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Illustration by Scott McKowen

THE *Clean* HOUSE

By Sarah Ruhl
Directed by
Wendy Goldberg
Stage Theatre
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Synopsis

LANE: *I'm sorry but I did not go to medical school to clean my own house!*
—*The Clean House*

Somewhere in metaphysical Connecticut, Matilde was hired as a live-in maid by Lane, a successful doctor who values order in every aspect of her life. But Matilde hates cleaning because it makes her depressed. She would rather spend her time concocting jokes in the tradition of her recently deceased parents, the funniest couple in Brazil. As luck would have it, Lane's modest sister Virginia delights in cleaning and begins to take over the maid's duties on the sly, thus allowing Matilde the time to craft the perfect joke. The plot becomes more complicated when Lane's husband, a surgeon, unexpectedly falls in love with his patient. His soul mate, the Argentinean Ana, has the quality Lane never had—a vital life force. In an instant everything that was clean and tidy for Lane—her house, her emotions, her relationships—is in disarray.

Forced to pick up the pieces and closely evaluate their lives, these characters come to find an uncommon bond packed with laughter and tears as they begin to discover what living—and dying—are all about.

Action is the antidote to despair.
—Joan Baez, singer

The Playwright

Sarah Ruhl grew up in Chicago, Illinois, and graduated with an MFA in playwriting from Brown University where she studied with Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Paula Vogel. Her other plays are *Melancholy Play*, *Eurydice*, *Late: A Cowboy Song*, *Orlando* and *Passion Play*. Ruhl's plays have been read and performed in numerous theatres across the United States and England, including the Actor's Centre in London, Madison Repertory Theatre, Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, RI, Washington's Arena Stage, Piven Theatre Workshop in Chicago and New York Theatre Workshop. Ruhl has won the Helen Merrill Award, the Whiting Writers' Award and the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, an international award given to a female playwright writing in English. *The Clean House* was a finalist for the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for drama.

http://www.thedailypage.com/going-out/the_guide/event.php?id/

Humor and Death

In the midst of life we are in death.
—Episcopalian saying at gravesides

Susan Sontag believed that she could beat the odds. In an article by her son David Rieff in the *New York Times Magazine* (December 4, 2005), he describes how his mother, diagnosed with myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS), a particularly virulent blood cancer, reacted to this news. This renowned, but controversial 71-year-old writer, after the first psychological shock, believed she would be the exception to the negative statistics and survive. After all, she had survived Stage 4 breast cancer in the mid-1970s and a uterine sarcoma when she was 60. Researching MDS online and consulting with physicians, she learned of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle which did complicated bone marrow transplants. Accepted as a self-pay patient, she went through the surgical ordeal. When told the transplant had failed, she was surprised to learn she was going to die. Flown by

Medivac from the Washington state hospital to Memorial Sloan-Kettering in New York, she was determined to live no matter how terrible the suffering. "I am not interested in quality of life!" she told her doctors, so they administered an experimental drug Zarnestra. 1. She wanted her doctors to do everything possible, no matter how much of a long shot it was, but privately they believed the attempt was futile. Ultimately, they were right; Sontag died despite all they could do, accepting death only at the very end.

In contrast to Susan Sontag is Ana in the play. After her initial mastectomy, she refuses to return to the hospital when her disease reappears. "I don't want a relationship with a disease. I want to have a relationship with death." (play, p. 66) While her husband is off in the Arctic tundra searching for a yew tree to provide her with medicine, Ana

Continued on next page

is being cared for by his ex-wife, the wife's sister and Matilde, the Brazilian maid. It is a ludicrous situation, but humor will rear its head at the strangest of times. It is nature's way of giving us a perspective on life and death and helping us keep our balance. Ana will die defying death, standing up and laughing at Matilde's joke.

Though we make no judgments about either patient's approach to death, we can examine the opinions given by other writers. For example, in his book, *The Courage to Laugh*, Allen Klein makes some perceptive observations:

Death itself is not funny. Things that happen around it are. Our only real weapon against death is humor. Those who work in the death-and-dying arena understand the need for humor; those who do not, may not.

Most people don't want survivors to be morose after they die. No matter how serious a situation is, humor can help us get through the day.²

Ana's attitude toward death is somewhat like that of author George Mikes in *Laughing Matter*. He points out that "laughing at death gives us triple pleasure: the pleasure of the joke itself, the malicious joy of laughing at death's expense and the pleasure of taming Death and fraternizing with him."³ Ana's wish for a relationship with death is realized when she laughs at Matilde's joke in her final moments.

In a letter written by a cancer victim two weeks before her death, her words are both humorous and philosophical. "...I must be truthful and say there are a few advantages in living only half a lifetime.

Besides the end of good, death also means the end of tribulations... no more holding in the stomach, no more PTA, no more putting hair in curlers, no more cub scouts, no more growing old."⁴

Everyday as we live, we lose a little of ourselves; a touch of death permeates life. It could be a few hairs in the sink, dry skin, weaker vision. We forget a face, a name, a phone number. We have less strength, stamina, agility, flexibility, mobility, whatever. But we make adjustments. We can indulge in treatments to slow down the aging process and/or we can joke about growing older. And we can evaluate ourselves and our sense of humor. Humor is first and foremost an attitude—toward life and toward accepting ourselves as we are, wrinkles and all.

Man alone suffers so excruciatingly in the world that he was compelled to invent laughter.
—Friederich Wilhelm Nietzsche

Klein, Allen. *The Courage to Laugh*. NY: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1998.

Mikes, George. *Laughing Matter*. NY: The Library Press, 1971.

Rieff, David. "Illness is more Than a Metaphor." *The New York Times Magazine*. Dec. 4, 2005.

Robinson, Vera M. *Humor and the Health Profession*. Thorofare, NJ: Charles B. Slack, Inc., 1977.

1. Rieff, p. 53.
2. Klein, p. 10.
3. Mikes, p. 40.
4. Robinson, p. 58.

Cleaning up the Dirt

Virginia: People who give up the privilege of cleaning their own houses—they're insane people.
—The Clean House

Whether you agree with Virginia or not, cleaning is an indicator of how we attend or don't attend to our needs, writes Kathryn L. Robyn in *Spiritual Housecleaning*. She believes every room corresponds to a part of the human body, mind or condition. For example, the kitchen is for nurturing; the bathroom for purification and preparation; the bedroom for renewal, and the living room is the place for contact with culture.

Cleaning is like healing, states Robyn. Just as cleaning maintains the life of a house, healing maintains the structure of a life. Healing is waking up to your own life and then making a decision to care for it. One of the first steps in caring for your life is to recognize your feelings. The negative emotions are the "dirt," and we must get rid of them.

Lane, Virginia and Matilde are denying the dirt in their lives. After years of insulating herself from all the pain and joy of the world outside, life has finally penetrated the walls of Lane's home; all the old fears and aspirations she kept sweeping under the rug have literally exploded in her living room. Virginia is obsessed with orderliness and cleanliness, but won't face her feelings about her sister's success. And Matilde, who hates to clean, but wants to create the world's perfect joke, won't come to terms with her parents' death. When Ana enters the picture, these characters must re-evaluate their lives and decide how to heal them.

"Being human is messy in so many ways, externally and internally," writes Louise Rafkin in *Other People's Dirt*. 1. A house-cleaner by choice, she concludes that every person is a mess waiting to happen. We sojourn briefly in these bodies and then leave them behind for recycling or composting. Every day in our daily maintenance we are simultaneously decomposing, a veritable falling to pieces. Yet, despite these depressing words, Rafkin sees her cleaning obsession as a way to forge order out of chaos. And order is not the worst way to begin a healing process—in anybody's house or life.

*Who is the foe for whom they attack
With rag, a brush and pail?
'Tis dust—but not seen dirt alone:
—Rokumangyogan. The Army of Peace.*

Rafkin, Louise. *Other People's Dirt*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1998.

Robyn, Kathryn L. *Spiritual Housecleaning*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2001.

Rafkin, p. 37.

Women Taking Charge

ANA: I want him [Charles] to be a nurse and he wants to be an explorer.
—The Clean House

While Ana is ill and close to death, Charles is off in the Arctic searching for the yew tree that yields the medicine to prolong her life. It's a beautiful, romantic gesture but utterly futile; when he finally chops down the tree, he can't find a plane big enough to transport it. In his absence the women, Lane, Virginia and Matilde take charge.

In her book, *Tapestries of Life*, Bettina Aptheker writes about the dailiness of women's lives and how it makes them strong, resourceful, inventive and competent. "Women invest their daily lives with meaning and acknowledge this work on its own merits." 1. Certainly, Lane knows the importance of her daily work as a doctor, while Virginia's housecleaning ritual indicates a competent, caring person.

In the introduction to *Ordinary Women*, Adrienne Rich discusses women's daily lives in these terms: "It's the women who cope... Every ordinary woman is extraordinary. [The women] who still make gardens in flower pots on housing window sills, worry about holidays, the taste of special foods, rituals for cleanliness and seamliness... women whose labor [it is] to create a decent space in an indecent system... Women cope." 2. But Lane, Matilde and Virginia do more than cope; they assume the responsibility for Ana and the way in which she wants to face death.

This year's television season has produced its share of "take charge" women. For example, *Desperate Housewives* has a raft of extreme characters from the wacko to the wanton, but the two strongest are Bree and Lynette. Bree is the model housewife who takes pride in the appearance of her home. She is a gourmet cook, sews her own clothes and reupholsters her own furniture. Unfortunately, her husband, Dr. Rex, has a heart attack while engaged in a sleazy affair, but Bree copes and

keeps up appearances while taking care of her straying spouse.

Lynette is not the model housewife. She loves her children, but is weak when it comes to discipline. Housework is not her forte and she longs for the days when she was a hotshot in an advertising agency. When her husband Tom leaves his job after being passed over for promotion, Lynette seizes her opportunity. With Tom as house-husband, Lynette returns to the ad-biz, and in a series of calculated moves (and some uncalculated ones), she becomes vice-president of the company.

Despite not knowing where the series will go next, we know these women are strong, competent and likely to extricate themselves from the next sticky situation.

If you're not a fan of *Desperate Housewives*, there are other examples, of course. The interrogator on *The Closer*; the various detectives, prosecutors, lawyers and judges on *Law and Order* and all its variants, and the doctors (when not romantically engaged) on *ER*, are all strong role models.

And if you're still not convinced, catch an episode of *Commander in Chief*. Now there's a woman who's really in charge!

"Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment, making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity."
—Gilda Radner, (1946-1989), comedian

Aptheker, Bettina. *Tapestries of Life*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989.

Rich, Adrienne. *Ordinary Women*. NY: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978.

1. Aptheker, p. 175.
2. Rich, p. 7.

Bashert

CHARLES: In Jewish law you are legally obligated to break off relations with your wife or husband if you find what is called your 'bashert.'

ANA: Your soul mate.

—The Clean House

In Yiddish, the word *bashert* or *basherte* means “the apportioned one,” the one destined to be your spouse. The Gemara, one book of the Talmud, says: “Forty days before the gestation of the fetus, a Heavenly voice proclaims ‘The daughter of so-and-so will marry so-and-so.’ ” 1. However, the fact that someone is destined or *bashert* does not guarantee the ensuing marriage will be a happy one. For example, Rav Yehudah referred to his wife as being “more bitter than death.” 2. However, she had a forgiving nature, so he remained with her. Therefore, *bashert* is not always synonymous with marital bliss.

If something is deemed *bashert*, it does not mean it will come to pass. The Torah preaches the concept of a “flexible destiny;” there is always room for man to intervene and change destiny. Judaism does not hold a fatalistic view; everything can change depending on one’s actions. We are all works in progress and that progress may result in alterations as situations arise. That is why Judaism allows for divorce.

In Jewish philosophy the world that God created is a world in which man is to perform. “This concept of human action or *hishtadlut* stands in direct contradiction to the passive philosophy espoused by those who are obsessed with *bashert*.” 3. This passivity can affect an individual’s ability to try to change himself or the world and can lead to a sense of impotence and frustration. A healthier attitude would be a heightened sense of the importance of human action, a level of self-esteem

and an appreciation of the human powers we possess. We must believe that there is much we can do to affect the world and that we can change reality both around and within us. Life will change, not when someone else comes to change it, but only when we ourselves change it.

Rabbi Algaze (the writer of this article) believes that ultimately *bashert* weakens and depresses us. An active philosophy helps us more and gives us hope.

The “someone for you” may be closer than you thought if you have the ability to change reality and change yourself.

An example of taking action: Jewish single:
The New Way to Find Love. Online.
No credit card required. Join free.
—www.chemistry.com

Algaze, Rabbi David. “Bashert: a Dynamic Understanding of Human Relations.” *Jewish Times*. June 27, 2003.

Mietkiewicz, Mark. “Bashert and the Internet: Webwise ways to find love.”
<http://www.jewishsf.com/content/>

1. Algaze, p. 1.
2. Algaze, p. 1.
3. Algaze, p. 2.

Life and Experiences with Merry Maids

I sat down with Kelly Nolan, Adrianna Martinez and Christine Moudy of Merry Maids in Boulder and asked them about their life and experiences with Merry Maids.

Here is some of what they had to say.

—Dane Witherspoon



Adriana Martinez

— “I will be here 4 years in June. I have 2 boys, 7 and 10 months. I am a single parent. I enjoy working here — for the people I work for. (she tears up). At the time, I was 19 and looking for a job — I needed somewhere to work. Once I started working here, I saw the type of people I work for — loving and caring for their employee so much. Cleaning doesn't bother me — I knew I could do it and now I really enjoy it going into a home — and seeing its not its greatest and when once I leave, everything looks so great and I can see I made a difference. I enjoy seeing, after, what I accomplished. I try to make things as nice as I think they can look. I don't just do what I guess what they expect of me. I try to go a little bit more than that. I just want when they walk in to think, 'Wow, my house looks really great.' It think working here and with my kids, they understand when they're sick, they have no problem with me calling and letting them know, 'Oh, my son's sick and I have to take him to the doctor today, and okay, well, just call us a and let us know how he's doing — they're concerned about how my children are doing — not only myself, but

they care about my children as well, they're like family. They're super nice to work with.”

Christine Moudy — “Very family oriented, definitely. I feel like I am a part of their family. I watched Adriana and her family grow up here. I've been with them since 1986 — So it's deff.... I was off for a few years there, but, I came back. I missed them. I was 19 —just graduated from High School and was looking for a job — liked it, but surprised I liked it. They're such nice people to work for.”

Kelly Nolan — “On my first job, first time in is what we call it — the woman thought her husband had left. We wanted to start in the master bedroom and the bathroom and the woman said 'Oh go ahead. My husband's already left.' So my sister and I opened the door and he's just standing there and dropped his towel and we're like, oh my Gosh — and we turned and ran down the stairs and dropped the equipment and took off — we were mortified. We thought we were going to lose that customer. It was the first thing in the morning. That wasn't a sight we wanted

Continued on next page

Kelly Nolan, Adrianna Martinez and Christine Moudy of Merry Maids in Boulder...

to see.”

Christine Moudy – “Oh, we love the pets. I am so attached to every single pet. Everybody’s always... I go straight for the pets... you know the dog’s name — you know the pet’s name and that makes the customers feel really good too. If you take the time... ‘cause pets are like children. I have no children. That means a lot to them, that you remember their pets and the pets love you. You always have to find one thing that you like about going into a home. You have to... Otherwise, you just... it’s not... you can’t do it and do it well. You just have to do it.”

Adriana Martinez – “I love going to old... older customers. Like E.W. She’s just the cutest little old lady and when you get there, she’s just so happy to see you and she has these big old glasses and, once I leave, I’m in a better mood. Even the customers just make it worth wile.”

Christine Moudy – “It’s a highlight for her too – to see us. An awful lot of older people that don’t have visitors – they like us to come

visit – to have visitors. That’s an awful lot of what their cleaning is. A lot of Seniors – some of them – they don’t even need us. You know, they just want someone to come in and visit with them. You go through life’s motions and make ‘em happy. That makes you feel good.”

Adriana Mortinez – “This is the perfect thing for me at this time in my life. Actually, I’ve gone to college and I have a degree and I still would rather come here. I enjoy helping people any way I can. I love pleasing people. I think... It makes a person feel wonderful inside helping someone else.”

I had to ask. “Do you have any male maids?”
“Not many. They’re not as detailed—
and they wipe – they don’t scrub.”

For more information on Merry Maids, please see their website at www.merrymaids.com

Activities

Questions for Discussion

1. Oprah Winfrey calls certain epiphanies “aha moments.” Think about those times in your experience when you have shared a profound moment of truth or realization with someone.
2. After those seminal or “aha moments” have passed, are you changed and if so, how?
3. Recall a tragic moment either in your world or in your personal life. What adjective and/or overall description describes your experience?
4. What are the bonds of friendship? What do we gain by embracing those bonds?
5. What relationships that you value have come to you through a totally unexpected channel?