College of DuPage Theater Department

Presents

Dead Man's Cell Phone

By Sarah Ruhl

Directed by Daniel Millhouse

The College Theatre Department sincerely thanks the library for research support, for classes studying the script and production, as well as for the cast, director, and production team working on the project.

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Play/Production Information

Brief Synopsis

Gordon is dead, but his cell phone lives on. When Jean, an empathetic museum worker, answers his ringing phone beside her in a café, she becomes comforter and confessor to the man's grieving friends and family. Before she knows it, Jean is ensnarled in the dead man's bizarre life. A wildly imaginative comedy, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is the odyssey of a woman forced to confront her assumptions about morality, redemption, and the need to connect in a technologically obsessed world. Adult themes and language.

Time and Place

Timeless. Placeless.

Characters

A Woman, Jean
A Dead Man, Gordon
Gordon's Mother, Mrs. Gottlieb
Gordon's Widow, Hermia
Gordon's Brother, Dwight
The Other Woman/The Stranger
Ensemble

Note: Mature themes and language

Set Design Concept for College of DuPage's College Theater's Fall 2023 Production of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* by Set Designer Richard Arnold, Jr.

Dead Man's Cell Phone Director's Note

Fall 2023

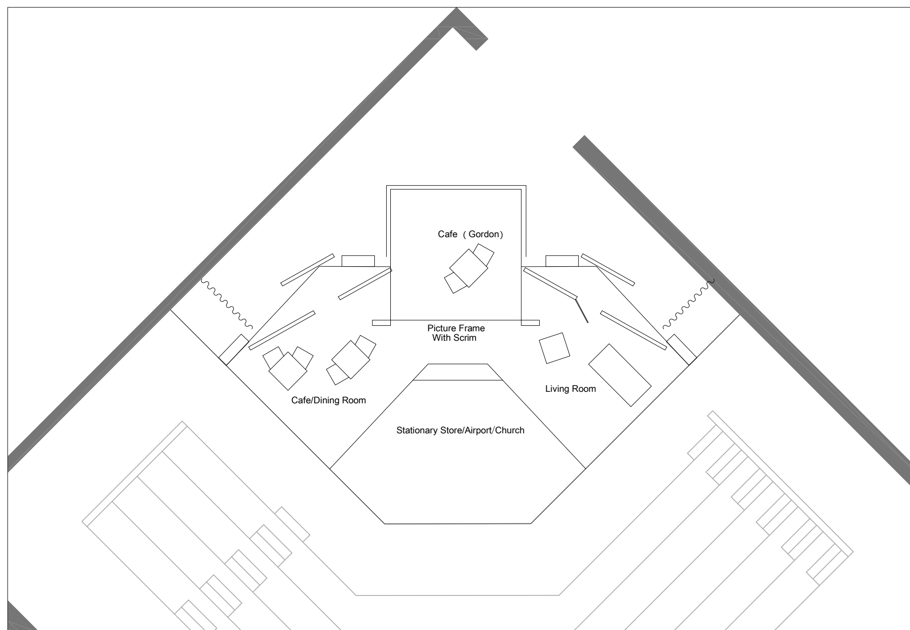
In a world dominated by technology, where ringing cell phones seem to hold the answers to our every need, it is easy to forget the profound depth of human connection that lies beyond the screen.

This play delves into the paradoxical nature of technology, which both brings us together and drives us further apart. How well do we know the person on the other end of the line? Despite our constant connectivity, many of us still grapple with feelings of isolation and solitude. *Dead Man's Cell Phone* takes us on a journey where characters discover themselves through unexpected and often absurd situations, reminding us that personal growth often emerges from life's most unforeseen twists.

As you take your seat, you may notice that our production draws inspiration from the works of the renowned artist Edward Hopper. Hopper's art often captures the yearning of individuals trying to connect with one another, reflecting and heightening one of the core themes of this play.

As entrepreneur Matt Mullenweg said, "Technology is best when it brings people together." We invite you to journey with us as we explore the power of genuine human connection, the magic of self-discovery, and the art of embracing the unknown.

Thank you for joining us on this enduring quest for connection.



'Through The Frame' Concept

Dead Man's Cell Phone
Playhouse Theatre

Ground Plan for College of DuPage's College Theater's Fall 2023 Production of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* by Set Designer Richard Arnold, Jr.

The Playwright: Sarah Ruhl

Source: Ruhl, Sarah. “About: Sarah Ruhl - The Short Story.” Sarah Ruhl, 2023, www.sarahruhlplaywright.com/about.

Sarah Ruhl is an award-winning American playwright, author, essayist, and professor. Her plays include *The Oldest Boy*; *Dear Elizabeth*; *Stage Kiss*; *In the Next Room, or the Vibrator Play* (Pulitzer Prize Finalist, 2010); *The Clean House* (Pulitzer Prize finalist, 2005; Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, 2004); *Passion Play* (Pen American Award, Fourth Freedom Forum Playwriting Award from the Kennedy Center); *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* (Helen Hayes Award for Best New Play); *Melancholy Play*; *Demeter in the City* (Nine NAACP Image Award Nominations); *Scenes from Court Life*; *How to transcend a Happy Marriage*; *For Peter Pan on her 70th Birthday*; *Eurydice*; *Orlando*; and *Late: A Cowboy Song*. Her plays have been produced on Broadway and across the country as well as internationally, and translated into fourteen languages. Originally from Chicago, Ms. Ruhl received her M.F.A. from Brown University, where she studied with Paula Vogel. She is the recipient of a Helen Merrill Emerging Playwrights Award, a Whiting Writers’ Award, a PEN Center Award for mid-career playwrights, a Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award, and a Lilly Award. She is a member of 13P and New Dramatists and won the MacArthur Fellowship in 2006. She teaches at Yale School of Drama and lives in Brooklyn with her family.

Photo: Rick Loomis

Articles for your Consideration

Finding the World of *Dead Man's Cell Phone*

BY JOY MEADS

Source: Meads, Joy. "Finding the World of 'Dead Man's Cell Phone.'" Steppenwolf Theatre, www.steppenwolf.org/articles/finding-the-world-of-dead-mans-cell-phone/.

"She's going to become her own vocabulary word," Paula Vogel has said, describing former student Sarah Ruhl's unique voice. "There's not anyone else like her. There are no models to refer to. Ten years from now, we'll say, 'It's rather Sarah Ruhl'." Indeed, others are recognizing Ruhl's distinctive talent; in the past few years, she has received a MacArthur Genius Fellowship, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, a Pulitzer Prize nomination, and productions in theaters across America. Ruhl's plays display boundless imagination and striking theatricality; her extraordinary landscapes meld familiar experience with the possibility of fantastic occurrences. Ruhl's spare yet evocative stage directions—her play The Clean House is set in "a metaphysicial Connecticut"—are a gift to her artistic collaborators, providing them with a clear framework that allows ample room for creative exploration.

Two months before first rehearsal, we talked to director Jessica Thebus, actress Polly Noonan and the *Dead Man's Cell Phone* design team about Ruhl's distinctive theatricality and creating the unique world of this play.

JESSICA THEBUS, Director: One of the things I love about Sarah's voice is that she has a sense of the mythic. *Eurydice*, one of her well-known early plays, builds on a Greek myth and *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is like a fairy tale. Her plays are very theatrical, and I would say not unlike Greek theater. There are many differences of course, but they share a mythic landscape that contains very human problems. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, you get a magical place, an unusual place, a place where you visit the underworld or miraculous things can happen, and yet the problems and issues the characters are dealing with are extremely familiar and sometimes mundane. This combination of the mundane and the magical is fertile theatrically, and it makes Sarah a playwright who is uniquely well suited to the theater. She's not writing movies that can also be performed live, she's writing plays that can only be done on the stage, because it is a place of procession and passion and mythic possibility. I think that often reflects what it is to be alive inside your own head. When you look at yourself and the world from inside your mind—your dreams and your fantasies and your jealousies—it all has a magical, epic dimension. It's why it's funny to think of the distinction between "naturalistic" versus "non-naturalistic" theater, because naturalistic theater is about how you see the world, but I think this more magical theater expresses what it's like to be the world.

POLLY NOONAN, Actress/Jean: Sarah is such a visual playwright; her plays are full of absurd and wonderful images. In *Melancholy Play*, one character becomes so depressed that she actually turns into an almond. And then the other characters have to play a scene with her. It's totally ludicrous but quite wonderful; to watch two actors talk to an almond. And yet, if you've ever dealt with someone who is deeply depressed, there are moments when people do seem to enter an almond state, where you can't quite reach them. It's a very funny way of pointing out something that is quite heartbreaking, which is that sometimes we can't reach each other.

Polly Noonan and the cast of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* at Steppenwolf Theatre - March 27, 2008
Photo by Michael Brosilow

SCOTT BRADLEY, Scenic Design: For me, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* was almost entirely inspired by a small note that Sarah puts in a parenthesis after Jean speaks: "An Edward Hopper painting, for five seconds." Hopper is one of my absolute favorite artists, because of his use of light on architecture and the way he encapsulates the feeling of loneliness in otherwise spacious rooms. So one of my first stabs at the design was recreating one of his paintings: a woman in a café window, alone and staring out. It was so much the opening scene of this play that I almost literally made the painting three dimensional. We refined it from that to something even more simple, while retaining the feeling of a Hopper painting. We created an elongated space with a very long horizontal window that opens up onto sheer blackness, a void beyond. The window becomes a metaphor for death, but also a frame for the visions we see in the play, such as the cell phone ballet. We never leave that room. All of the play's episodic descriptions—it goes to the airport, and to the stationery store, to someone's home—happen in a room that's quite spare. It celebrates Sarah's way of transforming a space's emotional metaphor from a comfortable café to the underworld. Her very first description of the setting is some chairs and tables, that's it. Rather than decorate the stage with more stuff, we're trying to use just those simple elements, and to use them in different ways than you might imagine, along with specific props to tell us where we are. It becomes a challenge to make the most of our choices, and to be as creative as possible. I think the set is going to be quite familiar yet expansive in its possibilities of unexpected change.

LINDA ROETHKE, Costume Design: We started the design process last fall over a cup of coffee in a wonderful old café in Andersonville, appropriate when you think about it as the play is placed in one. Jessica had recommended reading Mark Strand's *Hopper*, and so we were thinking about Edward Hopper's paintings, which is timely, because the Art Institute opened an exhibition of his work in February. There's such stillness and a sense of waiting in Hopper's paintings; he captures the seemingly mundane moments in life when extraordinary things can and do happen. We talked about the paintings in relationship to this play about a woman in her middle years waiting for something to happen to her in life. Scott's design for the set is a deconstruction of a Hopper painting, and it uses the colors that he loved so much in his interiors. The clothing palette is similar, though heightened somewhat in intensity and texture. I believe Sarah sees color when considering some of her extraordinary characters. I very much appreciate that aesthetic as a designer. One of the challenges that Jessica and I have been in conversation about is the delicate balance that needs to be struck between theatrical realism (drama occurring in realistic setting) and magic realism (magical elements appearing in a realistic setting). The characters have very real motivations and objectives, yet some of them contribute to the magical moments of the play in a visual way through their clothing. Striking that balance in such characters as Mrs. Gottlieb and The Other Woman is the artistic challenge of designing the costumes for this play. Mrs. Gottlieb, a character in her 70s, has a little Miss Haversham (of Great Expectations), "the house smells of dry cracked curtains," and a drop of Cruella De Ville, "she wears furs indoors." Yet her grief is very palpable, a mother suffering after the death of a favorite child.

JIM INGALLS, Lighting Design: We're responding to the loneliness and the isolation of Hopper's work. The set isn't heavy on detail. It's heavy on plane and diagonal, but there's not a lot of molding and extra stuff, it's all "Hopper-spare." I'm hoping that I'll be able to tone the set in a way that enhances that. Basically, we're trying to find a balance between the café and the café modulated. We're never going to really lose the café, it'll be that space with changes in temperature, in volume and in angle.

ANDRE PLUESS, Sound Design and Composition: Right now, I'm thinking about unity and cohesion. *Dead Man's Cell Phone* works as a sustained trance or dream, from the moment the audience enters the world until the end. What we've all been working on is how to frame the entire experience in a way that makes the magical moments feel cohesive with the more naturalistic scenes, so we don't feel like we're in a play and then, all of a sudden, a dance piece. Right now, Jessica and I are in the process of trying to find an instrumental vocabulary for the show. But more importantly, we're trying to explore the gray area where literal music—meaning melody, and harmony, and chord and rhythm—meets sound design. For example, we've been discussing heavily the cell phone ballet in the show. Is it simply a collage of treated, mediated sound, perhaps with elements of voice interspersed with fragments of melody, or is it something that is specifically metered musically, that has a clearer tempo and structure? Or is it somewhere in between? What's the most effective way to evoke the feelings in the sequence? Is it by being more angular in our approach to "music," or is it by creating the most lyrical music I can possibly write?

Why Ask Why? Try Some Lies

BY SARAH RUHL

Source: Ruhl, Sarah. “Why Ask Why? Try Some Lies.” Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, 28 Sept. 2008, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-sep-28-ca-sarah-ruhl28-story.html.

If SOMEONE were to ask me why I wrote this strange play *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, I might be silent, I might be evasive, or I might outright lie. But imagine that I said that I was interested in the culture of cellphones, in how they have completely altered our emotional, psychic and body states to the point where culture (and perhaps not even evolution) has caught up.

Imagine that I said I was interested in how there is no longer any privacy, nor is there any reason anymore to talk to strangers on elevators. I might say that I don’t feel comfortable with modernity. That the last novel to feel contemporary to me was the modernist novel. That I am trying to make sense of the times we live in, the Digital Age. An age that feels bodiless, as though there is no longer any imprint. That I feel, at times, lost.

And what of the morbid quality of the title, this *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*? Why connect cellphones with death? If I took a journalistic approach, I would tell you that my morbid approach to cellphones is based on recent studies in Israel that have linked long-term cellphone use with salivary gland cancer and brain tumors, and that a new study in Denmark has linked talking on the cellphone during pregnancy to a wide array of emotional and behavioral problems in the grown children, and that these two studies have tempted me to chuck my cellphone at last. But I haven’t chucked it yet. In any case, the following essay is full of lies and this is based on actual scientific evidence, and so while I do exhort you to chuck your cellphone, especially if your family has a history of salivary gland cancer, as mine does, or if you are pregnant, as I had been, I am not qualified to take a scientific stance on the matter.

And truly, am I the best person to tell you why I wrote this play? In fact, I might be the very last person to have any insight into why I wrote it or what you should think about it. So let me introduce to you an expert on my work, Jacques Joli-Coeur. He is a very eminent theatrical scholar, at this very moment now working on a book about ladders and their usages backstage, historical and modern, and the eventual extinction of the ladder as a means of hanging lights. According to Mr. Joli-Coeur, “Ms. Ruhl began writing *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* when a man’s phone kept ringing and ringing at a cafe and she wished that he was dead. Ms. Ruhl was reportedly raised Catholic, so presumably she felt guilty about this death-wish, and wrote a play to expiate her bad thoughts about her fellow man. This was in the year 1998.”

And here I pause. Because I recall that I did not own a cellphone in the year 1998; in fact, I bought one three years later, standing on the base of a mountain in Utah from a cowboy because my mother was having a medical test and I wanted to speak with her. So Jacques Joli-Coeur cannot have been right; no, he was not right at all -- about my work, or about chronology. And so I ask you: What is the truth?

The truth is that Jacques Joli-Coeur was a cabdriver I met on the way to see the Dalai Lama at Radio City Music Hall in 2007. I wrote down the name Jacques Joli-Coeur in a little red book for future use. I am sorry, because I do not know if the truth about Jacques Joli-Coeur is more illuminating than the fictional one, and now his name, his beautiful name, is lost to me forever. I can never name a character after him because now you know his real identity. And so Jacques Joli-Coeur is not to be believed as an expert on what *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* is about.

And we find ourselves in the dark again.

So many untruths! So many red herrings! In the play in question, the main character is called Jean, and some might say she tell lies, but others might call them confabulations or fictions. Some might call them base untruths, others might call them acts of compassion. I might call them stories. And is this not our profession, the art of telling a story? Perhaps it is no longer our province. Leave storytelling to the politicians and leave artists the job of stating the facts. Oh, dear, again I digress, I keep digressing, tie my hands, tie me down!

Joys of multiplicity

The POINT is: Is this not one of the great joys in life, and in art, for a thing to be simultaneously three or four or five things at once? There is a word in another language, untranslatable, I am sure there is -- I think it is in French, or Polish, or perhaps Romanian -- that means “the ability of an individual or an audience member to take the absurd seriously, yes, to take the absurd quite seriously, and to touch at, to trace, the most grave matters, death itself, with a certain lightness.”

As Mr. Jacques Joli-Coeur writes: “At the end of a long day, full of broken ladders, full of missed opportunity, it is my great joy to sit in a dark theater, and to see a play that is many things at once -- knowable and unknowable, familiar and strange, sad and happy both. Sometimes I cry a little bit and I don’t know why. But this doesn’t bother me. And the next day, I drive, I drive, I pick up a crazy passenger, and sometimes it is a good day for driving in this God-forsaken city, and sometimes it isn’t, but I do thank the good Lord for being alive.”

I want to thank Mr. Joli-Coeur for offering his insights, because we as writers or artists or even as private citizens one day reach a personal chasm, a gulf that separates our own conviction that it is in fact our very uselessness that qualifies us to speak and a peculiarly American injunction to be useful and to know. Please, dear God, dear reader, allow me to know things that I do not know. Knowing things that I do not know is the only real qualification for this strangest of jobs, the scribbler for the stage. It is when we start to believe what we pretend to know about ourselves, when we, in short, begin to act as though we are experts on ourselves . . . (and this is, after all, the modern age, we are all experts of ourselves . . .) that we begin to lie. And because I love you, dear reader, most of all. You are the very last person I would ever lie to.

Margaret Welsh and Lenny Von Dohlen in *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*
at South Coast Repertory, 2008
Photo by Ed Krieger

Edward Hopper and American Solitude

PANDEMIC OR NOT, THE ARTIST'S MASTERLY PAINTINGS EXPLORE CONDITIONS OF ALONENESS AS PROOF OF BELONGING BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Source: Schjeldahl, Peter. "Edward Hopper and American Solitude." The New Yorker, The New Yorker, 1 June 2020, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/08/edward-hopper-and-american-solitude.

"Cape Cod Morning"

I've been thinking a lot about Edward Hopper. So have other stay-at-homes, I notice online. The visual bard of American solitude—not loneliness, a maudlin projection—speaks to our isolated states these days with fortuitous poignance. But he is always doing that, pandemic or no pandemic. Aloneness is his great theme, symbolizing America: insecure selfhoods in a country that is only abstractly a nation. "E pluribus unum," a magnificent ideal, thuds on "unum" every day throughout the land. Only law—we're a polity of lawyers—confers unity on the United States, which might sensibly be a Balkans of regional sovereignties had the Civil War not been so awful as to remove that option, come what may. Hopper's region is the Northeast, from New York to parts of New England, but his perceptions apply from coast to coast. Born in Nyack in 1882, and dying in 1967 after living for half a century in an apartment on Washington Square, he couldn't conceivably have developed as he did in any other culture. His subjects—atomized persons, inauspicious places—are specific to his time. But his mature art, which took two decades to gestate before consolidating in the nineteen-twenties, is timeless, or perhaps time-free: a series of freeze-dried, uncannily telling moments.

Though termed a realist, Hopper is more properly a Symbolist, investing objective appearance with clenched, melancholy subjectivity. He was an able draftsman and masterly as a painter of light and shadow, but he ruthlessly subordinated aesthetic pleasure to the compacted description—as dense as uranium—of things that answered to his feelings without exposing them. Nearly every house that he painted strikes me as a self-portrait, with brooding windows and almost never a visible or, should one be indicated, inviting door. If his pictures sometimes seem awkwardly forced, that's not a flaw; it's a guarantee that he has pushed the communicative capacities of painting to their limits, then a little bit beyond. He leaves us alone with our own solitude, taking our breath away and not giving it back. Regarding his human subjects as "lonely" evades their truth. We might freak out if we had to be those people, but—look!—they're doing O.K., however grim their lot. Think of Samuel Beckett's famous tag "I can't go on. I'll go on." Now delete the first sentence. With Hopper, the going-on is not a choice.

I haven't seen "Edward Hopper: A Fresh Look at Landscape," a large show at the lately reopened Beyeler Foundation, Switzerland's premier museum of modern art, outside Basel. I take its fine catalogue, edited by the exhibition's curator, Ulf Küster, as occasion enough for reflecting anew on the artist's stubborn force. I rely as well on memories that we likely share of encountering "Nighthawks" (1942) and "Early Sunday Morning" (1930), but also, really, anything from his hand. Once you've seen a Hopper, it stays seen, lodged in your mind's eye. The reason, beyond exacting observation and authentic feeling, is an exceptional stylistic cleverness. Hopper was explicit on this score, saying, in 1933, "I have tried to present my sensations in what is the most congenial and impressive form possible to me." Exasperated by questions of what his works meant, he squelched one interviewer by exclaiming, "I'm after ME." The remark reflects his debts to European Romanticism and Symbolism, which he absorbed in depth while stripping away any stylistic resemblances. Highly literate, he read and reread nineteenth-century German and French poetry all his life. His poetic liberties in a realist mode point back to one of his favorite predecessors, Gustave Courbet. And a certain smoldering vehemence in Hopper puts me in mind of Théodore Géricault, except tamped down to static views of drab actualities. Hopper imported, or smuggled, some emotive powers of European traditions to unforgiving American soil.

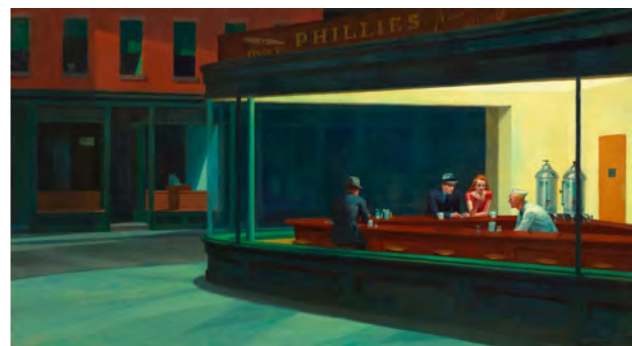
Having studied in New York with Robert Henri and other preceptors of the Ashcan School, who addressed modernity with vernacular realism, he had three sojourns in Paris. There he emulated minor Post-Impressionists with restless variations of tonal contrasts and off-kilter compositions. Back home, while supporting himself as a commercial illustrator, he found a way forward by way of etching. Heavily inked cows, railroad tracks, and a banal house in "American Landscape" (1920) presaged a direction unlike that of any of his contemporaries. The closest was his mystically inclined acquaintance Charles Burchfield, whose rapturous treatments of unprepossessing sites in western New York State have aged very well, informing a trend today among young painters toward potent representation. Less imitable, Hopper has never ceased to influence the thinking, at the very least, of subsequent artists. Willem de Kooning, as Küster recounts in the catalogue, praised him to an interviewer in 1959. De Kooning noted a startling effect of the summarily brushed woods in the background of "Cape Cod Morning" (1950), in which a woman is seen from the side leaning forward at a bay window and staring at something beyond the picture's right edge: "The forest looks real, like a forest, like you turn on it and there it is, like you turn and actually see it." That's on the mark with Hopper: thereness that becomes hereness, in a viewer's eye and mind.

A catalogue essay by David M. Lubin, the esteemed scholar of art history in relation to popular culture, makes a connection that I've often thought about myself: Hopper and Alfred Hitchcock. The Yank painter and the Brit cinéaste display remarkable parallels as visual storytellers. Hitchcock, learning American experience from scratch after immigrating to Hollywood in 1939, at the age of thirty-nine, acknowledged the influence. The Bates house in "Psycho" reproduces, with simplifications, the already suitably ominous Victorian in Hopper's "House by the Railroad" (1925). Lubin concentrates on suspenseful narrative tactics, which I would enlarge to cover methods of composition and aspects of temperament. Hitchcock storyboarded scenes and shots for his films. Hopper (incidentally, an addicted moviegoer) as much as did the same for his paintings. I once got to inspect a stack of studies that he'd made on paper. Some sheets bore only drawn rectangles: seeking the right proportions for what he had in mind. Then there were congeries of details with which he auditioned, in effect, particular body parts, architectural features, or other elements that would be knitted into dramatic wholes. Both he and Hitchcock aimed for the soundness and the suddenness of sights that compress time in service to a pre-imagined vision. Each knew the feeling—because he felt it—that the effort would trigger in viewers.

Hitchcock shares with Hopper a predilection for jarring relations of backgrounds to foregrounds in pictorial space: perhaps someone or something relatively innocuous is nearby and something less calming is yonder. Lubin offers the example, from “North by Northwest,” of the distant crop-dusting plane at work “where there ain’t no crops.” In certain pictures of rural dwellings by Hopper, woods (like those in “Cape Cod Morning”) or topographical formations subtly menace a human intrusion. But in Hitchcock’s work, and in Hopper’s, especially, the unnerving relation of the far to the near is often reversed, and what’s mysterious, if not sinister, becomes identical with our point of view. What are we doing here, seeing that? Voyeurism—the saddest excitement—may be suggested. The emotional tug of many of Hitchcock’s characters and all of Hopper’s requires their unawareness of being looked at. To see them is to take on a peculiar responsibility. Hopper often produces the unease even in unpeopled landscapes and views of buildings, as if catching nature and habitation defenselessly exposed in disarray, mundanity, or squalor. The New England coastlines, lighthouses, and sailboats that he painted on summer excursions get off relatively easy. He liked them. But they, too, feel taken by surprise, depicted from odd angles of vision. No judgment is passed on anyone or anything, one way or another. The naked fact of their existence is provocative enough. “Why is there something rather than nothing?” cosmologists wonder. Hopper is all ears for the answer.

Politically, Hopper was “a sort of McKinley conservative,” his friend the novelist John Dos Passos remarked. The artist scorned the New Deal art programs of the thirties as sops to mediocrity. Interrupting a vacation on Cape Cod in 1940, he returned to New York to register to vote in order to cast his ballot against Franklin Roosevelt. The orientation leaves no mark in his work that I can detect—Hopper’s artistic passion disallowed the trivia of opinionating—but it chimes with a wary individualism that could seem to refuse agreement about practically everything with almost everybody except his painter wife, Josephine Nivison. Having first met as art students around 1905, they married in 1924 and were symbiotically a unit. (Their closeness strikingly recalls that of Hitchcock’s taut, creatively collaborative marriage with the screenwriter Alma Reville.) Nivison supervised a detailed ledger of all Hopper’s works and served, at her insistence and with his consent, as his only model when he painted nudes. She was as vivacious as he was taciturn. (She once joked that talking with him was like dropping a rock down a well and waiting to hear it hit, in vain.) Hopper’s last painting, “Two Comedians” (1965), pictures the pair of them in commedia-dell’arte costume as Pierrot and Pierrette on a stage, taking a bow.

Nivison aside, or standing guard, Hopper’s independence feels absolute, repelling attempts to associate him with any other artist or social group. In this, he updates and passes along to the future the spirit of a paradigmatically American text, “Self-Reliance,” minus Ralph Waldo Emerson’s optimism. The free, questing citizen has devolved into one or another of millions rattling around on a comfortless continent. Can you pledge patriotic allegiance to a void? Hopper shows how, exploring a condition in which, by being separate, we belong together. You don’t have to like the idea, but, once you’ve truly experienced this painter’s art, it is as impossible to ignore as a stone in your shoe.



“Nighthawks”

Other Reviews

A Nagging Call to Tidy Up an Unfinished Life

BY CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Source: Isherwood, Charles. “A Nagging Call to Tidy Up an Unfinished Life.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 5 Mar. 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/03/05/theater/reviews/05cell.html.

That commonplace gadget you are advised to turn off when the lights in the theater go down, or when the plane takes off, becomes a mysteriously powerful totem of transformation in *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, the beguiling new comedy by Sarah Ruhl that opened on Tuesday night at Playwrights Horizons.

Mary-Louise Parker, her poker-faced style embellished with deliciously odd new flourishes, stars as an unexceptional woman who embarks on a loopy odyssey into the lives of others when she inherits, confiscates really, the phone of a stranger she meets in a cafe.

As the title of this poetic fantasy intimates, that meeting is a bit awkward because one of the parties happens to be dead when it occurs.

Hunched over a bowl of soup at lunch one day, the mousy-looking Jean (Ms. Parker) becomes flustered, then irritated, then quietly outraged as the phone of a man across the way trills insistently. He makes no move to answer, so Jean gingerly approaches, only to find that the man is not afflicted with rudeness but with a mild case of rigor mortis.

The phone continues to ring. And as Jean will later say with mournful truth, a ringing phone demands to be answered. So she flips it open. “Hello?” Pause. A sidelong glance at the guy who failed to fog a spoon. “No, he’s not. Can I take a message?”

Jean will proceed to take many for her new intimate, who turns out to be a man named Gordon Gottlieb (T. Ryder Smith, terrifically mordant in a monologue from the beyond). She will learn that Gordon has had a frostily elegant mother, an emotionally estranged wife, a mysterious mistress, a lonely brother and a sinister career.

Clinging doggedly to the symbol of her life-changing communion with a corpse, Jean will not stop at playing the dead man’s social secretary either. She also channels Gordon’s spirit, after a fashion, by delivering messages to his survivors that she hopes will bring them succor, even if she has to fudge the truth. She tells his mother, whose calls Gordon had stopped returning, that he’d tried to phone her on the day he died; her number was on the outgoing calls list really.

“I only knew him for a short time,” Jean confides to the Almighty on a visit to church to pray for Gordon’s soul, fudging even to the presumably all-knowing, “but I think that I loved him, in a way.”

This seemingly absurd statement is typical of the startling leaps made by the characters in Ms. Ruhl's work, which blends the mundane and the metaphysical, the blunt and the obscure, the patently bizarre and the bizarrely moving. Characters in her plays, which include *The Clean House* and *Eurydice*, negotiate the no man's land between the everyday and the mystical, talking like goofs one minute and philosophers the next. She writes surrealist fantasies that happen to be populated by eccentrically real people, comedies in which the surface illogic of dreams is made meaningful made truthful by the deeper logic of human feeling.

Her theme in *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is the paradoxical ability of the title device (and the people who use it) both to unite and isolate. Gordon's mother, played with glistening imperiousness by Kathleen Chalfant, ends her funeral oration by calling for a certain hymn by Rodgers and Hammerstein: "You'll Never Walk Alone."

"That's right," she adds dryly, her eulogy having been interrupted by the telltale sound of a muffled phone. "Because you'll always have a machine in your pocket that might ring."

But the machine in the pocket means that wherever you are present, you are potentially absent too. "I never had a cellphone," Jean reflects. "I didn't want to be there, you know. Like if your phone is on you're supposed to be there. Sometimes I like to disappear. But it's like when everyone has their cellphones on, no one is there. It's like we're all disappearing the more we're there."

As the play takes surprising twists and leaps right up into the stratosphere, actually the lament for the supposed coziness of predigital culture (some of which we've all heard before) takes on layers of nuance and contradiction. In one scene Jean uses Gordon's phone as a tool of emotional withdrawal from his brother. (Anyone who has felt a twinge of jealousy toward a friend's Blackberry can relate.)

But it is the act of answering a phone that draws Jean into the mysteries of life, death and the varieties of love, from the compassion for a stranger that an overheard conversation can evoke to the continuing challenge of romantic intimacy.

Ms. Parker, who also stars as the pot-dealing soccer mom on Showtime's "Weeds," gives a bold, stylized performance in tune with the dreamy spirit of Ms. Ruhl's play. With a floppy hat pulled down over her ears, nerdy eyeglasses and a flowery dress over black leggings, Jean initially looks like a Roz Chast character who has escaped from the pages of The New Yorker.

But as the play proceeds, Ms. Parker eases up on the uncertain gait, the deadpan nasal drone, transforming her character from a cartoon into a human being. A nice touch: the way this far-from-earthbound woman's heels never touch the ground when she's sitting down.

The director, Anne Bogart, best known for directing her own troupe, the SITI Company, is likewise sympathetic to the hallucinatory style of the play. The set by G. W. Mercier, mostly a series of colored panels, and the lighting by Brian H. Scott evoke the paintings of Edward Hopper: the lonely rooms, the slanted light, the night-tinted hues. One epigraph to the text of the play is a quotation from the poet Mark Strand's book of commentary on Hopper.

Ms. Ruhl's allegiance to whimsy can be exasperating. I could have done without the cloying bit in which Jean brings Gordon's family little gifts from the cafe where he died: a saltshaker, a knife, a spoon. And the bond she forges with his brother, Dwight (David Aaron Baker), over the glory of embossed stationery rates too highly on the cuteness scale for my taste.

But her affection for the unexpected phrase, the kooky observation, the unlikely juxtaposition is essential to her central belief that the smallest and most trivial things in life a bowl of lobster bisque, in Gordon's case can be charged with meaning. And her characters' quirkiness is in keeping, too, with the play's doleful central theme, that each human being is a book full of surprises even to intimates, and one that is destined to be left unfinished.

That observation, quoted by Gordon's mother at his funeral, comes from Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*. I suspect the advent of the text message would not have changed his opinion.

Mary-Louise Parker, with T. Ryder Smith, in Sarah Ruhl's new comedy "Dead Man's Cell Phone."
Photo by Sara Krulwich

Analysis Tools

Things to Think About Prior to Performance

- Why do we tell lies? Who are we helping/hurting? What could motivate someone to lie or embellish the truth to a total stranger?
- Do cell phones connect us or keep us distanced? How does technology affect our daily lives and interpersonal relationships?
- What does an “authentic connection" mean today? How do we express our connection to those we love?
- How often do you talk on the phone? How often do you text? Which is your preference?
- What are the benefits of helping others? What does it take to be selfless? What responsibilities do we have in the lives of others?
- Are we able to keep secrets from anyone today with the rise of technology? Who is keeping our secrets?
- How much are we impacted by death in our lives?
- What types of relationships are most important in your life? Familial? Romantic? Professional?

Things to Watch For in Performance

- Was there any casting that you thought was especially appropriate or inappropriate? Why?
- Was there a good, motivated relationship between the set and the action of the play?
- Were there levels on the stage for variety? If so, did they heighten the story?
- How does the color scheme and costume design heighten the show? Pay particular attention to the time periods hinted at for specific characters. Why do you think that is?
- There are a ton of props used in this play. Do these props help further the plot or character development? How?
- How is the passage of time and location conveyed through design?
- How does the sound design help heighten the story?

Things to Think About After the Performance

- What do you think the core value and then the theme is of this play?
- Why is this play still significant in the American Theater?
- Do our experiences or our relationships define who we are?
- How does the play challenge our attachment to cell phones?
- What do you think compelled Jean to take Gordon’s cell phone?
- Many of the characters in this play are extreme characterizations. Which character do you think was the most extreme? Least extreme? Was this an effective tool for telling this story?
- How do the relationships between the characters change throughout the show?
- Did this play challenge your perception of life and death? If so, how?
- How does humor intersect with the play’s deeper philosophical questions?
- What does the play suggest about the nature of memory and the preservation of identity?
- What is the role of silences and pauses in this play? How can the use of silence contribute to the overall concept and thematic exploration for this production?

Other Analysis Tools

- What happens in the very last moments of the play? Certainly, the last few minutes, but, more importantly, the last thirty seconds? In that time, WHAT happens or is said, and what does that say about what the play is “about”? In a nutshell, how does the playwright drive his point(s) home? This counts for both the last scene of the play and the Maths Appendix.
- And what is the significance of the title? Why did the playwright decide that this was the most quintessential title for this work?

Additional Information

The running time for this production is approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes, which includes one 15 minute intermission.

Please join us for a pre-show discussion Thursday, October 5 at 6:45pm in MAC 140 preceding the preview performance. Note that the pre-show discussions will include the director and designers and will be a discussion on the approach to this production.

There will also be a post-show discussion following the Friday, October 13 performance. The post-show will be with the director, cast and crew, and we will be fielding questions from the audience.

Please join us!

Publicity Photo for College of DuPage’s College Theater’s Fall 2023 Production of *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*
Costume Design by Kim Morris
Top: Nola Helms as A Woman, Jean
Bottom: Nicholas Washington as A Dead Man, Gordon