

Answering the Call

BY JOHN GLORE

"An almost empty café. . . . Jean sits, drinking coffee, and writing a thank-you letter. She has an insular quality, as though she doesn't want to take up space."

That's how Sarah Ruhl introduces the central character in her fanciful comedy, *dead man's cell phone*. We never find out whom Jean is thanking in her note. We don't know why she isolates herself, trying not to take up space. In fact, we learn almost nothing about her past life. The play is much more interested in discovering what happens when Jean sets that life aside to adopt the life of someone else — a stranger, a man who sits at a neighboring table in the almost empty café and allows his cell phone to ring rudely and incessantly, intruding upon Jean's quiet solitude.

When Jean finally crosses to the adjoining table and answers the offending cell phone — discovering in the process that its owner is dead — the tiny device becomes a portal into the dead man's world. Jean is exceptionally polite, too polite even to correct a misunderstanding; so as she answers a series of calls on the cell phone, she allows herself to be mistaken for someone who mattered to its dead owner, Gordon. In the process, she does begin to matter to the people in Gordon's circle, and discovers that she likes the feeling of mattering. She feeds that feeling by applying balm to the wounds Gordon has left behind. On Gordon's

"I only knew [Gordon] for a short time," Jean confides, "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... 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.

The New York Times, March 5, 2008

behalf, she offers little gifts — material and emotional — to Gordon's wife, his brother, his mother, his mistress, allowing them all to feel better about the man who was less than attentive to their needs when he was alive. Feeling better about him, they feel better about themselves.

Jean's accidental kindnesses don't go unrewarded. Her sense of the world begins to open like a rosebud as she infiltrates Gordon's life. She even discovers love. But while a brighter future beckons, the importance of memory continues



to assert itself in surprising ways. Jean's best gift to the new people in her life is to facilitate their reconciliation with the past, inspiring them to remember Gordon not as he was, but as he should have been. That she accomplishes this by making things up in no way lessens the value of her service.

In a note at the end of the script, Ruhl writes, "I call Jean's stories confabulations, I never call them lies..." Although the primary definition of "confabula-

tion" is "casual conversation," the word conveys a sense of fable-making, the fashioning of little stories that hold secret truths. But the lexicon of psychiatry provides another resonant meaning: "confabulation: a plausible but imagined memory that fills in gaps in what is remembered."

dead man's cell phone shows that Ruhl herself is in every sense a confabulist. Like her best known plays, including *The Clean House* (SCR 2005) and *Eurydice*, this simple, meaningful, graceful new work is both fable and fairy tale, both conversational and poetic, without ever forcing lyricism. It's also surprisingly funny in a quirky, teasing, unassuming way. Although her plays are often preoccupied with love and death (and love in death), they have a lightness that defies their own gravity.

That's partly because, like all of Ruhl's work, *dead man's cell phone* is tinged with the fantastic. A recent profile of the playwright in *The New Yorker* (March 17, 2008) proposes that her artistic mission is "to make the known world unfamiliar in order to reanimate it." But if Ruhl embraces strangeness in her work, she does so not for its own sake: the strangeness arises organically from the yearnings of characters for whom the objective facts of everyday life are no longer adequate.

Ruhl calls her writing "pre-Freudian" — in other words, she foregoes psychological realism in favor of confabulation. She's less interested in figuring out what makes her characters tick than in listening closely to the music of the ticking. Her theatrical flourishes, her dips into the surreal serve to amplify the subtle vibrations that echo between characters who are trying to hear each other's heart-songs.

Like the solitary woman in a café, who hears the sound of a cell phone ringing and follows it into a new world — and into unexpected corners of her own heart.

"You know what's funny? I never had a cell phone. I didn't want to always 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 cell phone on, no one is there. It's like we're all disappearing the more we're there."

Jean, in *dead man's cell phone* by Sarah Ruhl

