



American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century



Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

I Fernández-Caparrós – 979-10-231-1798-1

SORBONNE UNIVERSITÉ PRESSES

If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of “dramaturgy” as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright’s viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

Julie Vatain-Corffdir (ed.)

American dramaturgies for the 21st Century

SORBONNE UNIVERSITÉ PRESSES
Paris

Ouvrage publié avec le concours de Sorbonne Université,
du PRITEPS, de l'Initiative Théâtre et de VALE



Les SUP sont un service général de la faculté des lettres de Sorbonne Université

© Sorbonne Université Presses, 2021

PDF complet – 979-10-231-1793-6

ePub – 979-10-231-1808-7

ISBN DES TIRÉS À PART EN PDF :

Foreword – 979-10-231-1794-3

I Robinson – 979-10-231-1795-0

I Sidiropoulou – 979-10-231-1796-7

I Maxwell & Jouve – 979-10-231-1797-4

I Fernández-Caparrós – 979-10-231-1798-1

II Lee & Vatain-Corfdir – 979-10-231-1799-8

II Davies – 979-10-231-1800-1

II Rigaud – 979-10-231-1801-8

II Willis – 979-10-231-1802-5

II Vasak – 979-10-231-1803-2

III Monot – 979-10-231-1804-9

III Benea – 979-10-231-1805-6

III Sigal – 979-10-231-1806-3

III Anderson, Hines & Haley – 979-10-231-1807-0

Couverture : Michaël BOSQUIER

Maquette et mise en page : 3d2s (Paris)/Emmanuel Marc DUBOIS (Issigeac)

SUP

Maison de la Recherche

Sorbonne Université

28, rue Serpente

75006 Paris

tél. : (33) (0)1 53 10 57 60

sup@sorbonne-universite.fr

<https://sup.sorbonne-universite.fr>

PART I

**Realism Deposed,
Reclaimed and Exposed**

Ana Fernández-Caparrós
Universitat de València

SARAH RUHL'S EMBRACE OF ITALO CALVINO'S LESSONS ON LIGHTNESS

Lightness is a literary virtue that more often than not needs to be defended and made a case for.¹ This is, at least, what Sarah Ruhl claims in her short essay “Calvino and Lightness”, where she suggests that a “suspicion that lightness is not deeply serious (but instead whimsical) still pervades aesthetic discourse.”² As Scott Bede explains, both lightness and weight are slippery categories that reflect transhistorical and transcultural aesthetic values found in all forms of literature at all times, privileged at certain historical and cultural junctures and underprivileged at others.³ Thus, while in the Western tradition lightness has often been undervalued “and the term itself used pejoratively or, at best, apologetically”, this was not always the case. During the eighteenth century, Bede asserts, “the characteristics we tend to associate with light literature (spontaneity, superficiality, implausibility etc.) were all highly regarded within dominant culture.”⁴ Yet, with the rise of realism in the nineteenth century and its often serious and solemn treatment of everyday reality, we witness a return to the appreciation of gravity and weight whose influence can still be felt. In fact, despite the ludic pleasure and the banishment of the divide between high and popular culture enacted by postmodern literature, Bede, like Ruhl, believes that our contemporary understanding of what constitutes light literature is still generally associated with

65

AMERICAN DRAMATURGIES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY • SUP • 2021

- 1 Research for this chapter was conducted at Basel University with the financial aid of a travel grant funded by the Program *Estades curtes en altres universitats i centres d'investigació* (2019) of the *Universitat de València*.
- 2 Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*, New York, Faber and Faber, 2014, p. 36.
- 3 Scott Bede, *On Lightness in World Literature*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 1.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

triviality, frivolity and the kind of pleasurable narratives “that require a minimal degree of effort to read” and do “whatever it takes to keep us turning the pages.”⁵

It is, precisely, against this perception of lightness as a flawed quality related to inconsequentiality that Italo Calvino rebelled in the first of his posthumous *Lezioni Americane* (1988), later translated into English as *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.⁶ At the beginning of his essay, Calvino clarifies that, considering the opposition between lightness and weight as divergent literary values and tendencies that have competed over the centuries, he decided to uphold the former: not necessarily because the virtues of weight should be any less compelling, but because he had simply “more to say about lightness.”⁷ Nevertheless, were he to choose an auspicious sign for the approach of the new millennium, he would pick the following:

66

[T]he sudden nimble leap of the poet / philosopher who lifts himself against the weight of the world, proving that its heaviness contains the secret of lightness, while what many believe to be the life force of the times—loud and aggressive, roaring and rumbling—belongs to the realm of death, like a graveyard of rusted automobiles.⁸

In this essay I want to argue that, since the turn of the century, the plays of Sarah Ruhl, who “wanted desperately to become a poet before [she] discovered playwriting”⁹ might be regarded as the timely and felicitous creations of such a nimble poet philosopher envisioned by Calvino.¹⁰ With a rare delicacy of spirit that is nonetheless brazenly affirmed, Ruhl summons worlds on stage that, for all their material actuality

5 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

6 In June 1984, Calvino was invited by Harvard University to give the Charles Eliot Norton poetry lectures, scheduled for the academic year 1985-1986. By January 1985 he had already defined his topic and by September, the time of his scheduled departure for Massachusetts, he had written five of the lectures on the topics of Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility and Multiplicity. As he passed away before travelling and writing the sixth talk on Constancy, the manuscripts for his completed talks were published posthumously.

7 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, London, Penguin, 2016, p. 3.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

9 Sarah Ruhl and Max Ritvo, *Letters from Max: A Book of Friendship*, Minneapolis, Milkweed Editions, 2018, p. 20.

10 Ruhl is also a writer of poetry, but she has confessed to having seldom shared her poems with others, keeping them private for years. She had a now out-of-print booklet of early confessional poems published by a small Chicago press in 1995. Only recently, as a pleasant outcome of her friendship with the late poet Max Ritvo, some of her poems have been published as part of their four-year correspondence and in February 2020 Ruhl launched a new poetry book titled *44 Poems for You* published by Copper Canyon Press.

and consistency, create meaning through images, gestures and an economy of verbal fabric that feel both contemplative and weightless. In them, the characters' pursuit of momentary lack of gravity, far from being "an escape from the serious business of engaging with the world and being human"¹¹ generally associated with lightness, is intimately related, on the contrary, with a very serious engagement with what defines us as human beings: our own mortality.

While Ruhl has openly declared her admiration for Calvino's expanded concept of a "thoughtful lightness"¹² and embraced it as a "philosophical choice,"¹³ lightness remains a complex and challenging concept whose translation into a dramaturgical vision still deserves critical scrutiny. In 2008, as Ruhl showed theater critic John Lahr her copy of Calvino's book, she told him that: "Lightness isn't stupidity... It's actually a philosophical and aesthetic viewpoint, deeply serious, and has a kind of wisdom—stepping back to be able to laugh at horrible things even as you're experiencing them."¹⁴ Since then, lightness has become a common trope in the critical vocabulary used to describe—yet no so much to analyze—Ruhl's dramatic *oeuvre* in the scholarly articles, book chapters and books that, in the second decade of the 21st century, have proclaimed her one of the most outstanding American playwrights of the new millennium.¹⁵ Lahr suggested in his *New Yorker* essay that "Lightness—the distillation of things into a quick, terse, almost innocent directness—is a value on which Ruhl puts much weight" and that Ruhl's "stoical comic posture is a means of killing gravity, of taking the heaviness out of her words in order to better contend with life."¹⁶ In their monographs, both James Al-Shamma (2011) and Amy Muse (2018) have subsequently resorted to lightness as described by Calvino to interpret Ruhl's unique style in the

11 Simon Murray, "Embracing Lightness: Dispositions, Corporealities and Metaphors in Contemporary Theatre and Performance," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2013, p. 207.

12 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

13 Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

14 John Lahr, "Surreal Life," *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2008.

15 Leslie Atkins Durham, *Women's Voices on American Stages in the Early Twenty-First Century: Sarah Ruhl and her Contemporaries*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 4. According to Durham, Sarah Ruhl dominated the American stage in the first decade of the 21st century, having twelve premiere productions in as many years. Ruhl was as prolific in the past decade as in the previous one but it is rather the increasing scholarship on her work that confirms her status as a leading contemporary playwright, with two monographs devoted to her work and a third volume (Durham 2013) structured around her plays.

16 John Lahr, "Surreal Life," *art. cit.*

theater.¹⁷ However, James Butler's essay—included in Muse's book—is the only critical text to date that specifically addresses the subject at hand.¹⁸

For all its wide recognition, the concept of lightness as a fitting and relevant critical concept to approach the theatrical aesthetics of Sarah Ruhl across her career should be further investigated to shed light on: how it emerges on stage materially (visually, and aurally); and how it functions as a flexible poetic frame that interlaces with other motifs defining the playwright's theatrical style. I want to suggest, in fact, that lightness in Ruhl's dramatic worlds is inseparable from the notion of transformation and that it is thus, ultimately, a transformative quality. To do so, I will engage in dialogue with Calvino's text and other scholars who have studied lightness as a literary value; with scholarship on Ruhl's work; and with Ruhl's own essays. Making a gentle leap upward like a bird, I will then hover over scenes from selected plays with the aim of understanding and assessing how their theatrical nimbleness is created and conveyed.

68

THE LINGUISTIC SHAPING OF FLEETING LIGHTNESS

Calvino's seminal lecture on lightness is wide-ranging and eclectic: the author navigates swiftly from Greek mythology to Latin poetry, from medieval literature to eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers, in order to illustrate his ideal of lightness and locate this quality in the past and project it into the future. Several insights emerge through allusions to Perseus's killing of the Medusa; to Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; to Boccaccio's portrayal of Florentine poet Guido Cavalcanti in the *Decameron* and to the latter's poetry; to Cyrano de Bergerac, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, and Miguel de Cervantes among others. As film writer Richard Raskin has aptly summarized, for Calvino, lightness is identified "with such properties as mobility, agility of spirit, knowledge of the world, subtlety, the precariousness of things as they are, levitation and freedom" while, correspondingly, "heaviness is linked to inertia, opacity, petrification, sluggishness, density, solidity and the crushing of life."¹⁹ What becomes clear from Calvino's essay, in any case, is that

17 James Al-Shamma, *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of her Plays*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2011 (see especially p. 6, and pp. 81-83); Amy Muse, *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl*, London, Methuen, 2018.

18 Thomas Butler, "From Pontius Pilate to Peter Pan: Lightness in the Plays of Sarah Ruhl," in Amy Muse, *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl*, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-163.

19 Richard Raskin, "Italo Calvino and Inevitability in Storytelling," *Danish Journal of Film Studies*, December 18, 2004, p. 104.

neither of these qualities emerges from the application of a fixed set of rules, strategies or instructions. Instead, they should be thought of as flexible dispositions that occupy the terrain of language, of thought and the emblematic nature of the visual. On the other hand, as Scott Murray notes, lightness is not necessarily generated by the content of the narrative “so much as [by] its attitude toward the content, its style of being, its tone.”²⁰

In Ruhl's dramatic writing, we can perceive a lightening of language that acquires a rarefied consistency; a fearlessness of intellectual ideas, of abstraction, even “of the soul;”²¹ and the visual impress of weightlessness in scenically spare, stylized, and limpid sets with limited and often abstracted props. Given the complexity of the theatrical medium, which solicits more than one sense, distilled sensory impressions of lightness can emerge through the simultaneous combination and synesthetic perception of spatial, visual, aural and kinetic elements. Oftentimes, however, lightness emerges fleetingly and momentarily, and images of lightness mutate and transform: they are never static. In the dramatic dialogue of *Eurydice* (2003)—Ruhl's personal, re-focalized revision of the classic Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice—we find a revealing instance of a conceit, molded linguistically at first to delicately express lightness, only to be then transformed and made much heavier in the second movement. In the play's first scene, Orpheus, having told his lover he has made up a song in twelve parts for her, is asked by Eurydice where he is going to find the different instruments. So with a gentle, airy conceit, he transmutes his beloved into the perfect carrier for his music:

ORPHEUS – I'm going to make each strand of your hair into an instrument. Your hair will stand on end as it plays my music and become a hair orchestra. It will fly you up into the sky.

EURYDICE – I don't know if I want to be an instrument.

ORPHEUS – Why?

EURYDICE – Won't I fall down when the song ends?

ORPHEUS – That's true. But the clouds will be so moved by your music that they will fill up with water until they become heavy and you'll sit on one and fall gently down to earth. How about that?²²

20 Scott Bede, *On Lightness in World Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

21 Amy Muse, *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

22 Sarah Ruhl, *Eurydice*, in *The Clean House and Other Plays*, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

As Vatain-Corfdir has pointed out, the “strange—and perhaps comical—beauty of the conceit Orpheus uses to unite his love for Eurydice with his love for music” is “highlighted by its very pronunciation.”²³ Indeed, Orpheus’s long musical sentences, patterned by the rising rhythm of iambic feet to convey the sense of a gentle musical ascension, contrast with Eurydice’s short, sharp responses, which not only reveal her skepticism but also resonate as a gloomy foreboding of her imminent fall.

This passage shows how Ruhl seems to have learnt from Calvino that literary lightness is to a great extent derived from a way of seeing the world based on acute attentiveness. Lightness is related “to precision and definition, not the hazy and the haphazard”²⁴, and it then has to be *created* in the writing. In other words, the sense of weightlessness is not necessarily borne by words themselves: it has to be contrived instead through their specific combination and arrangement with other words. Calvino finds an accurate illustration of this by comparing the line “*e bianca neve scender senza venti*,” from a sonnet by Guido Cavalcanti to its latter adaptation by Dante in the *Inferno* (XIV, 30) “*come di neve in alpe senza vento*.” The two lines, though nearly identical because in both “the snow in the absence of wind suggests a gentle silent motion,”²⁵ nonetheless express radically different ways of thinking and conveying opposite qualities. In the first case, weightlessness (expressed by the use of a conjunction, a verb and adjective that together dissolve the landscape in an air of suspended abstraction); in the second, substance and stability (as the specification of place sets up a mountain landscape, and the word *come* encloses the entire scene within the framework of metaphor).²⁶ When, in a similar vein, Ruhl evokes the conceit of the hair orchestra in the second movement of *Eurydice* to transform it into a much denser trope, we soon understand that this mutation is a means to poetically respond to Eurydice’s passing. Although there is no set change, in the second movement of the play the dramatic action moves to the underworld, where Eurydice has to come to terms with her new state of being dead. Meanwhile, Orpheus has to mourn the loss of his wife and he does so, at first, by writing letters to her. After the short love note: “Dear Eurydice, / Symphony for twelve instruments,” in Scene 7, Orpheus describes in a new letter a nightmarish dream where the images (the hair, the clouds, water) used previously to create aerial lightness have been soaked and transmuted by aquatic gravity, now a symbol of death:

23 Julie Vatain-Corfdir, “[Music as Metaphor for the Interpretation of a Play: Examples from Sarah Ruhl’s Theater](#)”, *Revue française d’études américaines*, no. 153, 2017/4, p. 123.

24 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

26 *Ibid.*

Dear Eurydice,

Last night I dreamed that we climbed Mount Olympus and we started to make love and all the strands of your hair were little faucets and water was streaming out of your hair and I said, why is water coming out of your hair? And you said gravity is very compelling. And then we jumped off Mount Olympus and flew through the clouds and you held your knee to your chest because you skinned it on a sharp cloud and then we fell into a salty lake. Then I woke up and the window frightened me and I thought: Eurydice is dead.²⁷

The use of a paratactic structure and the avoidance of pauses are the main linguistic means Ruhl uses in this passage to convey the sense of heaviness felt in nightmares. Yet it is the recurrence of the transformed conceit that must be seen as an instance of the peculiar and complex way in which lightness can be created but also contested and transformed: in this case, when it intertwines with water, which, as James Al-Shamma has pointed out, “is frequently associated with grieving in the play.”²⁸

An awareness of Ruhl’s clear-cut weaving of fluid tropes draws attention to the way in which lightness and heaviness are forged linguistically, and expressed in dramatic dialogue with precision and definition. Beyond this acute attentiveness, the visual arrangement of words on the page in the published editions of Ruhl’s plays elicits an immediate sense of weightlessness. Dialogue, be it in prose or in verse, is always condensed, then distilled in Ruhl’s works. After four decades of writing fiction, Italo Calvino understood that his method for achieving lightness had entailed the subtraction of weight from “human figures, from celestial bodies, from cities” although, above all, he had tried “to remove weight from the structure of the story and from language.”²⁹ So seems to be the case in the drama of Sarah Ruhl, who removes weight from dramatic dialogue by having her characters speak short, straightforward, simple sentences; and provides audiences with minimum backstory and explanations. The beginning of scene two of *The Oldest Boy* (2014) illustrates these inclinations. Ruhl’s use of Dickinsonian dashes is yet another typographic choice that bespeaks a clear poetic influence in the shaping of condensed dramatic speech:

27 Sarah Ruhl, *Eurydice*, *op. cit.*, p. 371-372.

28 James Al-Shamma, *Sarah Ruhl*, *op. cit.*, p. 24. For an extended critical reading of Eurydice’s mythic revision see also: Ana Fernández-Caparrós, “Otherworldly Transitions and Transformative Identities in Sarah Ruhl’s *Eurydice* (2003),” in Laura Monrós (ed.), *(Re)Thinking Literary Identities: Great Britain, Europe And Beyond*, València, PUV, 2017, pp. 119-133.

29 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

MOTHER – We met—

FATHER – How did we meet?

MOTHER – He was supposed to marry another woman.

FATHER – An arranged marriage.

MOTHER – I walked into this restaurant. I was in despair—coming from a funeral in the rain—my teacher had just died—I couldn't write, I couldn't read, I couldn't finish my thesis—

FATHER – A crisis of faith? She was beautiful.³⁰

72 Unlike Annie Baker's meticulous and hyperrealist on-stage recreation of ordinary speech and small talk—which brings forth an uncommon awareness of how people speak their minds but also, crucially, of how they fail to do so, as all the hesitations, false starts and interjections show—Ruhl's opposite method is to eliminate all that true-to-life filler material. On the other hand, as she told John Lahr, she likes plays that have “revelations in the moment, where emotions transform almost inexplicably.”³¹ The sense of astonishment, strangeness, mystery, and surprise that arises from these momentary revelations depends greatly on rejecting the burdensome psychological exposition characteristic of realist plays and, in no less degree, on lightening the scenic load.

VISUAL LIGHTNESS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SPACE

Lightening the world of the stage should be thought of as a multilayered process. Thus, for all the importance of the stark, precise and poetic linguistic minimalism of Ruhl's dramatic speech, the first sensory impression of lightness we get as spectators emerges spatially—through the confrontation with a stage stripped of weighty material density, and whose scenic writing is an invitation to contemplate theatrical worlds that are often more suggestive than mimetic.³² In terms of scenic illusion, Ruhl's dramatic works clearly belong to the tradition of what Bert O. States calls the “postrealistic stage,”³³ which

30 Sarah Ruhl, *The Oldest Boy: A Play in Three Ceremonies*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016, p. 7.

31 John Lahr, “Surreal Life,” art. cit.

32 Arnold Aronson describes scenic writing, or scenography, as the “all-encompassing visual-spatial construct as well as the process of change and transformation that is an inherent part of the physical vocabulary of the stage.” Arnold Aronson, *Looking Into the Abyss: Essays in Scenography*, Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 2005, p. 7.

33 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1985, p. 71.

defiantly resists the “gravitational pull of naturalism,”³⁴ with its inevitable bonding of scenery and character, environment and psychology. Both visually and dramaturgically, Ruhl often avoids having the stage cluttered with objects characteristic of the realist tradition and the confinement of action to a single locale, as these create the effect of an unchangeable world and the impression that there is an inevitable connection “between the theatrically given, or allowable, space and the destinies to be worked out in it.”³⁵ Her plays, whose set descriptions are very spare, call for minimalist and fluid scenic designs instead. Hence, they stand in clear visual opposition, for instance, to the spaces overloaded with objects, and populated by men paralyzed by identity crises, which a previous generation of playwrights devised in its fiery exploration of wounded American masculinities. Don Dubrow’s junk shop in Mamet’s *American Buffalo* (1974) or Lee and Austin’s vandalization of their mother’s suburban kitchen at the end of Shepard’s *True West* (1980) can be seen as paradigmatic visual instances of a material density of theatrical settings where male characters, either driven by uncontrollable violence or paralyzed by powerlessness and inertia, remain trapped by the bulk of a junkscape of objects reflecting “the commercialized surfaces and fragmentary substances of an American culture weighted down with material icons.”³⁶ For Ruhl, on the contrary, reducing the material density of the stage is paramount, thus clearing the way to a phenomenological perception of the stage world and altering, at a stroke, our customary orientation with regards to time and space. How to make room to make visible the invisible, how to open up the space to accommodate a search for the metaphysical, allowing for fluid movement between realms—life and the afterlife, the real and the imagined?

In Ruhl’s plays, set descriptions are naturally, like dramatic speech, utterly minimalistic. In *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* (2007), for instance, the set is described as a list of four elements:

- 1) a moveable dining room table and chairs
- 2) a moveable table café
- 3) a cell phone
- 4) light.³⁷

34 Christopher Bigsby, *Twenty-First Century American Playwrights*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2017, p. 67.

35 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

36 Stanton Garner, “Staging ‘Things’: Realism and the Theatrical Object in Shepard’s Theater,” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1998, pp. 55–66.

37 Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2008, p. 4.

The functionality of stage props, their mobility and diminutive size (a *cell* phone) are as telling as the starkness of their selection. The minimalist description on the page clearly reinforces the idea of lightness. However, sketching out a set reduced to its bare minimum and avoiding superfluous embellishment does not diminish the potential for imaginative and poetic design. As set designer Ola Kraszpulska suggests, “[what] is typical of Ruhl’s plays is that the devices required do not call for money, they call for creativity.”³⁸ The last element in this list, “light,” prompts in fact several readings and potential uses, and it can certainly be interpreted as more than a lighting cue—it is in fact a statement of what the stage world should look like. In other plays, such as *Melancholy Play* (2002), Ruhl gives specific hints about how to suggest location creatively, with simple props: “Many scenes can be played on the same chaise, without creating confusion about where we are. The hair salon may be established with a stool; the tailor shop with a mannequin or the act of sewing;” as for the windows that actors use to gaze out, they “may be moveable or not; they may even be created with light. But they should be old-fashioned and beautiful. And they should frame, rather than obstruct, the actors.”³⁹ Set descriptions, like stage directions, are explicit, yet, at the same time, as Vatain-Corfdir points out, “dreamily indeterminate [...]. The focus is on the achievement of an aesthetic effect, not on realistic ways to attain it.”⁴⁰ Not that the playwright disregards scenic illusion, but as she clarifies in *The Clean House* (2004), a play set in that quintessentially realistic locale, the living room, “the space should transform and surprise.”⁴¹ Here, once again, the set is scantily delineated:

A white living room.

White couch, white vase, white lamp, white rug.

*A balcony.*⁴²

The luminous lightness that the whiteness of Lane’s house projects in this dramatic comedy is essential to visually and symbolically project the ideas of purity, cleanness, immaculateness, safety, brilliance, sterility and perfection that are contested and seen to

38 Ola Kraszpulska, “Visual Explorations of Metaphysical Ideas in the Works of Sarah Ruhl,” in Miriam López-Rodríguez et al. (eds), *Old Stories, New Readings: The Transforming Power of American Drama*, Newcastle Upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2015, p. 217.

39 Sarah Ruhl, *Melancholy Play*, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

40 Julie Vatain-Corfdir, “Music as Metaphor for the Interpretation of a Play,” *art.cit.*, p. 117.

41 Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House*, in *The Clean House and Other Plays*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2006, p. 8.

42 Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

evolve throughout the play. And, equally importantly, to allow for the transformation of space indicated at the opening of Act 2:

The white living room has become a hospital.

Or the idea of a hospital.

*There is a balcony above the white living room.*⁴³

Ruhl has confessed to having been particularly impressed by the Goodman's theater production of *The Clean House* directed by Jessica Thebus in 2006. There, stage designer Todd Rosenthal's response to the author's indications was to have a beautiful blue sky above an architectural, spare living room in the first act, and then to have a balcony suddenly appear, supported by a cantilever. In Ruhl's words: "It was so shocking—you wouldn't think that it could just come out of the air like that. The designer completely understood abstraction and transformation of space."⁴⁴

This sudden apparition of the balcony—locating the impetuous romance of Charles (Lane's husband) and Ana (the Argentinian woman he madly fell in love with while doing surgery on her) in reimagined Shakespearian fashion—is just one of many instances of Ruhl's bias for the sudden, imaginative transformation of theatrical space. The latter has often been labeled whimsical by reviewers of her plays. One might assume that these unexpected, lighthearted transformations are merely decorative, and thus dispensable. I want to suggest that they are, on the contrary, one of Ruhl's most effective strategies to visually and symbolically enhance the bond between lightness and transformation. Furniture and props *per se* do not enact transformations: characters are the ones who change, and pursue agency. Nonetheless, Ruhl often envisages a transformation of space to accommodate and to reflect these changes, visually and symbolically. In the case of the balcony, it places the new lovers above ground, thus underscoring the feeling of elevation of being head over heels in love. It also spatially forces Lane to have a relationship with them against her will and eventually to forgive them. In *Eurydice*, where live and dead characters coexist on stage throughout the play, the lightest of props, love letters, are made to travel in order to overcome the divide between worlds: thus, the letters that are dropped to the floor as if into (invisible) mail slots reach their addressee, Eurydice, across worlds and in both directions.⁴⁵

43 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

44 Paula Vogel, "Sarah Ruhl," *BOMB*, no. 99, Spring 2007.

45 In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, likewise, the phone is a transcendent prop that grants passage to another world. For an extended discussion, see Ana Fernández-Caparrós, "Death and the Community of Comic Romance: Sarah Ruhl's Poetics of Transformation in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 25, no. 4, October 2015, pp. 488-501.

Even lighter than letters is falling snow, which Ruhl has turned into a recurrent image of lightness in her plays. At the very end of *In The Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)* (2009), a “domestic space that seemed terribly permanent—a settee, a statuette—... suddenly disappears and we are in a sweet small winter garden. Snow covers trees that in the spring flower with pink flowers.”⁴⁶ In *The Clean House*, Charles leaves near the end of the play with the preposterous plan of chopping a yew tree that could cure his lover’s breast cancer, later to be seen crossing the stage in the distance, wearing a heavy parka and carrying a pick axe, while snow is falling on the balcony. In *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, on the other hand, stage directions indicate that, when Jean and Dwight kiss for the first time at the end of the first act, “embossed stationary moves through the air slowly, like a snow parade,” while light is falling on the slow-moving lanterns and houses made of embossed paper, and on Jean and Dwight, “who are also falling.”⁴⁷ In all these scenes the snow, or snow-like props, convey a wonderful sense of weightlessness that can pull the audience out of the fourth-wall reality in different ways. In *In the Next Room*, set transformation occurs when “the artificial construction of the home is revealed at the same time that the void love triangle that supported it is subverted.”⁴⁸ In other words, it is only once the domestic space is deconstructed that it is gently transformed, in a visionary way, so as to enhance the naked beauty of an unprecedented, intimate encounter between Mr. and Mrs. Givings. As for the snow falling in the second act of *The Clean House*, as Kraszpulska notes, designers and directors alike will have to make the choice and define what snow is in this play: “Is it a collection of white flurries fluttering in the air? Is it a physical obstacle hindering Charles’ journey? Or are they a visual representation of his reality in the state of hope, in the state of denial?”⁴⁹ There are no right or wrong answers.

I do however agree with Thomas Butler, who writes that these exquisitely realized moments, when space embraces characters in a stunningly unpredictable way, convey the “elusive joyful and playful vitality that distinguishes Ruhl’s drama from the work of other contemporary writers.”⁵⁰ They enhance a sudden feeling of lightness that is perceived as such, it must be stressed, not solely due to weightless stage crafting but also,

46 Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2010, p. 142.

47 Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, *op.cit.*, p. 56.

48 Noelia Hernando-Real, “Love Triangles and Triangular Loves: A Home for Three in Sarah Ruhl’s *In the Next Room or the Vibrator Play*, in Miriam López-Rodríguez et al (eds.), *Old Stories, New Readings*, *op.cit.*, p. 244.

49 Ola Kraszpulska, “Visual Explorations of Metaphysical Ideas in the Works of Sarah Ruhl,” *art.cit.*, p. 215.

50 Thomas Butler, “From Pontius Pilate to Peter Pan,” *art.cit.*, p. 155.

and crucially, because these moments of lightness emerge amidst an ongoing process of change or because they follow the characters' previous confrontation with the burden of living, or with the burden of dying, as in *Eurydice*. In the second movement of this play, entirely set in Hades, a sense of lightness emerges through the domestication of the wide, hostile, foreign space of the world of the dead, which becomes more earthly and homely. The whole act dramatizes and explores Eurydice's process of coming to terms with her new ontological state, which she does with the help of a man, her unrecognized father, whom she at first believes to be a hotel porter. Eurydice is very disappointed when she hears that there are no rooms because people do not sleep in the strange place she suddenly finds herself in. The room made of string that the father then slowly builds for his upset daughter in scene 3 inevitably has fragile and precarious foundations. Yet, it is a visual and symbolic triumph of lightness on stage: for all its lightweight structure; its humbleness; its smallness; and the invisibility of walls that are just hinted at, it provides the sense of shelter that any place called home can bring. As a delicate attempt to mitigate the harshness of hostile surroundings, it gently enacts a small transformation that will ease the relationship between characters and increase their trust in each other.

One needs time to unmoor oneself from the burdens of the past or sudden pain, inasmuch as one needs time to change and be transformed. Lightness is a "difficulty," Ruhl stated, "you cannot, after all, get something airborne on a mere whim, no—it requires careful patience and some physics to get a plane in the air."⁵¹ In her plays, the pursuit of moments of theatrical lightness thus functions as "an interpretation of the heaviness that seeks to free heaviness of its stasis and to present an opening whereby it could transform," according to Thomas Butler.⁵² In other words, it is a tactic related to the willingness to confront and accept loss, pain, grief, melancholy or marriage problems, rather than to avoid them; and one making room for possibility.

TEMPERING REALITY WITH STRANGENESS, EMOTION AND HUMOR

An openness to possibility stands at the very core of Ruhl's understanding of lightness as a multifaceted process of *tempering*. In her 2014 essay, "Calvino and Lightness," she wrote:

51 Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays*, *op. cit.* p. 36.

52 Thomas Butler, "From Pontius Pilate to Peter Pan," *art. cit.*, p. 157.

But what if lightness is a philosophical choice to temper reality with strangeness, to temper the intellect with emotion, and to temper emotion with humor. Lightness is then a philosophical victory over heaviness. A reckoning with the humble and the small and the invisible.⁵³

78 While Ruhl has adopted Calvino's lessons to remove weight from language, and extended them to the spatial and visual vocabulary of the stage, her distilled defense of lightness further proposes elements that contribute to its emergence, and that shape her signature style into the creation of a contemporary theater of lightness. The way Ruhl phrases her short definition is crucial: conceiving the search for lightness as a philosophical endeavor suggests an abstract, rational and methodical consideration of reality and existence, a path towards understanding, wisdom and truth. Moreover, an inherent openness to possibility ("what if") turns it into a flexible conceptual and poetic frame, rather than a fixed and well-defined discipline. In spite of the typical openness of any philosophical pursuit, lightness is then associated with a very specific aesthetic project whose end is the tempering of reality, intellect and emotion. The author identifies three interwoven elements—strangeness, emotion and humor—that should guarantee the desired mitigation of the heaviness of experience. Interestingly enough, Ruhl does not refer to the process of weight subtraction she actually endorses: instead, she uses the verb "temper" no less than three times. To "temper" means to soften or to make less severe, "to reduce to the suitable or desirable (middle) degree or condition free from excess in either direction; to moderate, mitigate, assuage, tone down."⁵⁴ This linguistic choice might be a way of stressing the fact that the burdens of reality are not to be negated, but aesthetically "assuaged" to open up a gentler confrontation with them.

From her early plays on, Ruhl has showed an uncommon interest in exploring death, grief, mourning and loss. This was closely linked to personal events, for her father died of cancer when she was twenty. *Eurydice* is the play where the weight of Ruhl's personal bereavement emerges in the most conspicuous way, as she has declared that, beyond her interest in the classic myth itself, she was also motivated by the possibility of having, on stage, one more conversation with her deceased father. By adding the character of the Father in the underworld as a surrogate for her own, Ruhl could eulogize him. But hers was a sophisticated transmutation of personal loss into a theatrical form that reached broad audiences, due to its engagement with bereavement at a time when intimate grief

53 Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

54 "temper, v.," *OED Online*, Oxford UP, December 2019.

was shunted aside as embarrassing, strange, or even pathological.⁵⁵ Ruhl would further engage with mortality in subsequent plays such as *The Clean House*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, and, more recently, *For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday* (2016)—or with other kinds of life-altering losses, such as having to renounce the conventional upbringing of a son whom one needs to let go, as in *The Oldest Boy*. All these plays explore, in diverse ways, the redefinition of self and community forged by the leaving of the Other, the need for the world to be re-made, or the willingness “to have a relationship with death” rather than a relationship with illness, as the character of Ana in *The Clean House* demands.⁵⁶ The representation of death should be understood as a complex cultural construct which “also remains beyond the limits of intelligibility.”⁵⁷ Ruhl’s plays show, nonetheless, a fierce desire to go beyond those invisible limits and to rely on the very liminality of theater to actually represent and cross boundaries. Even though the stark landscape of the afterlife is only visible in *Eurydice*, life after death is a common preoccupation for Ruhl: sometimes ordinary ghosts are seen engaging in mundane activities around the stage, such as George in *For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday*, who is seen with his dog, eating grapefruit and Chex party mix, unbeknownst to his daughters and sons. Or sometimes dead characters are given the chance to explain what being dead is like: “the atmosphere smells. And there are high-pitched noises—like a teakettle always boiling over. But it doesn’t seem to bother anyone. And for the most part there is a pleasant atmosphere and you can work and socialize,” says the Father in *Eurydice*.⁵⁸ In other plays, live characters express how they imagine heaven or the afterlife. In *The Clean House* for instance, Ana says she thought she would meet her husband in some kind of afterlife with fabulous green and blue rocks. In contrast, in *For Peter Pan...*, the

55 *Eurydice* was amongst the ten most-produced plays across the member theatres of TCG in the 2008-2009 season (American Theatre Editors, “[The Top Ten Most-Produced Plays: 1994-2014](#),” *American Theatre*, September 23, 2014). Its success challenges and problematizes the institutional call, after 9/11, to conceive grieving as something to be feared or to be quickly dispensed with in order to move on. Ten days after the terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush announced that Americans had finished grieving and it was time for resolute action to take the place of grief. Yet, the need to cope with a terrible loss—and with the fact that US boundaries had been breached with unprecedented violence; that a terrible toll on human life was taken; and that a War on Terrorism was called forth—far from being over, would linger on for years to come. Grief and mourning would become eloquent, ubiquitous and complex tropes of resistance across American literature and the arts in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

56 Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

57 Lisa Perdigo and Mark Pizzato (eds), *Death in American Texts and Performances: Corpses, Ghosts, and the Reanimated Dead*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 1-2.

58 Sarah Ruhl, *Eurydice*, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

characters' mother is reported not to believe in heaven at all, as it would be too heavy and "all the bodies would fall down," while Peter Pan, as performed by Ann, when asked what being dead was like and whether consciousness persisted, simply says: "It was flying! It was wonderful!"⁵⁹

80

This recurrent grappling with and questioning of (im)permanence should be seen as having profoundly shaped Ruhl's singular embrace of a transformative lightness. The latter becomes, in the theatre, at once a philosophical search and a strategy to prevent the weight of matter from burdening the characters. It is fully enacted when lightness makes room, spatially, emotionally, epistemologically, and spiritually, for change and transformation. It could be argued, firstly, that an engagement with transformation might be intimately related to the process of mourning in the plays that overtly explore finitude and loss because, as Judith Butler propounds, "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance."⁶⁰ The playwright's commitment to a process of transformation that allows us to "recognize impermanence, to see self as an illusion, [and] to grapple with leave-taking" leads, she believes, to the restoration of a ritual function of the theater as a "preparation for death" in a secularized society.⁶¹ This engagement does not, however, make Ruhl's drama necessarily downhearted, gloomy or fatalistic. The playwright claims that a complex blending of strangeness, emotion and humor can temper too intellectual or too emotional a representation of reality. But does Ruhl actually deploy such a technique in her pursuit of theatrical lightness?

A closer look at *Dead Man's Cell Phone's* scenic and linguistic minimalism can be illuminating. The play is described as being "full of silence and empty space."⁶² Along with *Eurydice*, it is Ruhl's most intense and thorough exploration of death and mourning, since both of them follow their protagonists to the afterlife. Open, unobstructed theatrical spaces allow for the blurring of boundaries and the connection between realms. The sense of spatial eeriness and strangeness is more conspicuous in these plays than in others, perhaps because of their direct engagement with death and its aftermath. Skeletal scenic elements suggest places, yet with a feeble sense of solidity.

59 Sarah Ruhl, *For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2018, p. 44 and p. 90.

60 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London, New York, Verso, 2004.

61 Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

62 *Id.*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

This does not mean, however, that the on-stage world should not be grounded in everyday experience. Reality is (re)presented, only to be tempered: while spectators are allowed to perceive a recognizable material world, objects, characters, and the language spoken on stage are, in Shklovskian fashion, simultaneously released from the automatism of perception. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, this is perceptible from the very first scene. The play opens on an “almost empty café” where we see Jean, who is described as having “an insular quality, as though she doesn’t want to take up space,” and a man sitting with his back to the audience, whose cell phone annoyingly rings without being answered.⁶³ Much of the scene’s strangeness derives not so much from the fact that Gordon has just passed away and his phone keeps ringing, but from the fact that he and Jean are utterly alone in a supposedly public space. When Jean uses the dead man’s phone to dial 911, she says they are “on the corner of Green and Goethe. (*Pronounced Go-thee*)” though: “There seems to be no one working at this café.”⁶⁴ In a play visually inspired by the solitary figures in Edward Hopper’s paintings, Jean and Gordon’s first encounter is lightened in terms of scenery and highly defamiliarized, to increase its quasi-liminality. This prefigures the characters’ ensuing encounter in the afterlife in scene five of Part Two, where stage directions indicate precisely that Jean and Gordon are “*sitting at a café. As if we are at the top of the play.*”⁶⁵ The whole construction of the scene shows that the search for spatial, visual and aural lightness is not a refusal to engage with such a grave matter as someone’s death, but a conscious attempt to mitigate the force of the void left behind. Ruhl crafts it, beyond scenic design, through her peculiar blending of strangeness, emotion and humor: counterpointing the heaviness of a scene full of silence—so that even Jean wonders how Gordon died “so quietly”—with the insistent ringing of the phone that Jean keeps answering as if it were hers, or as if she knew the stranger in front of her. Because of their quirkiness, her bizarre, sentimental reaction and the promise made to the dead man (i.e. to stay with him) become unexpectedly humorous and tender. Ruhl has referred to the pleasure she gets from the deceptively simple defamiliarizing device of seeing people “speaking ordinary words in strange places, or people speaking extraordinary words in ordinary places.”⁶⁶ Jean’s words to the dead man at the end of the scene are both ordinary *and* extraordinary, given the situation and this woman’s unforeseen determination to bond with an inanimate body:

63 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

66 John Lahr, “Surreal Life,” art. cit.

Do you want me to keep talking until they get here?
Gordon, I'm Jean.
You don't know me.
But you're going to be just fine.
Well, actually—
Don't worry.⁶⁷

The pursuit of lightness can be a strategy to assuage the heaviness of death as well as the emotional impact of other life-changing experiences. The beginning of the second act of *The Clean House* might provide a further, more cheerful illustration of the intertwining of strangeness, emotion, and humor as capable of eliciting a sense of dramatic lightness in the search for philosophical truth. The strangeness of the sudden switch in the perception of place—derived from transforming Lane's immaculate house into an operating theater—is greatly underscored by the way in which the action unfolds in this refashioned space. In Ruhlian style, the un-parenthetical stage directions that compose the first scene, where no dialogue is spoken, are carefully typeset, restrained, poetic, lyrical and visually imaginative.⁶⁸

I. Charles Performs Surgery on the Woman He Loves

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 a medieval love song in Latin
about being medically cured by love
as he does the surgery.*

*If the actress playing Ana is a good singer,
it would be nice if she recovered from the surgery and slowly sat up and sang a
contrapuntal melody.*

67 Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

68 Ruhl has acknowledged the importance stage directions have as visual language, which equals that of dialogues, in her essay "On standard dramatic formatting" (Sarah Ruhl, *A Hundred Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 199). That is the reason why she avoids treating and presenting them as parenthetical.

*When the surgery is over, Charles takes off Ana's sheet.
Underneath the sheet,
she is dressed in a lovely dress.
They kiss.*⁶⁹

Suggestive formulations as to how to perform the scene can be read as displacing and mitigating the mechanical performance of medical surgery. It is to be performed instead as a series of simply choreographed actions, and to be perceived physically as an act of love, with specific suggestions for the use of songs which do not confine interpretation.⁷⁰ Surprisingly, however, this delicate scene is immediately followed by the startlingly mundane words of Ana to the audience; words she utters while sauntering across the stage “like a man:”

I have avoided doctors my whole life.
I don't like how they smell. I don't like how they talk. I don't admire their emotional lives. I don't like how they walk. They walk very fast to get somewhere—tac tac tac—I am walking somewhere important.⁷¹

This hilarious, absurdly incongruous juxtaposition and the interplay of ordinary words and extra-ordinary gestures, actions and music confirm the suitability of Ruhl's technique as a means to prevent perception from being buried into the grave of custom. And yet, in this example from *The Clean House*, defamiliarization also allows the playwright to have Ana obliquely address the intellectualization of profound emotions through humor—these emotions resulting from having fallen madly in love with her surgeon and from having to accept the gravity of her health condition, belittling it so as to make it more manageable:

But with Charles, it was like—BLAM!
My mind was going: you're a doctor, I hate you!
But the rest of me was gone, walking out the door, with him.
[...]
There are stories of surgeons who leave things inside the body by

69 Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House*, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

70 For an extended discussion and insightful analysis of Ruhl's unique system of emphasis by subdued suggestion and careful pacing through stage directions that tend to function through suggestion by shape, sound and image rather than direct demand, see Julie Vatain-Corfdir, “Music as Metaphor for the Interpretation of a Play,” *art. cit.*, pp. 115-119.

71 Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

mistake:

rubber gloves, sponges, clamps—

But—you know—I think Charles left his soul inside me.

Into the missing place.⁷²

The replacement of a cancerous tumor with a dose of spiritual matter instead of a rubber glove or a clamp should be read as an instance of Ruhl’s “reckoning with the humble, the small and the invisible” that is, for her, a victory over the heaviness of pain. Later on in Act 2 of *The Clean House*, Charles claims that “there are things—big invisible things—that come unannounced—they walk in, and we have to give way.”⁷³ In various ways, the recourse to lightness might be a means to gently help characters and audiences deal with those big invisible things that come unexpectedly—love, death, loss, birth—and prove emotionally overwhelming as they redefine one’s place in the world and one’s relationships with others. As Thomas Butler insists, the bonding of lightness and transformation leads to another aspect of Ruhl’s work: its hopefulness. Hers is not, he claims, the work of an optimist or idealist person: by seeing it in light of Eagleton’s definition of the concept of hope, Butler draws attention to Ruhl’s method of incorporating reality as well as suffering—past and present—into her vision of the future: in this way hope is a commitment to the future and a concomitant acknowledgement of one’s present reality.⁷⁴ Lightness, then, does not deny the givenness of things, but is a means to envisage and channel transformative possibility.

84

72 *Ibid.*

73 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

74 Thomas Butler, “From Pontius Pilate to Peter Pan,” art. cit., p. 158.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AL-SHAMMA, James, *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of her Plays*, Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 2011.
- AMERICAN THEATRE EDITORS, "The Top Ten Most-Produced Plays: 1994-2014", *American Theatre*, September 23, 2014.
- ARONSON, Arnold, *Looking Into the Abyss: Essays in Scenography*, Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 2005.
- BEDE, Scott, *On Lightness in World Literature*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- BIGSBY, Christopher, *Twenty-First Century American Playwrights*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge UP, 2017.
- BUTLER, Judith, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London, New York, Verso, 2004.
- BUTLER, Thomas, "From Pontius Pilate to Peter Pan: Lightness in the Plays of Sarah Ruhl," in Amy Muse, *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl*, London, Methuen, 2018, pp. 155-163.
- CALVINO, Italo, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. George Brock, London, Penguin, 2016.
- DURHAM, Leslie, *Women's Voices on American Stages in the Early Twenty-First Century: Sarah Ruhl and her Contemporaries*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- FERNÁNDEZ-CAPARRÓS, Ana, "Death and the Community of Comic Romance: Sarah Ruhl's Poetics of Transformation in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 25, no. 4, October 2015, pp. 488-501.
- , "Otherworldly Transitions and Transformative Identities in Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* (2003)," in Laura Monrós (ed.), *(Re)Thinking Literary Identities: Great Britain, Europe And Beyond*, València, PUV, 2017, pp. 119-133.
- GARNER, Stanton B., "Staging 'Things': Realism and the Theatrical Object in Shepard's Theater," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1998, pp. 55-66.
- HERNANDO-REAL, Noelia. "Love Triangles and Triangular Loves: A Home for Three in Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room or the Vibrator Play*," in Miriam López-Rodríguez et al. (eds), *Old Stories, New Readings: The Transforming Power of American Drama*, Newcastle Upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, pp. 231-247.
- KRASZPULSKA, Ola, "Visual Explorations of Metaphysical Ideas in the Works of Sarah Ruhl," in Miriam López-Rodríguez et al. (eds), *Old Stories, New Readings: The Transforming Power of American Drama*, Newcastle Upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, pp. 213-229.
- LAHR, John, "Surreal Life," *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2008.
- MURRAY, Simon, "Embracing Lightness: Dispositions, Corporealities and Metaphors in Contemporary Theatre and Performance," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2013, pp. 206-219.
- MUSE, Amy, *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl*, London, Methuen, 2018.

PERDIGAO, Lisa K. and Mark PIZZATO (eds), *Death in American Texts and Performances: Corpses, Ghosts, and the Reanimated Dead*, Farnham, Surrey, Ashgate, 2010.

RASKIN Richard, "Italo Calvino and Inevitability in Storytelling," *Danish Journal of Film Studies*, December 18, 2004, pp. 103-108.

RUHL, Sarah, *44 Poems for You*, Copper Canyon Press, 2020.

—, *A Hundred Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*, New York, Faber and Faber, 2014.

—, *Eurydice*, in *The Clean House and Other Plays*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2006, pp. 325-411.

—, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2008.

—, *For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2018.

—, *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2010.

—, *The Clean House*, in *The Clean House and Other Plays*, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2006, pp. 3-116.

86 —, *The Oldest Boy: A Play in Three Ceremonies*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

RUHL, Sarah and Max RITVO, *Letters from Max: A Book of Friendship*, Minneapolis, Milkweed, 2018.

STATES, Bert O., *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1985.

VATAIN-CORFDIR, Julie, "Music as Metaphor for the Interpretation of a Play: Examples from Sarah Ruhl's Theater," *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 153, 2017/4, pp. 112-126.

VOGEL, Paula, "Sarah Ruhl," *BOMB*, no. 99, Spring 2007.

NOTICE

Dr. Ana Fernández-Caparrós is lecturer of English and American Literature at the University of Valencia. Her main field of research is contemporary American drama, on which she has presented widely in conferences and published in journals such as *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Atlantis* and *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*. She is the author of *El teatro de Sam Shepard en el Nueva York de los sesenta* (PUV, 2015) and the co-editor of the Special Issue “*Staging the Sounds of a Nation: The Poetic Soundscapes of the USA*” (*CJES*, 2015). In 2017 she was guest editor of *Studies in the Literary Imagination*’s special issue on “*21st-Century American Crises: Reflections, Representations, Transformations.*”

ABSTRACT

Sarah Ruhl has declared her admiration for Calvino’s defense of the literary quality of lightness and several critics have recognized this influence in her *œuvre*. However, a thorough investigation into the concept of lightness as a relevant critical concept to approach Ruhl’s theatrical aesthetics is still needed. The present essay sheds light on how lightness functions in Ruhl’s plays as a flexible poetic frame. Drawing from scenes from selected plays across Ruhl’s career, it analyzes how lightness is conveyed aurally, through a dramatic speech of precise and poetic linguistic minimalism; materially, and visually, by lightening the scenic load and conceiving the stage as a transformational space. This essay also argues that the pursuit of lightness is closely related to Ruhl’s interest in grappling with loss and finitude. Lightness is transformative because it prevents the weight of matter from burdening characters and makes room instead spatially, emotionally, epistemologically, and spiritually, for change and possibility.

KEY WORDS

Sarah Ruhl; Italo Calvino; lightness; scenography; post-realistic stage; mourning; transformation.

RÉSUMÉ

Sarah Ruhl ne cache pas son admiration pour la façon dont Italo Calvino défend la légèreté en tant que qualité littéraire ; plusieurs critiques ont noté cette influence sur son œuvre théâtrale. Il n'existe pourtant aucune exploration approfondie du concept de légèreté comme outil critique de l'esthétique de Ruhl. Le présent chapitre éclaire la façon dont la légèreté fonctionne, au sein des pièces de Ruhl, comme un cadre poétique flexible. Au fil de scènes tirées d'un éventail de pièces, j'analyse la façon dont la légèreté s'incarne oralement (grâce à un discours poétique au minimalisme précis), matériellement et visuellement (en allégeant la matière scénique au profit du plateau conçu comme un espace transformationnel). Cet article suggère également que la quête de légèreté a partie liée avec le traitement du deuil et de la finitude chez Ruhl. La légèreté est transformative, car elle empêche le poids de la matière de peser sur les personnages, ouvrant un espace physique, émotionnel, épistémologique et spirituel au changement et aux possibles.

88

MOTS-CLÉS

Sarah Ruhl ; Italo Calvino ; légèreté ; scénographie ; scène post-réaliste ; deuil ; transformation

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

TABLE DES MATIÈRES

Foreword	
Julie Vatain-Corfdir	5

PART I

REALISM DEPOSED, RECLAIMED AND EXPOSED

No Adjectives: New American Realism	
Marc Robinson	15
From Gertrude Stein to Richard Maxwell: Language, Performativity and Sensuousness in 21st-Century American Dramaturgy	283
Avra Sidiropoulou	37
“Plays as Sculptures”. Richard Maxwell’s Dramaturgy or the Art of Inventing New Shapes An interview with Richard Maxwell by Emeline Jouve	55
On Sarah Ruhl’s Transformative Theater of Lightness	
Ana Fernández-Caparrós	65

PART II

PAGE, STAGE AND GAZE RECONFIGURED

“Fulfill Your Obligations to Yourself Aesthetically”. Young Jean Lee on Experimental Theater and Teaching Playwriting	
An interview with Young Jean Lee by Julie Vatain-Corfdir	91
Investigating the Role of the Dramaturg at the National Playwrights Conference, Eugene O’Neill Theater Center	
Mary Davies	99
The Industry: Operas for the 21st Century	
Antonia Rigaud	125
Metamodern Aesthetics of Selfieness and Surveillance in <i>You are nowhere</i> and <i>I’ll Never Love Again</i>	
Emma Willis	149

“Blond, Blue-eyed Boy” Turned “Dark and Dusky”:
Why Can’t Edward Albee’s Nick Be Black?
Valentine Vasak.....173

PART III
THE PURSUIT OF COMMUNITY

On Neoclassicism: Theatrocracy, the 1%, and the Democratic Paradox
Pierre-Héli Monot.....201

Producing Community: A Process-Oriented Analysis of Ping Chong + Company’s
Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ (2018)
Diana Benea.....217

284 *Indecent*: Challenging Narratives of the American Dream through Collaborative
Creation and the Use of Memory as a Dramaturgical Device
Sarah Sigal.....243

Detroit ’67: Dramaturgy at the Intersection of the Theatrical Sphere
and the Socio-Political Sphere
Mary Anderson, Billicia Hines, Richard Haley.....259