student:

"She came into my intensive advanced playwriting seminar some 15 years ago. A sophomore, but I thought she was a senior: she was quiet and serious, but so obviously possessed a mind that came at aesthetics from a unique angle. I assigned an exercise: to write a short play with a dog as protagonist. Sarah Ruhl wrote of her father's death from that unique angle: a dog waiting by the door, waiting for the family to come home, unaware that the family is at his master's funeral, unaware of the concept of death."

Vogel was born in 1951 and still writes for the theatre alongside lecturing on various university courses. In 1998, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her play, *How I Learned to Drive*, which explored the affect of incest and sexual abuse on a child. Vogel has previously stated that she writes about themes which impact on her life; her 1992 play, *The Baltimore Waltz*, explored living with AIDS, a disease her brother died from in 1988. Her approach to playmaking is unorthodox as she writes at length about an emotional theme before introducing any plot. Furthermore, unlike most artists, each of her works deliberately has a different stylistic core, so it is difficult to define a Vogel play. She employs artistic techniques from various cultural traditions (including direct audience address, puppetry and detached omniscient⁷ narration) depending on what best suits the play's themes, characters and plot. To some degree, this echoes Ruhl's own approach to form and she has recognised Vogel's influence: *"Paula is very good about letting individual voices emerge, she doesn't want to stamp an aesthetic onto her playwrights, but instead tried to nurture out of them who they want to be, what they want to say, and how they want to say it."*

Quiara Alegria Hudes

Many of Vogel's students have become artistically-valued, award-winning playwrights and Ruhl has stated that she is constantly influenced by their different outputs. For example, Quiara Alegria Hudes' play, *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist, examined an American soldier on his return

⁷ Third person.

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from fighting in Iraq. Hudes originally trained as a musician and has taken her understanding of musical techniques and applied their principles (tempo, pitch, dynamics) to playwriting. She is now best known for her Broadway musical, *In the Heights*, focusing on the Dominican-American neighbourhood of Washington Heights in New York (her mother was Puerto Rican) told through hip-hop, salsa and soul music. The musical won the Tony Award for the Best Musical in 2008.

Jorge Cortinas

Another Brown graduate, Jorge Cortinas, is also admired by Ruhl who respects his capacity to distil thoughts with clarity, flair and imagination into the perfect economical sentence. His play, *Blind Mouth Singing*, is about a young man who has a lookalike friend who lives in a well; Cortinas juxtaposes the real world with a dreamlike environment, creating the kind of magical realism which Ruhl also portrays on stage. Originally a literary term, magical realism describes the penetration of a real world by magical happenings, in order to deepen an audience's understanding.

Maria Irene Fornes

Cortinas also studied alongside Ruhl with Maria Irene Fornes at a workshop that she runs in Mexico. Fornes is a Cuban-American playwright, born in 1930, and a major influence on American theatre. She was a member of many avant-garde theatre companies in New York in the 1960s and 1970s. Ruhl recently wrote an article about her work, focussing on Fornes' recognition of the extent to which actions changing on stage, whether it is a character's activity or an element of the design, have a major emotional impact on the audience. This is as opposed to the emphasis of much 20th century playwriting on engaging an audience through psychological changes. Ruhl has previously expressed regret that stage fighting is a diminishing production element in contemporary theatre, with writers preferring their characters to solve their differences through words rather than violence. Ruhl believes the physical activity has a greater theatrical and emotional resonance.

Fornes' exploratory 1980s play *Danube* was written to be performed outdoors during the daytime (with natural light) and one of her interests was how to incorporate scene changes as part of the production's form when there was no way of hiding them. Similarly, *Eurydice* does not pause for scene changes, and the set barely changes, as Ruhl prefers scenes to run continuously into one another. The audience is required to suspend their disbelief and use their imagination when the action relocates.

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Mac Wellman

Another playwright who has influenced Ruhl is Mac Wellman who is now the Professor of Playwriting at Brooklyn College, New York. Wellman is well known for creating experimental theatre and his 1994 essay, *'The Theater of Good Intentions'*, has had a major impact on young artists including Ruhl. Wellman argues against the psychological, Freudian-influenced theatre of subtext, stating that character should be formed from what the actor says as opposed to what he does not say. This is a viewpoint Ruhl has often proffered herself, admiring Wellman's plays for their *"great indulgences in language... great frenzy and excess and pleasure"*. Wellman often creates plays which have no plot or character at all.

Anne Bogart

Another experimental influence is theatre director Anne Bogart (who directed Vogel's play, *The Baltimore Waltz*), whom Ruhl admires for her imaginative approach to the material she directs. Ruhl recalls marvelling at the inventiveness Bogart provoked in a student performance in which Bogart gave her pupils 24 hours to create a piece of theatre without any money, leading to costumes fashioned from paper and desk lamps in place of theatrical lighting. *"Take people's money away and give them back their imagination"* Ruhl remarked afterwards.

Mary Zimmerman

Ruhl has often been compared to the American director and writer, Mary Zimmerman. Charles Isherwood, when reviewing *Eurydice*, said: *"Its mixture of visual allure, playfulness and emotional clarity recalls the best work of director Mary Zimmerman"*. Zimmerman has gained international renown for her experimental explorations of opera, Shakespeare and the classics and, like Ruhl, creates work which deals with epic subject matters and form. Her most famous play, *Metamorphoses*, is based on Ovid's epic poem of the same name which recalls six myths (not actually all recalled in Ovid but drawn from various sources) about people, animals and inanimate objects changing strikingly in appearance or character. Not only has the play similar source material to *Eurydice*, it also focuses thematically on the transforming power of water (*Metamorphoses* is famous for having a large pool onstage) which Ruhl explores by representing the River Lethe.

Kabuki

Ruhl's influences extend beyond fellow 20th century artists. As well as aforementioned traditional western cultures (the Ancient Greeks, medieval Passion plays, episodic renaissance playwrights such as

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Shakespeare), she is also interested in other traditional world cultures, particularly Japanese theatre. Vogel has recalled that she was amazed to find that Ruhl's first writing assignment at Brown University contained Kabuki stage techniques. Kabuki is a traditional Japanese theatrical art-form which first emerged in 1603 and still exists today. Best described as dance-theatre, the form has a complex history. Initially, it was performed by female performers portraying everyday events. The performances soon caught the attention of the authorities as many of the performers were also available for prostitution and they banned the art-form fifteen years after it was created. To flaunt the ban, Kabuki was reinvented with all-male performers. An emphasis on drama rather than dance emerged and, as in European theatre at the time, young men played female roles. As before, the male performers were also available for sex.

By 1673, Kabuki had become a popular art-form in Japan and the form began to be refined and solidified. Set character types were given specific names so as to be instantly recognisable to the audience and actors wore exaggerated, full-face make-up to aid recognition. (This echoes what was happening in other world theatre at the time such as the Italian Commedia dell'arte, which also had stock characters who were the precursors to Punch and Judy). Traditional Japanese Bunraku puppetry emerged from Kabuki and the two forms still influence each other today. Special playhouses were built with walkways projecting from the stage through the audience (like catwalks) which brought the drama closer to the spectators. Later, trapdoors were incorporated and sometimes whole sections of the stage could be raised to reveal scenes already in progress allowing for a fluidity of action.

Like any traditional theatrical form (including Ancient Greek theatre), Kabuki contains conventions which are formalised and stylised and Ruhl's chosen form of expression is influenced to greater a degree by these cross-cultural legacies than most contemporary plays.

Ruhl is one of a vanguard of contemporary playwrights who are returning to a more theatrical, episodic form of theatre. In the twentieth century, American theatre was dominated by realistic drama, starting in the 1920-30s with Eugene O'Neill [1888-1953], through the 1940s and 50s with Tennessee Williams [1911-1983] and Arthur Miller [1915-2005], the 1960s with Edward Albee [1928-] and the 1970s with David Mamet [1947-]. These artists each identified their own way of adding theatricality to naturalism, stamping their plays with stylistic nuances which marked out their excellence. Williams incorporated expressionistic elements into his work to heighten the drama - the sound effect of the tram passing by the house in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), for example, illustrating the threat of Stanley's sexual

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proress towards Blanche. Mamet's dialogue meanwhile, is more contracted and less poetic than that of O'Neill, Williams and Miller. By distilling the sentence to its essence, he suggests the psychological undertones of his characters' thoughts and motivations, implied through their absence. Ruhl and her contemporaries are rejecting this naturalistic approach by revelling in the heightened dialogue which had been a fundamental aspect of theatre in previous centuries. Theatre is once again becoming the chosen form to tell stories about places and people who are far removed from the audiences' everyday lives, where events can be supernatural and magical. The playwright's aim is to lift their audiences to a higher plane, forcing them to contemplate the contemporary world by observing a removed time and place - captured in a heightened form - with greater clarity. Ruhl's work is an innovative return to a classic form and therefore feels both familiar and remote. For this reason, audiences find her plays exciting and challenging to watch, and academics struggle to deconstruct and categorise them.

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