
In the ground-breaking *Women in American Theatre* (1986), Helen Krich Chinoy wondered “Where are the Women Playwrights?” (129). More than twenty-five years later, Leslie Atkins Durham, in *Women’s Voices on American Stages in the Early Twenty-First Century. Sarah Ruhl and her Contemporaries* (2013), sees the necessity to ask that question again and brings forward a group of contemporary American women playwrights who have been struggling, to different extents, to have their plays produced. Although the book pays closer attention to Ruhl, who is considered to “dominate the stage at the beginning of the 21st century” (Durham 4), and whose plays have extensively been analysed in James Al-Shamma’s *Sarah Ruhl. A Critical Study of the Plays* (2011), Durham also aptly presents the plays of other women playwrights who treat similar topics as Sarah Ruhl does. More specifically, Durham reads Ruhl’s *In the Next Room, Dead Man’s Cell Phone, Eurydice, The Clean House* and *Passion Play*, that is, Ruhl’s most popular plays, in relation to single plays by Lisa Loomer, Diana Son, Jenny Schwartz, Joan Didion, Kate Fodo, Young Jean Lee, Bathsheba Doran, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Lynn Notage, and Kia Corthron. The theoretical framework is overtly feminist, and, as Durham confesses, it comes from her feeling of “anger” at the numbers that reveal that women playwrights are left on the margins and their works are usually overlooked (6). More precisely, the way in which Durham approaches the texts is located in the third-wave liberal feminism, as Durham believes in the equality of the sexes and that the reform of such inequalities must be carried out within the system (8-9).

The first chapter, entitled “Educating Sarah Ruhl,” succinctly provides the background to understanding Ruhl’s style and her capacity to connect with her audience. Ruhl was almost literally brought up in the theatre, since her mother was an actress and Sarah used to accompany her to rehearsals at the Piven Theatre Workshop. Later, Ruhl worked for and with Joyce Piven, who gave her a space to experiment, and her theatrical abilities continued developing once she met Paula Vogel, who became her mentor. Durham also underlines the influence that Virginia Woolf and Chekhov—whose works Ruhl adapted for the stage (*Orlando, Lady with the Lap Dog, Anna Around the Neck*, and *Three Sisters*)—had on the playwright, beside that of Shakespeare and Viktor Shklovsky. Durham makes here an interesting point, claiming that Ruhl has been more deeply influenced by Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* than by Brecht’s *Verfremdung* or alienation (21), given that her aesthetic choices are always political, ideological, and ethical.
Having argued this case so aptly, one wishes Durham had taken this point further when discussing Ruhl’s theatrical strategies in the particular plays she analyses, which are usually labelled as simply Brechtian.

From chapter 2 onwards, each chapter takes a specific feminist stance for the purpose of discussing particular plays. In chapter 2, “Emotional Journeys,” Durham draws on feminist interpretation and analysis of emotion, such as Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2010) and Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), to discuss Ruhl’s rewriting of the myth of Eurydice in *Eurydice* (2003), Joan Didion’s adaptation of her bestselling memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2007), and Jenny Schwartz’s *God’s Ear* (2007). As Durham argues, these three plays, which focus on a woman grieving an intimate loss (father, husband, or son, respectively) “replace a transformed vision of grief in public life, recuperating it as a valid force on contemporary, and potentially political, expression” (32) that subverts the typical idea that mourning is a passive, feminine, and ineffective activity.

Chapter 3, “Caring Labor,” deals with feminist economics and care ethics in Ruhl’s *The Clean House* (2004), Lisa Loomer’s *Living Out* (2003), and Diana Son’s *Satellites* (2006). The three plays share a concern for the issues that surround women’s caring labour within the home, which Durham explores through the lens of feminist economic philosophy, as articulated by Drucilla Baker and Susan Feiner in *Liberating Economics: Feminist Perspectives on Family, Work, and Globalization* (2004). As Durham argues, caring labour, paid or unpaid, typically undertaken by women, is revealed in the plays as a reality in need of revision and as a lived experience that cuts across gender, race, and class.

In the fourth chapter, Durham turns to feminist theology, which she employs as the theoretical framework to discuss Ruhl’s *Passion Play* (2005), Young Jean Lee’s *Church* (2007), and Kate Fodor’s *100 Saints You Should Know* (2007). Durham, therefore, acknowledges the playwrights’ urge to revisit traditional theology for its assumed male dominance and female subjugation, for its rhetoric and its far-reaching use of symbols. As the author argues in this chapter, Ruhl, Lee, and Fodor are interested in how to embody and sanctify women’s experience, as they explore “what sin and grace mean in the contemporary world and how they are manifest,” and as they create new “parable structures and new imagery” to replace traditional male-dominated theology (77).

In chapter 5, entitled “Mobile Lines,” Durham makes use of feminist theories on space and technology to explore Ruhl’s *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* (2007), Bathsheba Doran’s *Kin* (2011), and Quiara Alegría Hudes’s *Water by the Spoonful* (2011). Durham’s main aim is to show how these playwrights explore “the terrain of intimacy when mobile technologies—of wireless communication, Internet chat rooms, social networking, and international travel—have redrawn the dramatic subject’s spatial boundaries” (99), and, in order to do so, she principally employs Caren Kaplan’s recent theories on identity, mobility, and location. Durham very convincingly argues and shows that in the plays proposed, their authors break typical binaries that have traditionally structured the world:
public and private, the internal and the external, home and away, the native and the foreign; all dichotomies are blurred to show the fluidity of experience in our globalized world.

The last chapter, “Natural Forces,” focuses on ecofeminism as the means to discuss Ruhl’s *In the Next Room* (2009), Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined* (2009), and Kia Corthron’s *A Cool Dip in the Barren Saharan Crick* (2010). Durham’s analysis of *In the Next Room* from the point of view of ecofeminism is not completely satisfying; the—otherwise accurate—analysis of the natural imagery in the play does not seem to purport an ecofeminist purpose in itself; meanwhile, what seems to be lacking is a stronger use of ecofeminist philosophy. Nevertheless, Durham’s analyses of Nottage’s and Corthron’s plays are much more satisfying regarding ecofeminism and the Brechtian strategies the authors employ to denounce, as is directly discussed here, environmental oppression.

Durham closes her book with an epilogue, very fittingly entitled “The Curtain Goes Up,” in which she hopes that the plays by Ruhl and her contemporaries continue to be produced. It must be added that Durham’s book will hopefully contribute towards making the works of these playwrights known to scholars and theatre-lovers alike, prompting not only the production of their works, but more scholarly work done on them. Durham’s excellent selection of plays in her discussion shows the concerns of U.S. women playwrights, who do not avoid any controversial and timely topic and who, as Durham suggests, treat them in a varied set of theatrical forms that invites further research.

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**Works Cited**


