

## MOUTH TO MOUTH

*Sarah Ruhl on attraction and artifice.*

BY JOHN LAHR



Sarah Ruhl is, at thirty-seven, one of America's most frequently produced playwrights. In the past year alone, two hundred and forty-four individual productions of her plays were performed around the country, and there are currently plans for eighteen foreign productions, in twelve languages. Ruhl's droll, limpid, surreal works explore the interplay between the actual and the magical. She likes to call them "anti-money shots"; her newest comedy, however, the smart, rollicking "Stage Kiss" (which was commissioned by the Goodman, in Chicago, and is premiering there), is a bonanza. While some earlier Ruhl plays are perhaps too arcane for a mass audience, "Stage Kiss"

(crisply directed by Jessica Thebus) gets down to the carnal, where everyone lives. At once a knowing sendup of the hazy half-truths of stage naturalism and a goofy meditation on the nature of desire and sexual fantasy, the play manages to be both wholly original and instantly recognizable to the audience. And, as a satire of theatre and theatricals, "Stage Kiss," with its combination of hilarity and trenchancy, is right up there with George Kelly's "The Torch-Bearers" and Neil Simon's "The Sunshine Boys."

Here two former lovers, He (Mark L. Montgomery) and She (Jenny Bacon), actors who parted bitterly about fifteen years earlier, find themselves, on the first day of

rehearsal for a revival of a nineteen-thirties boulevard melodrama—a lemon called "The Last Kiss"—cast opposite each other, as former lovers. They rehearse scenes of arch palaver ("I want to kiss you all day," her character tells his. "And I you," he replies), and, in between, relive the humiliating moments of their own turbulent past. She cheated on him; He called her names and threw things. He was "baffled for years"; She admits, "I was afraid of you." She is married to Harry (Scott Jaeck) and has a teen-age daughter. He's shackled up with Laurie (Erica Elan), a Pollyanna schoolteacher, and is an overgrown adolescent, "a seventeen-year-old in man pants." Nonetheless, She, haunted by their lost love, has seen all his stage performances; He has watched every one of her "Law & Order" episodes. In a sense, "Stage Kiss" is a ghost play in which both the play-within-the-play and the rebarbative lovers keep the past present. Is life imitating art? Or is art imitating life? Ruhl, in her gleeful counterpoint, gets to have it both ways.

Although "Stage Kiss" owes its inspiration to a plethora of lame Broadway entertainments of the thirties, its comic setup is a reworking of Noël Coward's 1930 play "Private Lives," in which a quarrelling former husband and wife meet on adjacent hotel balconies while on their respective honeymoons with lacklustre new partners, only to rekindle their passion and bolt to Paris for a romantic idyll. Likewise, in "Stage Kiss," the quarrelling lovers, as they rehearse a saga of sexual paradise regained, fall once again under the spell of romance. They jilt their new partners—who are thrown together by their heartbreak—to live for a while in a cocoon of lust. ("It was like giving bacon to a hungry vegetarian," Harry, the dutiful, abandoned husband, later concedes.)

"Private Lives" is a comedy of bad manners; "Stage Kiss" is a comedy of bad writing. Coward revels in camp mischief and revenge, Ruhl in memory and harmony. Where Coward is subversive and outrageous ("Certain women should be struck regularly, like gongs"), Ruhl is contemplative and wry. ("Pass me the hot-and-sour soup," She says, while lolling with her lover in a rumpled foldout bed. "It's cold now," He replies. "It's cold-and-sour soup.") But, for all their emotional differences, Coward and Ruhl share three crucial dramatic gifts: for structure, for immediacy, and for frivol-

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*An act of love: Mark L. Montgomery and Jenny Bacon in "Stage Kiss."*

ity. "Lightness isn't stupidity," Ruhl told me. "It's actually a philosophical and aesthetic viewpoint, deeply serious, and has a kind of wisdom—stepping back to be able to laugh at the horrible things even as you're experiencing them."

In "Stage Kiss," passion and fidelity engage in a kind of elegant pas de deux over the issue of the stage kiss. According to Harry's calculations, She, as the dying Ada Wilcox, who suffers from the incurable "Johnson's disease," snogs her ex—He plays a sculptor named Johnny Lowell, who rushes to her bedside from his home in Sweden—a grand total of two hundred and eighty-eight times during the run of the play. "That's not love. That's oxytocin," Harry says, catching the pair in flagrante and urging his wife to come home. A kiss is a kind of invasion, an invitation to transgress. The gesture is loaded with complicated feeling, which Ruhl parses to brilliant effect. In her comedy, contrary to the song, a kiss is not just a kiss—it's a battleground fraught with danger as well as delight. But before He and She get down to sharing a real kiss—an event that is delightfully postponed until the end of Act I—they prolong the anticipation by discoursing about tongue hockey, which He maintains the public doesn't like to watch. "They don't enjoy it. They tolerate it," He says. "It signifies resolution . . . but they don't really like to see the act of kissing onstage, only the idea of kissing onstage. That's why actors have to be good-looking, because it's about an idea, an idea of beauty completing itself. You don't like to see people do more than kiss onstage, it's repulsive."

Ruhl gets a lot of mileage out of the re-

pulsion for "swapping spit." When the two actors first start to rehearse together, She bobs and weaves away from him like a glass-chinned bantamweight; and when they finally embrace She says squeamishly, "Did you brush your teeth?" But love changes everything, and the stage kissing rekindles intimacy, so when He breaks his ankle just before opening night, and the gay understudy, Kevin (Jeffrey Carlson), has to stand in, Ruhl turns the moment into a wonderful spectacle of disgust, first by contriving for the poor boy to have crumbs around his mouth and then by lampooning his moves. "He makes this face—this weird face—like he's going to eat me—like a placoderm—you know, one of those jawless prehistoric fish—with teeth," She bleats to the Director (the excellent Ross Lehman), who tries to show her how to fake an embrace, shaking her so hard that he throws out her back.

"I'm interested in poking holes in naturalism," Ruhl said in a pre-show talk. With a deft, withering touch, she exposes the gears of dramatic exposition. For instance, when He has to perform on crutches, Johnny offers up a narrative alibi: "I must be the only sculptor to have had a marble head fall on my foot," he says. Later in the same scene, Johnny and Ada sing and dance: "No one says farewell these days/They hire a car or fly. . . . Farewells are for the birds." At the word "birds," Johnny raises his crutches, giving himself the ludicrous wingspan of a condor. There are verbal pratfalls, too. "Don't speak of death now that we are out of his crutches—clutches," Ada's husband says. In "Stage Kiss," back walls wobble, and actors trip over thresholds and struggle with costumes and cumbersome props,

like a divan. "Divan? Divan? Divan," He says, going briefly off script in the middle of a seduction to get his mouth around the strange word. And Ruhl has great fun mocking the preposterous deluxe milieus of thirties comedies. Ada's house is equipped with a solarium, a library, a billiards room, and a butler called Jenkins. ("I'm playing, you know, Jenkins *and* the Doctor," Kevin, the understudy, says to the Director, of his two bit roles. "I'm wondering how to do the emotional-journey part? I don't really have a back story?")

Coward's feuding lovers tiptoe away from chaos in the last beats of "Private Lives"; Ruhl's divided couples, on the other hand, repair their madness and achieve a kind of order. "Marriage is about repetition," Harry says to his wife at the finale. "Every night the sun goes down and moon comes up and you have another chance to be good. Romance is not about repetition." If She has learned a lesson about reality, Harry has learned one about fantasy: he asks to be taught about acting. "Once a week, I can be whoever you want me to be, and you can be whoever I want you to be," he says. "Kiss me in a place with no history and no furniture." The ending is a fairy-tale picture of blessing and balance. Fantasy *and* convention, Ruhl seems to be saying, are part of life's meaning and its joy.

On its journey to New York, "Stage Kiss" will, I suspect, acquire higher-definition players and a director with a surer command of the dynamics of comedy. This admirable première, however, has brought a bright and buoyant thing into the world. So, like Ruhl herself, let's quietly kick up our heels and be glad. ♦

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