

# Rehearsing Bereavement with Laughter: Grief, Humor, and Estrangement Affect in Sarah Ruhl's Plays of Mourning

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## Introduction: Mourning, Estrangement, and Affect

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According to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, world-renowned experts on loss and healing, we now live in “a new death-denying, grief-dismissing world” as illness and death disappeared from the public view and reemerged in the hospital and funeral home.<sup>[1]</sup> Accordingly, mourning has become a private affair, giving rise to what Sandra M. Gilbert calls “the shame of the mourner” or “Job’s shame” which is “the shame of the one who fears he has been singled out for suffering because he is unworthy of happiness,” particularly in contemporary British and American cultures.<sup>[2]</sup> It is in this cultural context that Leslie Atkins Durham situates *Eurydice* (2003), one of Sarah Ruhl’s early plays about bereavement. Durham reads the play alongside the irony that while “Americans had much to grieve” in the wake of big- and small-scale tragedies including 9/11, the Gulf War, and Hurricane Katrina, “grieving and mourning have been carefully regulated” in the delicate political climate of the Bush administration.<sup>[3]</sup> Although modern society in general has relegated the gloomy subject to the private realm and periphery, human mortality is a universal and perennial issue since all of us will lose someone and eventually die. In this respect, Ruhl’s plays of mourning—*Eurydice*, *The Clean House* (2004), and *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* (2006)—not only hold considerable significance for grief-stricken theatregoers today as they provide an occasion of communal mourning, but also make a strong case for the importance of theatre as an affective cultural medium.

On the other hand, Ruhl’s theatre is not simply a venue of sorrow and tears as her plays represent bereavement in unusual ways with surreal humor: *Eurydice* depicts a fairytale version of the Underworld populated by clownish characters including a tricycle-riding Hades and talking stones; *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* is a romantic comedy which begins with an organ broker’s sudden death from a heart attack and ends with his mother’s (off-stage) self-immolation with barbecue fire; and finally, a cancer patient is literally killed with a joke in *The Clean House*. In these plays which resist conventional realism, highly emotional circumstances are interrupted by an unexpected turn of events and death and grief are estranged by humor with mixed emotional results.

In an attempt to expound the dramaturgical significance of Ruhl’s peculiar method of estrangement in her plays of mourning, this essay revisits the German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht’s theory of *Verfremdungseffekt* (hereafter referred to as “V-effect”), a representational strategy that “allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.”<sup>[4]</sup> The estrangement of death and grief in *Eurydice*, *The Clean House*, and *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* is achieved by various techniques evocative of Brecht’s epic theatre, with humor at the core of the process. Far from showing how Ruhl’s estrangement is indebted to Brecht, my aim is to use his theory as a point of contrast to articulate how

Ruhl's distancing devices in the plays defamiliarize emotion for emotion's sake relieved of the materialist premises of V-effect. Here, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), an anti-war satire revolving around the protagonist's loss of her three children, will serve as the specific reference point for Brecht's result-oriented V-effect, in contraposition to what I propose to call 'estrangement *affect*' (hereafter referred to as 'E-affect'), Ruhl's emotion-centered estrangement for the audience's rehearsal of bereavement. This conceptual formulation of E-affect suggests a new possibility to understand and use estrangement as a theatrical device detached from its original ideological context.

While Brecht's influence on Ruhl's antirealist dramaturgy has generally been noted, her major critics, such as Durham, James Al-Shamma, and Ana Fernández-Caparrós, have borrowed the German scholar Franz Roh's "magic realism" and the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky's "defamiliarization" (*ostranenie*) to analyze Ruhl's estrangement devices in her grief-themed plays. For instance, Al-Shamma traces Ruhl's lineage back to Brecht via Tony Kushner, John Guare, and Thornton Wilder, making several specific references to the German playwright throughout his monograph on Ruhl's major works.<sup>[5]</sup> Aside from the fact that some critics used the term in their performance reviews of her plays, Al-Shamma does not explicitly state why he draws on magic realism instead of Brecht's epic theatre to illuminate on the antirealist characteristics of *The Clean House*. While his choice seems to reflect his awareness of the discrepancy between the play's non-rationalist poetics and the strain of European rationalism found in Brecht, the unstated rationale warrants further investigation. If he puts Ruhl in the genealogy of Brecht along the line of her American predecessors and wants to talk about estrangement in her plays, why not Brecht? In her essay on *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Fernández-Caparrós analyzes the estrangement process in the play in terms of *ostranenie*. And yet, she only applies *ostranenie* to the cell phone, but not to the central theme of death, despite her observation that the play and *The Clean House* are two of the plays that demonstrate "Ruhl's distinctive concern with dying and its aftermath" and "approach mortality 'with a somewhat lighter touch.'"<sup>[6]</sup> As a result, the significant relationship between estrangement and the emotion of grief in the play remains unexplained.

While magic realism and *ostranenie* resonate with Ruhl's aesthetics and help illuminate the major issues that the plays tackle, drawing on the literary notions seems to limit her estrangement to noetic and stylistic concerns. More fundamentally, magic realism and defamiliarization were developed in the context of postcolonial fiction and Russian formalism, respectively, without regard to the mechanics of theatre, where the audience emotionally reacts to the action on stage. I seek to complement these previous studies by paying particular attention to the emotional function of Ruhl's estrangement (E-affect) in comparison with the V-effect, which is arguably the most systematic theory of estrangement proposed thus far, particularly as a way to combat emotional manipulation in the theatrical context.

Since the so-called "affective turn," the word "affect" has gained wide currency, particularly in literature and cultural studies, and has sometimes been distinguished from feeling or emotion as "a preliminal, preconscious phenomenon."<sup>[7]</sup> However, it would be arbitrary to maintain such a neat distinction since the word connotes a wide range of bodily experiences which may well include emotional responses; for instance, the Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines affect as "the conscious subjective aspect of an emotion considered apart from bodily changes" or "a set of observable manifestations of a subjectively experienced emotion."<sup>[8]</sup> Also, the affect-emotion dichotomy is not strictly adhered to by many theorists of affect including Silvan S. Tomkins, whose foundational system of primary affects is comprised of the nine emotional responses of interest, enjoyment, surprise, fear, anger, distress, shame, contempt, and disgust,<sup>[9]</sup> and Eve K. Sedgwick, who expands on Tomkins' work in her *Touching Feeling: Affect*,

*Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003). In this essay, I adopt James Thompson's definition of affect as "emotional, often automatic, embodied responses that occur in relation to something else—be it object of observation, recall of a memory or practical activity" and use it as the counter term to "effect" to focus on the emotion of grief.<sup>[10]</sup> Here, the affect of grief is specifically attached to people who are lost, although affects, as Sedgwick notes, can have any object such as "things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects."<sup>[11]</sup>

### Making Death Visible and Grief Felt

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The unrealistic and abstract settings of *Eurydice*, *The Clean House*, and *Dead Man's Cell Phone* blur the line between the worlds of the living and of the dead. *Eurydice* takes place on a dark, bare stage suggestive of the Underworld with rusty pipes, an abstracted River of Forgetfulness, and strange watery noises. The living and the dead exchange letters by dropping them on the soil and the characters arrive in the Underworld in a raining elevator. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, the dead man Gordon, who now is "in a hell reserved for people who sell organs on the black market and the people who loved them," transcends the boundary between life and death by telling the audience about the last moment of his death and even having a conversation with the protagonist Jean.<sup>[12]</sup> *The Clean House* is set in the all-white living room of the snobbish doctor Lane's house in a "metaphysical Connecticut" or "a house that is not far from the sea and not far from the city," where the 27-year-old Brazilian maid Matilde sees imaginary visions of her deceased parents reenacted on stage.<sup>[13]</sup> The plays' phantasmagoric settings allow the living and the dead to co-inhabit the same space to restore death to the domain of everyday life.<sup>[14]</sup>

The representation of the dead on stage and the living characters' struggle with the losses inevitably elicit highly emotional responses from the audience. A couple of years before she wrote *Eurydice*, Ruhl published an essay on one of her mentors, María Irene Fornés, titled "Six Small Thoughts on Fornés, the Problem of Intention, and Willfulness." In the essay, Ruhl pits Fornés' "theatre of desire and pleasure" against two different types of western theatre that revolve around the notion of objective: American realist theatre and Brecht's politically-motivated epic theatre. On behalf of Fornés, Ruhl argues that a "heightened emotional state" such as grief can be self-justifying as a pure emotional process without an external purpose:

It wants nothing. It is complete in itself. If X dies, and I grieve for X, my grief does not depend on a frustrated desire for X. I know that I can't have X from beyond the grave. I am not thinking about how to ameliorate my grief. My grief for X is beyond desire and beyond intention. It is a state.<sup>[15]</sup>

Like Tomkins who argued that "affect is an end in itself," Ruhl views the affect of grief as a natural process that has to happen for its own sake.<sup>[16]</sup> The grief that her characters experience and the audience may share with them is not meant to achieve any objective, at least in the sense of the character's objective in the realist theatre (i.e. what does the character want?) or the socialist aim of epic theatre. In feeling grief, neither the characters nor the audience are supposed to think of ways to bring the deceased back to life or prevent others' deaths. Rather, grief is a state of acceptance and the emotion matters in itself.

Ruhl's view of grief makes a striking contrast with that of Brecht who aimed at "an extremely classical, cold, highly intellectual style of performance."<sup>[17]</sup> Here, it would be important to note that Brecht was not against emotion *per se*. For instance, comparing Brecht's treatment of emotion in *The Measures Taken* (1930) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948), R. Darren Gobert concludes that Brecht's initial "hostility toward emotional effects" rose as a reaction to the behaviorist understanding of emotion and his view evolved from the "wholesale rejection" to "cognitive catharsis"—an emotive clarification that works alongside reason.<sup>[18]</sup> Similarly, Darko Suvin argues that Brecht was against emotion at first but later "suppressed the final opposition between emotion and reason."<sup>[19]</sup> Thus, Brecht's revolt against empathy did not connote an outright rejection of emotion, at least towards his late career—the phase Vidar Thorsteinsson refers to as "the late Brecht's passionate defense of political-theatrical affect."<sup>[20]</sup> Still, Brecht's approval of emotion hinged on the proviso that it is based on reason and conducive to his socialist goal for his ultimate aim was to make the audience "feel emotions that would drive them to try to change situations like the ones represented on stage."<sup>[21]</sup>

One good example is his use of grief as a medium of rational critique in *Mother Courage*. Brecht wanted to lead the audience to critically examine the circumstances surrounding Mother Courage's grief rather than simply share her emotion. John Rouse explains how Helene Weigel's *Mother Courage* "defamiliarized Courage's grief through the very demonstration of that grief" to achieve V-effect as follows:

Both Brecht's play and his production allow Courage this intensely human moment in order to illustrate for the audience the basic social contradiction out of which the character is built. Courage is both businesswoman and mother. Or rather, she tries to be both; the social realities of the total war from which she tries to profit as businesswoman prevent her from fulfilling her responsibilities as mother. She has been confronted with a nearly impossible economic choice—either she lose her son or she pay a sum that will cost her the wagon, her only means of supporting herself and her daughter. But she has tried to avoid making this choice in attempting to deal her way out. . . . Sounds of gunfire teach both her and the audience that her delay is indeed costly. Courage bears responsibility for her own extreme moment of grief. . . . Brecht allows Courage her grief, but he also uses it to provide his audience with the necessary data for a dialectical analysis of his play's social relationships.<sup>[22]</sup>

As Rouse explains above, the play directs the audience's attention to the social and individual causes of Courage's grief: war and her delayed action. For Brecht, it is of critical importance that these conditions look problematic and alterable to the audience, and grief is used against grief—i.e. to ward off further grief occasions in reality—as a tool for the stimulation of their critical thinking and social action.

The contrast between Ruhl and Brecht in terms of grief reveals a fundamental difference in their approaches to the issue of human mortality. Whereas *Mother Courage* ascribes the deaths of the heroine's children to identifiable causes as a way of exhorting the audience "to take pleasure in the possibilities of change in all things," bereavement in Ruhl's plays of mourning is beyond human control.<sup>[23]</sup> In *Eurydice*, the father is already dead when he first appears, residing in the Underworld, and the cause of his death is not mentioned at all—although it is possible, since it is an auto-biographical play, to assume that he, like the playwright's own father, died of cancer. Similarly, the cause of Gordon's sudden heart attack in *Dead Man's Cell Phone* remains unidentified; he was just eating a lentil soup at a

café instead of the lobster bisque he wanted. Ana's death in *The Clean House*, though it could be argued that it was facilitated by Ana's refusal to be hospitalized and Matilde's joke, is due fundamentally to her stage four breast cancer, a medical condition that is incurable by contemporary medicine. These characters' deaths are *thrust upon* the other characters due to unpreventable causes.

More significantly, Ruhl's plays are not a critique of such causes of death; they do not say cancer and the heart attack, for instance, are evil in the way Brecht deemed war and capitalism. A materialist application of V-effect to the plays would be equivalent to trying to find ways to change the individual or social circumstances that made these characters die, which would be a preposterous task for Ruhl's audience given the circumstances. These points of contrast suggest that Ruhl is interested in dealing with bereavement as an inevitable incident rather than analyzing its causes and preventing it.

In the plays, Ruhl presents three different types of response to bereavement: committing suicide to follow the deceased, trying to save the deceased (only if, of course, it appears possible), and acceptance. Eurydice, Mrs. Gottlieb, and Matilde's father make the first choice: Eurydice dies a "second death" by dipping herself in Lethe, Mrs. Gottlieb sets herself on fire, and Matilde's father shoots himself. Even though the emotional difficulty of their loss and their sincere desire to be reunited with their lost family member are understandable, it is apparent that suicide is not the best course of action for two main reasons. First, there is no guarantee that they will see the deceased after the suicide; they, overcome by their emotion, act on impulse despite the potential futility of such a venture into the unknown. Secondly, by killing themselves, they are causing further bereavement and grief for their surviving family and others who care about them.

Orpheus and Lane's husband Charles show the second type of response; Orpheus braves the gates of hell to bring his bride back to the world of the living, and Charles flies to Alaska to find a yew tree, a conifer that is believed to have some healing effect on cancer patients and used to produce chemotherapy drugs.<sup>[24]</sup> Unfortunately, their long trips turn out to be counter-productive. Orpheus and Eurydice only reaffirm their differences and have to experience a second separation, and Charles deprives himself of Ana's last days which he could have spent with her and belatedly arrives with the tree only to find her dead. The failure of the two daring attempts attests to their lack of control over their significant other's life—the case of Orpheus does so in a more symbolic way than realistic since the mythical setting cannot be taken literally. Here, Charles's former aphorism to Lane in defense of his morally questionable affair with Ana returns to himself: "There are things—big invisible things—that come unannounced—they walk in, and we have to give way."<sup>[25]</sup> These two purpose-driven reactions to bereavement—suicide and rescue mission—do not appear to improve the situation at all and their questionable efficacy alludes to the philosophy of life, or of death to be more specific, that the plays communicate to the audience: that there are events in life that frustrate human will and effort and demand acceptance.

The third response of acceptance is represented by Matilde, who, instead of making the extreme choice her father made, moves on to make a living by cleaning Lane's house in a foreign country. She is the character that initiates the symbolic gesture of acceptance in the play: to stop cleaning. In the play, the "clean house" is a visual metaphor for the ideal of perfect life, and to give that up is an acknowledgment that life cannot always stay in order and under control. Likewise, Lane and her sister Virginia leave the house in a mess only after realizing that the first step to come to terms with life's inevitabilities is to let go and accept the situation as it unfolds.

Here, acceptance in mourning does not mean abandonment or defeatism but care and wisdom. In mourning for the loss of her parents, Matilde resorts to some “strange” ways to keep her loss in perspective and maintain some emotional distance to it. For example, she tries to imagine her parents’ happy moments and make up new jokes, remembering her late mother’s advice: “in order to tell a good joke, you have to believe that your problems are very small, and that the world is very big.”[\[26\]](#) She does not simply accept her loss but also interrupts her own grief with some estrangement techniques including humor *à la* Brecht. Here, she not only models a peculiar attitude of acceptance herself but also serves as a good reference point for the peculiar rehearsal of bereavement that Ruhl stages for the audience in her three plays of mourning.

### **Making Death Strange and Ameliorating Grief**

Ruhl’s interest in the theme of bereavement derives from her personal experience of losing her father to cancer when she was twenty years old, and she invites the audience to share her characters’ similar experiences and go along with their emotional journey. At the same time, she, knowing too well the emotional challenges of such occasions, represents their circumstances in strange ways to “ameliorate” the audience’s sorrow aroused by her characters’ losses, using several estrangement devices that are generally associated with Brecht’s epic theatre.

As it is well known, Brecht devised various estrangement techniques to interrupt the realism of stage and the audience’s empathy. For instance, such interruption is achieved in *Mother Courage* by a wide range of dramatic and theatrical means including, but not limited to, a sudden change in situation, emotional tone, acting style, line delivery method etc., as Robert Leach succinctly captures:

Peace is interrupted by war; direct address is interrupted by conversation; song by speech, and the method of singing, *Sprechstimme*, is a method of interrupting singing with speaking and vice versa; *Mother Courage*’s failure is interrupted by her success as a businesswoman, her mother’s pride by her grief; even the melodrama of the shooting of Katrin as she drums to awaken Halle is interrupted by comedy.[\[27\]](#)

As mentioned earlier, the goal of the interruptions is to help the audience keep some emotional distance from the characters and the situations they are in as a way of promoting critical observation. Here, *Mother Courage*’s loss and grief serve as a catalyst for this cerebral enterprise, and, as a result, the absurdity of social reality and the characters’ attitudes toward it are exposed as alterable conditions.

Similar estrangement devices are used in Ruhl’s plays but the given circumstances of bereavement obviate such a critical exercise since they, as discussed above, are unchangeable. The most obvious Brechtian staging techniques in the plays are double casting, direct audience address, and subtitles. For instance, A Nasty Interesting Young Man and the Child in *Eurydice*, the Other Woman and the stranger in *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, and Matilde’s deceased parents and Ana and Charles in *The Clean House* are double cast. Secondly, the chorus of Stones in *Eurydice*, Gordon in *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, and Matilde, Lane, and Virginia in *The Clean House* all directly address the audience to break the fourth wall. In addition, subtitles, a distancing device that harks back to Brecht’s use of placards, are often projected on stage in *The Clean House*.[\[28\]](#) These antirealist aesthetics remind the audience of the theatricality of

performance and create some emotional distance to the characters' losses and suffering. In short, whereas the emotion of grief itself is objectless, Ruhl's E-affect has a specific objective for the audience: to alleviate their emotional pain as they, watching the plays, rehearse bereavement.

Ruhl also employs other estrangement devices that are more grief-specific. The most telling example would be the cell phones that ring in the middle of Gordon's mother Mrs. Gottlieb's funeral speech to disturb the solemnity of the woeful event. In *Eurydice*, it is mainly the Stones who interrupt the doleful atmosphere of the Underworld as the foil of humanity capable of grief and sympathy. Their intrusive and disturbing character is similar to that of the cell phones but their interruption is intentional and more inconsiderate. The apathetic Stones discourage Eurydice's grief with the warning, "Being sad is not allowed! Act like a stone."<sup>[29]</sup> Watching her mourning over the second death of her father, the Stones admonish her as follows:

LOUD STONE. Didn't you already mourn for your father, young lady?

LITTLE STONE. Some things should be left well enough alone.

BIG STONE. To mourn twice is excessive.

LITTLE STONE. To mourn three times a sin.

LOUD STONE. Life is like a good meal.

BIG STONE. Only gluttons want more food when they finish their helping.

LITTLE STONE. Learn to be moderate.

BIG STONE. It's weird for a dead person to be morbid.

LITTLE STONE. We don't like to watch it!

LOUD STONE. We don't like to see it!

BIG STONE. It makes me uncomfortable.

THE STONES. Don't cry! Don't cry!<sup>[30]</sup>

The Stones' heartless reproach above seems to suggest how grief is generally repressed in modern times although a "mourner should be allowed to experience his sorrow" for grief only has the power to heal.<sup>[31]</sup> It is probably a similar internal voice of repression that keeps Mrs. Gottlieb crying alone like "a small animal in pain" somewhere in her house.<sup>[32]</sup> The Stones' coldness and rude remarks do not only satirize the modern culture that tries to keep death and grief at bay but also enable a detached look at Eurydice's mourning by interrupting her moment of grief.

The most notable example of such interruption in *The Clean House* is Matilde's killing joke. As her

breast cancer worsens, Ana asks Matilde to end her acute pain by making her die laughing with a joke. Matilde grants her wish and euthanizes her in the same way her father accidentally killed her mother, which “symbolically rectifies her mother’s murder as an act of mercy rather than an accident.”<sup>[33]</sup> Here, the audience’s emotional response of grief to her death is interrupted by the irony of dying from laughter.

As the last example of the killing joke suggests, a major component of E-affect is humor, whose mechanism and function can be construed in light of the incongruity and relief theories of humor. According to John Morreall, the two theories, along with the superiority theory, constitute the three major theories of humor. The superiority theory of humor notes that “laughter is always directed at someone as a kind of scorn,” while the relief theory sees the major function of humor as “the venting of excess nervous energy” through laughter.<sup>[34]</sup> According to the third and most widely-accepted incongruity theory, “what amuses us is some object of perception or thought that clashes with what we would have expected in a particular set or circumstances.”<sup>[35]</sup> Despite the obvious differences, the three theories of humor are more complementary than contradictory as they focus on different aspects of humor. Generally speaking, the superiority theory is primarily concerned with the satirical nature of humor (i.e. intention of the joker), the incongruity theory with its semantic aspect (i.e. why jokes are funny), and, finally, the relief theory with humor’s physiological function (i.e. effect of humor).<sup>[36]</sup> The incongruity and relief theories are therefore not incompatible with each other and can be used together to shed light on the source and effect of humor in Ruhl’s plays.

Incongruity as the source of humor in Ruhl’s plays has mainly to do with the irony of representing the serious theme of mortality in the comic mode. First of all, such inconsistency can be observed in the contrast between the classic image of afterlife and the plays’ comic representation of it. The Underworld of *Eurydice* is ruled by a Child riding on a red tricycle and wearing a hat and clothes too small for him, and spooky but clownish figures known as Big, Loud, and Little Stones are its major inhabitants. The fairytale setting is significantly different from the grim and terrifying image of Hades in classical accounts such as Virgil’s.<sup>[37]</sup> Eurydice’s Father, who would start his wedding speech with “one or two funny jokes,” has been living there since his death, and he describes his life after death this way:

the atmosphere smells. And there are strange high-pitched noises—like a tea kettle 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, much like at home. I’m working in the business world and it seems that, here, you can better see the far-reaching consequences of your actions.<sup>[38]</sup>

His sensual description of the Underworld devoid of metaphysical seriousness and melancholy is unusual and refreshing. He seems to lead a rather easygoing life there, occasionally writing letters to her living daughter and practicing the jitterbug for fun. Although people lose their connection to their former lives, the life in the Underworld doesn’t seem that grim. On a similar note, Gordon describes the hell he is now in as a place where people “only have one costume” and “go to the Laundromat once a week,” and Matilde imagines heaven to be “a sea of untranslated jokes” where “everyone is laughing.”<sup>[39]</sup> These unorthodox and blithe images of afterlife challenge the common assumptions and expectations in contemporary religious and popular culture.

In *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* and *The Clean House*, similar incongruity is witnessed in the circumstances of the characters’ deaths. At the opening of the second act, Gordon describes the last day of his life to the

audience, on which he woke up thinking he'd like a lobster bisque. When he finally arrived in the café, he, much to his dismay, found Jean finishing the last lobster bisque that was supposed to be his so he had to settle for lentil instead. All of a sudden, he had a heart attack and began to think about to whom he would make the last phone call although his heart stopped before he could make the call. This is how he describes his last moment:

A man doesn't call his brother on his deathbed—no—he wants a woman's voice—but the heart keeps on heaving itself up—out of my chest—into my mouth—and I'm thinking—that bitch over there ate all the lobster bisque, this is all her fault—and I look over at her, and she looks like an angel—not like a bitch angel at all—and I think—good—good—I'm glad she had the last bite—I'm glad. Then I die.[40]

The gravity of death is lifted by the comic situation of dying in the middle of eating a lentil soup, jealous of another person enjoying the much-wanted lobster bisque. His mother's self-immolation with barbecue fire at the end of the play also displays a similar incongruity between the quotidian and casual occasion of eating and the singular and serious event of death. What further estranges her bizarre method of suicide is her second son Dwight's seeming indifference to or even approval of his mother's self-immolation. Both her death and Dwight's reaction challenge common expectations and produce surreal humor.

Humor's central role in the E-affect is most explicit in *The Clean House* since not only does the play begin with Matilde's joke about the first night of a virgin man in Portuguese but also its plot revolves around two killing jokes. According to Matilde, her father, contrary to his good intention, choked his wife to death with a joke on their anniversary and shot himself in order to follow her. She reprises the family "tragedy" when she kills Ana in the same way albeit for a different reason. These homicides sound absurd for jokes and laughter are not seriously considered as possible causes of death.[41] The ideas of jokes and laughter in themselves evoke humor but what makes them even more humorous is their incongruity with the grave topic of mortality.

In fact, incongruity is the main principle of Brechtian humor, too. As a device to prevent the audience's emotional engagement he called empathy, he employed "a range of comic elements, from slapstick and *commedia dell'arte* exaggeration, to burlesque and stagey playfulness" with a view to promoting the audience's recognition of the gap between ideal and reality in his contemporary society.[42] In other words, the comic in Brechtian theatre is "a structural principle underlying acts and communications that exposes the conflict between what is and what should be." [43] In both Brecht and Ruhl, therefore, humor arises from the conflict between one's expectations and what actually follows and plays a pivotal role in the estrangement process, although the two playwrights use humor for significantly different purposes.

Unlike Brecht who formulated V-effect under the shadow of fascism and capitalism, Ruhl's employment of humor had a deeply personal motivation. Ruhl's father used to tell a joke to the concerned family during his struggle with cancer and he was one of the people who made her believe that "humor pushed to an extreme, like any emotion, has a transformative power." [44] Another person who nurtured her belief in the power of humor is Italian writer Italo Calvino who considered lightness as the foremost quality of the New Millennium. Ruhl likewise believes that lightness is "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." [45] Aside from these personal and philosophical influences, it was her

college mentor Paula Vogel who taught her to translate the wisdom of humor into the idiom of theatre. Vogel's *Baltimore Waltz* (1990), a semi-autobiographical comedy about terminal illness, death, and grief, was a primary dramatic influence on the estrangement of death and grief in her plays.<sup>[46]</sup> In short, Ruhl's E-affect was developed in a very different personal and historical context from the V-effect to serve a different function as she uses humor mainly for the audience's relief of tension and emotional excess.

In contrast to Brecht's satirical humor designed to provoke the audience's resistance to the status quo, Ruhl's humor is geared toward acceptance. The clinical psychologist Rod A. Martin explains the positive function of humor as follows:

Because it inherently involves incongruity and multiple interpretations, humor provides a way for the individual to shift perspective on a stressful situation, reappraising it from a new and less threatening point of view. As a consequence of this humorous reappraisal, the situation becomes less stressful and more manageable. . . . Humor and laughter provide a means for cancer patients to make light of their illness and maintain a spirit of optimism, and jokes about death are a way for people to distance themselves emotionally from thoughts of their own mortality. Thus, by laughing at the fundamental incongruities of life and diminishing threats by turning them into objects of nonserious play, humor is a way of refusing to be overcome by the people and situations, both large and small, that threaten our well-being.<sup>[47]</sup>

Owing to the transformative power of humor, Ruhl's audience can take a more objective view of the situation and maintain control of their emotion while participating in the mourning.

In psychological parlance, this type of humor is called "gallows humor," which Katie Watson defines as "humor that treats serious, frightening, or painful subject matter in a light or satirical way."<sup>[48]</sup> The term originally comes from Freud's example of prisoners joking on their way to the gallows, and gallows humor can be distinguished from cruel or derogatory humor by the analogy of "whistling as you go through the graveyard" versus "kicking over the gravestones."<sup>[49]</sup> According to clinical psychologist Thomas Kuhlman, gallows humor flourishes in a hopeless situation that "justifies the psychological shift from a goal-directed frame of mind to a playful one."<sup>[50]</sup> Likewise, Ruhl's humorous representations of bereavement introduced above take the audience away from a rationalist and goal-driven perspective to a playful state of mind.

While intellect is an important component of this process, the physiological function of laughter, which usually accompanies humor, is also critical. According to the British philosopher Herbert Spencer, a proponent of the relief theory along the line of Freud, laughter is "purposeless" in the sense that, unlike fear that makes a person run from the danger, laughter is not directed to "special ends"; it is just "an uncontrolled discharge of energy."<sup>[51]</sup> Likewise, humor in Ruhl's E-affect mainly serves an affective or physiological function. The aforementioned incongruities—the fairytale version of the Underworld, Gordon's and her mother's unusual circumstances of deaths involving lobster bisque and barbecue fire, and the motif of killing jokes—not only set an emotionally ambiguous tone throughout the plays but also allow the audience to release their emotional tension through laughter. Here, the point of such relief is not to prevent or repress their grief—if so, why represent grief in the first place?—but to help them grieve *well* as they rehearse bereavement. Navigating sorrow in the comic mode, Ruhl's plays lead the audience to laugh through grief or grieve through laughter as a result of empathy. Unlike Brecht, Ruhl's E-affect is

not opposed to grief, but it does resist an excess of grief lest one should fail to recover from the overwhelming emotion. It guides the audience through their mourning process without necessitating a sober inspection of the situation to find a practical solution.

According to Ruhl, “laughter is a kind of acceptance” since it is to acquiesce to the view that “life is funny, because it’s both tragic and bizarre.”<sup>[52]</sup> Critics such as Charles Isherwood, Peter Marks, and David Rooney have used the word “whimsical” to describe Ruhl’s antirealist and fluid dramaturgy but that is in fact what her plays show life itself to be. By inducing the audience to laugh at life’s most difficult experience represented on stage, Ruhl challenges them to face life’s uncertainties with courage.

### **Conclusion: Towards a Theatre of Emotional Freedom**

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Today’s Brechtian scholarship, even after the publication of Hans-Thies Lehmann’s *Postdramatic Theatre*, which problematizes “the overpowering authority of Brecht” and defines postdramatic theatre as “a *post-Brechtian theatre*,” is still heavily concerned with the question of empathy with the materialist premises and implications of V-effect taken for granted.<sup>[53]</sup> For instance, David Krasner and Paul Woodruff find fault with Brecht’s narrow view of empathy and redefine it as both an emotional and cognitive response fundamental to theatrical spectatorship. Other major Brechtian scholars aforementioned have challenged the conventional understanding of Brecht’s stance towards emotion by making a notable case for Brecht’s transition to a positive assessment of emotion later in his career. The central question is whether emotion necessarily encumbers rational criticism or not. While Brecht and his critics all acknowledge the importance of emotional engagement in theatre spectatorship, their views presuppose the utilitarian credo that emotion should contribute to socio-political agenda somehow. However, this focus on “effects—identifiable social outcomes, messages or impacts,” as Thompson argues, can lead us to overlook “the radical potential of the freedom to enjoy *beautiful radiant things*.”<sup>[54]</sup> In this respect, Ruhl’s E-affect supplies us with an alternative model to Brecht’s epic theatre to understand and describe other types of non-realist drama that have so far been discussed in relation to his name and focus on *affect* instead.

Even though Ruhl does not make practical suggestions as to how one can bring a lost person back or avert death, I would argue that her plays of mourning are graced with profound insight in their earnest and extraordinary explorations of some of life’s most grievous experiences. Despite considerable development in science and medicine, there are many questions yet to be answered and we are still mortal beings subject to forces larger than life. Against our wish, unfortunate events do occur, demanding the serenity to accept what we cannot change and ready ourselves to deal with the aftermath of what must come to pass. In this regard, Ruhl’s sincere engagement with such matters deserves attention for learning to accept is as important as fighting to fix a problem.

Grieving for the sake of grieving does not simply mean abandonment, lack of purpose, or being selfish and indifferent to others. Rather, it means pleasure and freedom in Ruhl’s theatre. Fornés believes that life is “not constantly about wanting to get something from somebody else”—as most American actors are taught within the realist tradition—but about pleasure, particularly “the pleasure of communication.”<sup>[55]</sup> In Ruhl’s plays of mourning, death is closely linked to community, and the community literally includes the dead: Eurydice’s father, Gordon, and Matilde’s late parents. This communal aspect of her plays evokes the essential affinity between theatre and mourning.

In many ways, theatre itself can be seen to be a place of mourning. In the Western classical formulation, for example, theatre evokes multiple losses, restaging past events and resuscitating the voices of those who are no longer there. At the same time, it enables an “acting out” of projective losses, those phantasmatic griefs that remain unspoken within the performance of everyday life.<sup>[56]</sup>

Ruhl’s theatre is meant to be a gathering space of people made of flesh and blood, with feelings and desires, and entitled to laugh and cry without being told to stop being melodramatic and channel their emotion into some socially productive action.

As a playwright, Ruhl’s genuine interest in grief and emotion contributes to increased “appreciation of the roles of feeling and of bodies in making meaning,” which “recalibrates historical hierarchies of meaning which have denigrated bodies, feelings and, for that matter, theatre and performance.”<sup>[57]</sup> For the audience, Ruhl’s theatre allows its human subjects to exist outside the burden of utility, celebrate their emotional freedom and have the pleasure of communication with each other—even with the dead—whether in laughing or mourning, or doing both at the same time.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 205.

<sup>[2]</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, *Death’s Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 261.

<sup>[3]</sup> Leslie Atkins Durham, *Women’s Voices on American Stages in the Early Twenty-First Century: Sarah Ruhl and Her Contemporaries* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 31.

<sup>[4]</sup> Brecht, Bertolt, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 192. The most widely accepted English translation of *Verfremdung* has been “alienation” since the publication of John Willett’s collection of Brecht’s essays, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, published in 1964. However, the accuracy of this translation has been contested by several scholars. According to Michael Patterson, for instance, the closest English translation is “distanciation,” and Robert Gordon has pointed out that *Verfremdung* can be more

accurately translated as “strange-making” or “distancing.” See Michael Patterson, “Brecht’s Legacy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 273-87 (274); Robert Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing: Modern Acting Theories in Perspective* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 233. In this article, I use ‘estrangement’ as the general term for the theatrical method of making something strange whether in the strictly Brechtian sense or not, chiefly because the word most immediately communicates the idea of making something ‘strange.’ Also, the rarely adopted phrase ‘estrangement effect’ itself makes V-effect unfamiliar, which is the partial aim of the current essay.

[5] See James Al-Shamma, *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 187.

[6] 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* 25, no.4 (2015): 489.

[7] Megan Watkins, “Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 269. In a similar vein, Brian Massumi defines affect as “an ability to affect and be affected” and “a prepersonal intensity” rather than a personal feeling. See Brian Massumi, “Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgments,” in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xvi.

[8] “Affect,” *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affect> (accessed 5 August 2018).

[9] Silvan S. Tomkins, “The Quest for Primary Motives: Biography and Autobiography of an Idea” in *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. E. Virginia Demos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 58.

[10] James Thompson, *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 119.

[11] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

[12] Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008), 80.

[13] Sarah Ruhl, “The Clean House,” in *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 7.

[14] In this regard, it is significant that the terminally-ill cancer patient Ana in *The Clean House* spends her last days in Lane’s house instead of the hospital, the modern institution that has had “local monopoly on death” since the twentieth century. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death Over the Last One Thousand Years* (2nd ed.), trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 584. So, when Ana dies in her house, Lane, the doctor, starts panicking and says, “I’ve never seen someone die in a house before. Only in a hospital.” Ruhl, “The Clean House,” 106. Ana’s choice literally brings death home in order to show that it is an undeniable part of our

everyday life.

[15] Sarah Ruhl, "Six Small Thoughts on Fornés, the Problem of Intention, and Willfulness," *Theatre Topics* 11, no. 2 (2001): 197.

[16] Silvan S. Tomkins, *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. E. Virginia Demos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 51.

[17] Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 14.

[18] R. Darren Gobert, "Cognitive Catharsis in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*," *Modern Drama* 49, no. 1 (2006): 13.

[19] Darko Suvin, "Emotion, Brecht, Empathy vs. Sympathy," *Brecht Jahrbuch / The Brecht Yearbook* 33 (2008): 58.

[20] Similarly to Gobert and Suvin, Thorsteinsson holds that "Brecht's late dramatic theory" in the 1940s is "more eager to chart the territory of production through an affective, emotional, and bodily exploration." Vidar Thorsteinsson, "'This Great Passion for Producing': The Affective Reversal of Brecht's Dramatic Theory," *Cultural Critique* 97 (2017): 58. Thompson also argues that affect was an integral part of Brecht's epic theatre. Thompson, *Performance Affects*, 129–130.

[21] See Paul Woodruff, "Engaging Emotion in Theater: A Brechtian Model in Theater History," *The Monist* 71, no. 2 (1988): 237.

[22] John Rouse, "Brecht and the Contradictory Actor," in *Acting (Re)Considered: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*, ed. Phillip B. Zarrilli (New York: Routledge, 2002), 255.

[23] Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 202.

[24] According to Jennifer Heller, Charles wrongly chooses "a thing" ("yew") over "a human connection" ("you"). Jennifer Heller, "'To Follow Pleasure's Sway': Atomism in Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House*," *Modern Drama*, 60, no. 4 (2017): 443.

[25] Ruhl, "The Clean House," 63.

[26] *Ibid.*, 26.

[27] Robert Leach, "Mother Courage and Her Children," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 135.

[28] Peter Marks, who saw the Woolly Mammoth Theatre production in 2005, notes that "Ruhl intermittently has subtitles flashed on a panel above the set, as if her characters were the subjects of a documentary." According to him, some of the subtitles are "mere recitations of apparent events" while others "offer ironic commentary." Peter Marks, "'Clean House': A Lemon-Fresh Shine," *The Washington Post*, 19 July 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp->

[dyn/content/article/2005/07/18/AR2005071801502.html](https://jadt.commons.gc.cuny.edu/dyn/content/article/2005/07/18/AR2005071801502.html) (accessed 1 August 2018).

[29] Ruhl, “Eurydice,” in *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 373.

[30] *Ibid.*, 406.

[31] Kübler-Ross and Keller, *On Grief and Grieving*, 24.

[32] Ruhl, *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, 49.

[33] Al-Shamma, *Sarah Ruhl*, 39.

[34] John Morreall, introduction to *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987) 3–6.

[35] *Ibid.*, 6.

[36] Salvatore Attardo also sees the tripartite division as a “commonly accepted classification” and notes that the three theories are “not incompatible” with each other. Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), 47–49.

[37] Here’s lines 467-70 from Virgil’s *Georgics* IV, for instance: “The jaws of a Spartan cavern, Death’s towering gateway, / and the grove miasmatic with black dread—he entered them / and came to the realm of the dead with its fearsome king, / their hearts impossible to soften with living prayers.” Virgil and Janet Lembke, *Virgil’s Georgics: A New Verse Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 75.

[38] Ruhl, “Eurydice,” 343.

[39] Ruhl, *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, 82; Ruhl, “The Clean House,” 109.

[40] Ruhl, *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, 61.

[41] Although death from laughter is rare and not usually discussed as a serious research topic in medicine, there have been several reports of the case in history, mostly caused by asphyxiation or heart failure. One of the earliest records comes from Book VII of *Diogenes Laertius* (meaning “Lives of Eminent Philosophers”) which gives the account that the Ancient Greek scholar Chrysippus died after “a violent fit of laughter,” looking at his donkey eating his figs. R. D. Hicks, ed., *Diogenes Laertius* (Perseus Digital Library, Tufts University, 1972), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=D.%20L> (accessed 25 July 2018). A more recent and credible case is that of Alex Mitchell, the Scottish bricklayer who “died from heart failure after laughing non-stop at *The Goodies*” in 1975. Although the cause of his death was simply thought to be a cardiac arrest at that time, doctors now believe that Mitchell had Long QT syndrome, “a rare form disease which causes irregular heartbeats,” based on his granddaughter’s abnormal heart condition. Andrew Levy, “Doctors Solve Mystery of a Man Who ‘Died from Laughter’ While Watching *The Goodies* after His Granddaughter Nearly Dies from Same Rare Heart Condition,” *Mail Online*, last modified 20 June, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2162102/Doctors-sol>

[ve-mystery-man-died-laughter-watching-The-Goodies-granddaughter-nearly-dies-rare-heart-condition.html](#) (accessed 15 June 2018). For people of normal health, death from laughter is simply a joke.

[42] Marc Silberman, "Bertolt Brecht, Politics, and Comedy," *Social Research* 79, no. 1 (2012): 170.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Wendy Weckwerth, "More Invisible Terrains," *Theater* 34, no. 2 (2004): 32.

[45] John Lahr, "Surreal Life: The plays of Sarah Ruhl," *The New Yorker*, 17 March 2008, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/17/surreal-life> (accessed 20 May 2018).

[46] Al-Shamma, *Sarah Ruhl*, 43.

[47] Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (San Diego: Elsevier, 2007), 19.

[48] Katie Watson, "Gallows Humor in Medicine," *Hastings Center Report* 41, no. 5 (2011): 38.

[49] D. Wear, et al, "Derogatory and Cynical Humor Directed towards Patients: Views of Residents and Attending Doctors," *Medical Education* 43 (2009): 39.

[50] Thomas L. Kuhlman, "Gallows Humor for a Scaffold Setting: Managing Aggressive Patients on a Maximum-Security Forensic Unit," *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 39, no. 10 (1988): 1087.

[51] Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," in *The Bibliophile Library of Literature, Art, and Rare Manuscripts*, vol. 22, ed. Nathan Haskell Dole, Forrest Morgan, and Caroline Ticknor (New York: International Bibliophile Society, 1904), 7566.

[52] Alexis Greene, ed., *Women Writing Plays: Three Decades of The Susan Smith Blackburn Prize* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 138.

[53] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 29, 33; italics in original.

[54] Thompson, *Performance Affects*, 6; emphasis in original.

[55] Quoted in Ruhl, "Six Small Thoughts on Fornés," 187, 197.

[56] Adrian Kear and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, "Ghost Writing," in *Mourning Diana: Nation, Culture and the Performance of Grief*, ed. Kear and Steinberg (London: Routledge, 1999), 6.

[57] Paul Allain and Jen Harvie, *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), 149.



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