Women’s Voices on American Stages in the Early Twenty-First Century

_Sarah Ruhl and Her Contemporaries_

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Introduction
The Context for Ruhl and Her Contemporaries, or Women’s Playwriting: Strictly Prohibited in the New Century?

For more than a decade, activists, writers, and critics have been calling for a change to unfair working conditions faced by contemporary female playwrights. During the 1998–99 theater season, the Guerilla Girls put stickers in the stalls of women’s restrooms in New York City theaters that had not produced a play by a woman that season—this included some of the city’s most well-regarded companies. The stickers proclaimed, “In this theater the taking of photographs, the use of recording devices, and the production of plays by women are strictly prohibited.” The Susan Jonas and Suzanne Bennett study “Report on the Status of Women: A Limited Engagement?” was released three years later, in January 2002. In their study, funded by the New York State Council on the Arts, Jonas and Bennett reported on the number of female playwrights at work in the American regional theater and in Off-Broadway theaters at several moments: from 1969 to 1975, the number was 7 percent; in the 1994–94 season, 17 percent of plays were written by women; in the 2000–2001 season, 20 percent “had a woman on the writing team”; and in the then current season of 2001–2, 17 percent of plays were written by women.1 They observed that in 1998 in Off-Off Broadway theaters the percentage of plays written by women neared 30 percent, but if one looked uptown to Broadway houses that same year, only 8 percent of dramas and 1 percent of musicals had female authors. While women’s voices might not have been literally prohibited in the years covered by the study, the statistics Jonas and Bennett gathered demonstrated that on American stages, these voices were rare. It was at roughly this time that Sarah Ruhl began her professional playwriting career.

In The New York Times the next year, Jason Zinoman trumpeted “The Season of the Female Playwright.” Noting the perception among playwrights that Jonas and Bennett’s study was a “turning point,” he compared the 2002 and 2003 seasons: “Last year’s fall season did include New York premieres by Caryl
Churchill, Dael Orlandersmith and Elaine May, but the majority of new plays were written by men and there were hardly any debuts by female playwrights.” By contrast in 2003, he argued, “Downtown, the highest profile commercial play was Omnium Gatherum by Ms. [Theresa] Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros. Arguably the best-reviewed plays so far this season have been Lisa Loomer’s Living Out, Amy Freed’s Beard of Avon and Paula Vogel’s Long Christmas Ride Home.” But before Zinoman concluded his thoughts, he did note that even in this golden season for women, “the only play written by a woman on Broadway this fall closed before it opened—Bobbi Boland by Nancy Hasty.”

The public furor over gender equity in American playwriting quieted for a time, Sarah Ruhl’s list of plays and productions expanded, and tension continued to simmer just beneath the surface of critical discourse. Writing a little more than four years after Zinoman, Alexis Greene decried the lack of a new and comprehensive study mapping male and female writers’ work opportunities in American Theatre. In October 2008, female playwrights took matters into their own hands in order to restart large-scale, public conversations. Playwrights Sarah Schulman and Julia Jordan organized a town hall–style meeting at the nation’s oldest organization supporting playwrights, New Dramatists, to discuss the struggles female writers continue to face if they aim to have their work produced Off-Broadway, a segment of New York theater generally hospitable to new, nonmusical plays. The then current 2008–9 season at the Public Theater would feature six new plays by men and one by a woman; at the Manhattan Theatre Club five news plays were written by men and one was by a woman (Lynn Nottage, whose Pulitzer Prize–winning Ruined will be discussed in this study). At the time of the meeting there were no nonmusical plays on Broadway written by women.

Meanwhile, at the instigation of Jordan, Emily Glassberg Sands began studying the situation. When she shared her findings at the 59E59 Theatre in New York in June 2009, she confirmed some assumptions while upending others. Sands found that in 2008, 82 percent of plays in nonprofit theaters with more than 99 seats were written by men while only 18 percent were written by women, thus indicating no profound change from the seasons studied by Jonas and Bennett. In addition, she found that there are more scripts being written by men, so the percentage of male-authored scripts that find their way to production is actually almost equal to the number authored by women; she found that women are more likely to write plays about women and that plays about women are less likely to be produced; she found that women artistic directors (those who schedule plays for production) tend to anticipate bias and thus worry more about female-authored texts’ economic value than male artistic directors; and she found that while women’s scripts, when they make it to
Broadway, are actually more profitable than men’s by an average of 18 percent, they play for shorter runs.\(^6\)

As summer turned to fall and the 2009–10 season began, the Sands study was fresh in people’s minds, and stories about her findings turned up in a variety of mainstream and specialist publications. Marsha Norman’s article in the November issue of *American Theatre*, “Not There Yet: What Will it Take to Achieve Equality for Women in Theatre?” ranks among the most influential of these pieces. Norman demanded change, calling on the major arts-funding organizations to legislate against discrimination of women writers—in the same way they protect every other kind of writer. She simply found the 80/20 divide unacceptable and argued persuasively, “We have to commit to telling all the stories of this country. We need to make some new rules for ourselves, and do our jobs fairly. We need to stop expecting plays by women to be soft. We need to see what they actually are when we read them. We should’ve done this a long time ago. But we can do it now. We can even up these numbers.”\(^7\)

By season’s end, however, the numbers were not even. The *New York Times* ran a story in mid-May as part of its Tony Award coverage called “Disappointing Season for Broadway Women.” As *The New York Times* discussed the female writers up for Tony consideration, they observed that 4 of the 22 nominees were women. Two of the four women were in musical categories—Lucy Prebble and Sherie Rene Scott.\(^8\) This is worth noting, because the musical theater has been hospitable to female writers in recent years.\(^9\) The other two women were Edna Ferber—whose *Royal Family*, coauthored with George S. Kaufman, was up for a Best Revival Tony 73 years after its 1927 debut—and the sole living author of a straight play to receive recognition, Sarah Ruhl. She was nominated for *In the Next Room*, her Broadway debut.

The other award for which *In the Next Room* was a contender, the Pulitzer Prize, also inspired controversy in the spring of 2010. Reaction to the award was nearly instantaneous. Three plays were designated nominees: *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Diety* by Kristoffer Diaz, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* by Rajiv Joseph, and *In the Next Room* by Sarah Ruhl. The Pulitzer winner was a title not originally on the list of finalists (created by a five-member jury of critics, artists, and academics) but one that several Pulitzer Prize board members went to see the night before the final vote on the year’s winner.\(^10\) The Broadway musical *Next to Normal*, the only title among the four contenders running in New York at the time of the deliberations, took home what is arguably the highest prize in American playwriting.

In the 2010–11 and 2011–12 awards cycles, the Pulitzer Prize did honor work by women again. Lisa D’Amour’s *Detroit* was a Pulitzer finalist; Quiara Alegría Hudes’s *Water by the Spoonful*, also considered in this study, won the Pulitzer in 2012, making Hudes the first Latina author to win the award. But
the Tony Awards did not honor women writers either year in the best play category. In 2011 Cheri Steinkellner was nominated for her book of *Sister Act*; in 2012 Margaret Edson’s *Wit* was a nominee for best revival of a play. Neither writer won in her respective category. No women writers of straight plays were nominated in 2010–11 because there were no new straight plays on Broadway written by women that opened that season. In the 2011–12 season, however, Lydia R. Diamond, Katori Hall, and Theresa Rebeck all had new work on Broadway stages.

Sarah Ruhl’s Serious Success

Despite these conditions, Sarah Ruhl dominated the American stage at the beginning of the twenty-first century. She had 12 premiere productions in as many years. One more script had major remountings at the Yale Repertory Theatre in January 2010 followed by the Classic Stage Company in September 2010. And four of her plays were among the ten most-produced plays in the American theaters that are members of the Theatre Communications Group’s organization: in 2010–11, *In the Next Room, or the Vibrator Play* was the seventh-most-produced play and in 2011–12, the third most produced; in 2009–10, *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* was tied for the second-most-produced play; in 2008–9, *Eurydice* was the fifth-most-produced play; and in 2007–8 *The Clean House* was tied for the second-most-produced play. Across the country, if theatergoers were attending the premiere of a new play, there was a good chance that play was written by Sarah Ruhl.

Academic scholarship has not yet succeeded in catching up with the prolific and widely produced Ruhl. The first book on her work appeared in 2011. In *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays*, James Al-Shamma did an exceptional job of analyzing each of her major plays. He also amplified the primary trope running through the voluminous popular commentary on her work in newspapers and magazines. In these reviews, critics applied a limited number of adjectives to Ruhl’s work over and over again, regardless of whether reviewers were praising her plays or dismissing them: they called the plays fantastical, fanciful, hallucinatory, offbeat, quirky, and, most frequently, whimsical. Al-Shamma also describes Ruhl’s style, particularly in her early plays, as whimsical. I am intrigued by the subtext of these words. The words critics, popular and now academic, use to describe Ruhl’s plays all suggest an otherness, a strangeness, and a disconnection from some facets of reality. My goal in this study is to reveal another and equally important dimension of Ruhl’s dramaturgy. I will contend that Ruhl is not simply quirky and whimsical. Instead, I intend to prove that she also has a passionate interest in the social concerns and ethical questions that characterized her (first) great decade of success. While her work generally,
and sometimes emphatically, eschews psychological realism—in terms of character, subtext, and action—that does not mean she fails to engage the troubles of the world around her in profound ways. In fact, quite the opposite is true. As she has explained when discussing her admiration for Italo Calvino and her own tendency toward existential comedy, “Lightness isn’t stupidity . . . It’s actually a philosophical and aesthetic viewpoint, deeply serious, and has a kind of wisdom—stepping back to laugh at horrible things even as you’re experiencing them.” Furthermore, these deeply serious matters connect her to the work of other women writing plays in the decade. Ruhl’s work should not be read in isolation, because her work is part of a larger conversation by female playwrights about the values present in and missing from contemporary American culture. This conversation was taking place on Broadway and off, as well as in regional theaters around the country; well-established authors and emerging writers lent their voices to this multilogue. I will, therefore, read five of Ruhl’s most popular plays—those listed on Theatre Communications Group’s (TCG) most-produced list, and one of the last of her plays to receive a New York premiere in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and the last published before the end of 2010, Passion Play, in relation to single plays by Lisa Loomer, Diana Son, Jenny Schwartz, Joan Didion, Kate Fodor, Young Jean Lee, Bathsheba Doran, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Lynn Nottage, and Kia Corthron.

My focus on the popular is quite purposeful. In “Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein,” Jill Dolan wrote, “Conducting feminist practice, as third wavers advocate, from a place admittedly within capitalism (and within dominant ideology) could be advantageous, instead of holding on to what might finally be an idealist belief that feminist practice can remain outside capitalism’s reach. Many American feminist performance theorists and critics have historically looked to the outside or the margins for effective, socially critical theatre. Perhaps it is now time to acknowledge the potential of looking inside as well, and to address feminism as a critique or value circulating within our most commercial theatres.” While I wish to qualify what being “third wave” might entail—I will discuss the relationship of third-wave feminism to this study below—I do advocate the approach Dolan describes here and find it timely and necessary. I want to highlight the kind of feminist theater that aims for and reaches a broad audience in the new century: the kind of theater created by Sarah Ruhl and this selection of her contemporaries. These women have boldly claimed a spot at the center of American theater, against the odds, and the characters they craft, the stories they tell, the questions they pose, and the ideas they materialize have the potential to shape the cultural imagination of a large group of theatergoers as a complex new era unfolds. These expansive contributions demand the same kind of rigorous and sustained critical attention that alternative feminist theater received from
scholars in decades past. Like feminist acts on the margins of the theater world, feminist acts in the center matter greatly to the history of American theater and culture.

**Riding Waves of Emotion**

The situation faced by most contemporary female playwrights—the lack of production opportunity and the subsequent lack of recognition—makes me angry. Outraged. It’s a passion that’s drives me from computer to library to theater and back to the computer in a continuous loop of writing, reading, and watching, but I haven’t always been sure how (and how forthrightly) to express it.

During one phase of my writing, I felt particularly wary of sounding “too angry” here at the book’s start, both because I didn’t want to make it easy to dismiss my points as ranting, thus giving readers an easy excuse to put the book down before they’d even begun, and also because I wanted to celebrate the work that I had found so moving both on the page and on the stage. No matter how angry the numbers make me, these plays thrill me. I want more people to read them and to produce them; I want more audiences to experience all they have to offer. So to mask the anger that was part of my reaction, I tried to trace out networks of possibility that linked the writers in my study—things like graduate school experience, mentorship in the profession as well as the academy, awards, and strong artistic partnerships—that gave them the edge to get noticed and produced. These things matter, and they are well worth discussion. But try as I might something was always percolating beneath the surface that made the descriptions seem no more than dutiful and the argument flimsy. That something was the emotion that this positive framework didn’t contain or honor.

Sara Ahmed’s work in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* has been pivotal in helping me parse and claim my emotional response to the scene of contemporary women’s playwriting and to these plays in particular. Ahmed writes eloquently about feminism’s relationship to anger, wonder, and hope and the way these emotions can be related.

First, she helped me embrace my feeling of emotional connection while letting go of my fear that this connection was irrational, and hence, unscholarly. She writes, “The response to the dismissal of feminists as emotional should not then be to claim that feminism is rational rather than emotional. Such a claim would be misguided as it would accept the very opposition between emotions and rational thought that is crucial to the subordination of femininity as well as feminism. Instead we need to contest this understanding of emotion as ‘the unthought,’ just as we need to contest the assumption that ‘rational thought’ is unemotional, or that it does not involve being moved by others.” She helps her reader reclaim emotional reaction as a reasonable response and reason as
something intertwined with emotion. And in regard to anger in particular she writes, “Anger is creative; it works to create a language with which to respond to that which one is against, whereby ‘the what’ is renamed, and brought into a feminist world.”

Ahmed also helps me locate wonder in my reaction. She writes, “Wonder is about learning to see the world as something that does not have to be, and as something that came to be, over time, and with work.” When I wonder at unbalanced numbers and the prospect of strong voices unheard and compelling stories untold, I can imagine something else and do something with that imagining. If the 80/20 split was made, not natural or inevitable—because there are plenty of trained, talented professional women writers writing plays worthy of staging—it can be made another way. I start to hope for something better for all the writers in this study and the many more who aren’t here. As Ahmed clarifies for me, “Hope is crucial to the act of protest: hope is what allows us to feel that what angers us is not inevitable, even if transformation can sometimes feel impossible . . . The moment of hope is when the ‘not yet’ impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future.”

In her introduction to Theatre Journal’s 2008 special issue, “Feminism and Theatre, Redux,” Catherine A. Schuler wrote, “Although in the interests of ‘equity’ our [the University of Maryland, College Park] season generally includes one female-authored play, the season selection committee is often stumped after its members run through the usual suspects: Caryl Churchill, Wendy Wasserstein, and Marsha Norman . . . Bardolatry endures, and it is still the job of the women on the faculty to know the literature by women. In my youth, a prematurely optimistic Virginia Slims ad asserted, ‘You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby’—but what was the destination, and are we there yet?” It is my hope that this book will start chronicling the way the other half of the nation’s stories were told at the start of the new century, begin mapping the road to the destination longed for by feminist theater scholars like Schuler, and work toward filling a gaping hole in theater scholarship. College faculty, male and female, simply do not know the range of women are who are writing contemporary American drama, because in-depth analysis beyond production reviews and the occasional article-length inquiry on most of the writers I plan to study does not yet exist. By now, they know Sarah Ruhl. Her work—most particularly Eurydice and Dead Man’s Cell Phone—has been produced on college campuses across the country. But Ruhl is hardly the only female writer telling provocative stories and shedding light on concerns important to men and women. The story of her success shouldn’t obscure the broader picture. In addition to Ruhl’s plays, the work of Lisa Loomer, Diana Son, Jenny Schwartz, Joan Didion, Bathsheba Doran, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Kate Fodor, Young Jean Lee, Lynn Nottage, and Kia Corthron demands rigorous consideration. While Nottage and Didion are
well known, most of the other writers have received scant academic attention, and these playwrights most certainly have not been grouped together and compared in a sustained scholarly investigation. When faculty don't know new work thanks to a dearth of academic criticism, students—the next generation of artists and audiences—don't know it either, because the work isn't being studied comprehensively and it isn't being produced. A true appreciation of the field today, and a meaningful goal for the theater in the future, is impossible without this crucial area of knowledge. Looking at a high-profile author in concert with the constellation of writers, famous and not-yet-but-should-be famous, who share her nonwhimsical concerns is just the beginning, but it is an important place to start. It is a project of protest—and one full of hope.

The Methodology and Structure of the Study

This is also a feminist project. Angela McRobbie has recently argued, “What feminism actually means varies, literally, from one self-declared feminist to the next, but this does not reduce its field of potential influence, quite the opposite.” My definition of feminism, my perspective and my agenda, have much in common with liberal feminism. In Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism, Gayle Austin writes, “Liberal feminism developed from liberal humanism, stressing women’s parity with men, based on ‘universal values.’” She also notes that liberal feminism “works for success within [the] system” and that it advocates “reform, not revolt.” While I may not share the same notions of “universal values” that some liberal feminists have espoused (my embrace of emotion via Ahmed is one indication that traditional bifurcations of reason and emotion are not acceptable to me), I am fully convinced that women deserve equal opportunities to see their work produced on the nation’s most prominent stages—on Broadway, Off-Broadway, Off-Off-Broadway, and in regional theaters from coast to coast. I think it is vitally important that they work within the system of mainstream theater to achieve reform of current production practices that have featured limited participation by women, so that they can bring their work to a wide audience. A privilege that has been claimed by men should be sought by women.

In addition to my interest in parity, I’m concerned with how female playwrights achieve parity. In “Supremacy Ideology Masquerading as Reality: The Obstacle Facing Women Playwrights in America,” Sarah Schulman offers a scathing critique: “Most plays that receive mainstream production and approval in the United States do so because they represent very rigid ideological perspectives about power. The more mainstream the venue, the more politicized the choices. Plays that assume that the story of the white male is the most central and important story of our culture are the plays most likely to be produced
and rewarded. Because of the obsessive repetition of this point of view, it has become so familiar as to be mistakenly confused with quality.” 30 And lest the reader have any doubt whether Schulman is addressing female playwrights who find production in the same mainstream venues that male playwrights do, she says, “Plays by women and people of color are often produced and rewarded to the extent that they reflect these values.” 31 Through the course of the study, I will argue that the plays I have chosen to analyze do not uncritically mirror hegemonic cultural values. On the contrary, I intend to prove, they offer rigorous and creative critique of these values from a rich variety of female perspectives, even if these plays appear on mainstream stages.

My interest in mainstream stages and in working within established systems of production (cultural and economic) to bring voices that do not mimic hegemonic attitudes, does, if we return to the quotation from Jill Dolan, align the study with third-wave feminism as well as liberal feminism. While the parameters of liberal feminism are relatively stable at this point, the same can’t be said for third-wave feminism, which is perpetually (re)defined against the architects and ideas of second-wave feminism, the phase usually situated in the 1960s and 1970s during which liberal feminism surged. In Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism, Astrid Henry outlines three interrelated features of third-wave feminism that contribute to the term’s motility. First, she observes, third-wave feminism implies “generational age,” as it is sometimes understood as being “the feminism practiced and produced by men and women born after the baby-boom generation.” 32 At first this seems rather straightforward: third wavers are the generation following the second wave, or those born between 1961 and 1981. Many of the writers I study were born in this period (everyone, in fact, but Loomer and Didion), and I join them in this date range linking my perspective with theirs. But as Henry also notes that term suggests youth; other writers have defined the outer limits of the age of third wavers as being 35, so people born between 1961 and 1981 are quickly aging out of the movement if it is defined thus. Of the writers in this study only Quiara Alegría Hudes was still under 35 at the time of the book’s publication.

Henry notes a second characterization of the third wave, one based in ideology instead of chronology. She explains, “In this understanding of the term, the third wave represents a shift within feminist thought, moving it in a new direction by blending aspects of second-wave feminism with other forms of contemporary critical theory, such as queer, post-colonial, and critical race theories.” 33 Several texts associated with second-wave feminism have been critiqued for emphasizing the conditions and concerns of white, heterosexual, middle-class women. The third wave has learned from this critical discussion, and it actively tries to engage a wider variety of human experience. Likewise, while Ruhl, a white, heterosexual, privileged woman is at the study’s center, I
place her work “beside” women outside her immediate demographic circle—those who identify as Asian American, African American, and Latina—so hers is not the sole voice heard. I emulate Eve Sedgwick’s use of the term beside in *Touching Feeling*: “Beside is an interesting preposition also because there’s nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them . . . Beside comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations.”34 The writers beside Ruhl have the kinds of complicated relationships with her and each other that Sedgwick’s list of gerunds describes.

Henry’s third meaning is the one most directly referenced by Dolan, one that is applicable to all the authors and their work. Henry explains that the third meaning is a response to current lived experience “and the realities of the current historical moment, ‘a world of global capitalism and information technology, postmodernism and postcolonialism, and environmental degradation as [Rory] Dicker and [Alison] Piepmeier write in *Catching a Wave*. ‘We no longer live in the world that feminists of the second wave faced.’ Third wave feminists, they continue, ‘are therefore concerned not simply with ‘women’s issues’ but with a broad range of interlocking topics.’”35

This conception of the third wave’s historical situation and its theoretically based response to “lived messiness,” as third wavers Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake have phrased it,36 underpins the way I’ve devised and structured the study. The challenges facing people in the early twenty-first century grow out of current lived conditions and are distinctive and multiple. It is no wonder that these vital dramatists are eager to render these conflicts in theatrical form. The issues in the plays very much concern women’s lives, but they are not exclusively “women’s issues.”

After a first chapter that marks the contours of Ruhl’s earliest professionally produced plays and the dialogue she had with two of her literary predecessors, Virginia Woolf and Anton Chekhov, I establish the pattern that will hold until the book’s conclusion. I pair one of Ruhl’s plays with two plays that are authored by other female authors who share similar cultural concerns, that are in relatively to very near chronological proximity within the decade, and that benefit from a particular feminist analytic lens. Because of the diversity of issues that occupy Ruhl and her contemporaries, no single methodology will serve all the plays in the study. I intentionally bring a variety of perspectives to bear on these texts because the writers give shape to a multiplicity of viewpoints onstage. Heywood and Drake inspire me with this thought: “Even as different strains of feminism and activism sometimes directly contradict each other, they are all part of our third-wave lives, our thinking, our praxes: we are products of the contradictory definitions of and differences within feminism.”37 In this spirit I
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