South Coast Repertory

STUDY GUIDE

Eurydice
by Sarah Ruhl
directed by Marc Masterson
Sep 23 - Oct 14 • Julianne Argyros Stage

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Part I: THE PLAY

Orpheus and Eurydice: A Brief Synopsis of the Myth

While there are many variations on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice among poets Ovid, Virgil, and Apollonius or philosophers Plato and Aristotle, the basic story goes as follows.

A charming and talented musician, Orpheus is the son of a Thracian king and the muse Calliope. When Orpheus plays, every animate and inanimate thing follows and his music can divert the course of rivers. He meets and marries the maiden Eurydice—thought to be perhaps a nymph (minor Greek deity related to nature), or maybe a daughter of Apollo. Their joy is brief; on their wedding day Eurydice travels through a meadow with her bridesmaids (in some versions, she’s running to escape the sexual advances of a satyr or shepherd) and she steps into a pit of vipers. She is bitten by a snake and dies.

Overcome with grief, Orpheus strikes a sad note on his lyre and travels to the Underworld. A normal mortal would have perished, but Orpheus uses his music to charm the spirits and Hades, the Lord of the Underworld. Hades agrees to let Eurydice return to the world of the living on one condition: that she must follow Orpheus and he could not look back at her until they reach the outer world. The young couple sets off as proscribed. Whether his faith was not able to withstand the test or whether he was tricked by the gods, Orpheus fatefully looks back at Eurydice. She is taken back to the Underworld. In some versions, Orpheus is simply heartbroken and in others he is punished, wandering alone with his lyre until he is torn apart by a band of Maeneds.

Sarah Ruhl’s play uses the basic myth as inspiration, but differs in many ways. As classicist M. Owen Lee said in his book entitled Virgil as Orpheus, “A great artist never touches a myth without developing, expanding, and sometimes radically changing it.” Eurydice’s father doesn’t play a role in the original myth, but he plays a pivotal role in Ruhl’s play. In the classical versions of the story, Eurydice is a passive victim. In Ovid’s version of the story, she doesn’t speak at all and in Virgil’s poem she says only a few words after Orpheus has already looked back at her. In Sarah Ruhl’s Eurydice, she is given both a voice and a choice.

The story in brief, using epic poetry excerpts: http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/webtexts/eurydice/eurydicemyth.html


Another brief narrative version: http://www.paleothea.com/Myths/Orpheus.html
Production History Highlights of *Eurydice*

Workshop production at Brown University Theatre in 2001

“[Eurydice] had, I think, 14 staged readings. It was a long, long road in development. By the 13th reading I didn’t change a word.”

–Sarah Ruhl, in a 2004 interview

World premiere at Madison Repertory Theatre in 2003

West Coast premiere at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 2004
- Directed by Les Waters
- Sets by Scott Bradley and costumes by Meg Neville
- The set was created with faux tiles and extreme wash-lighting. The rain elevator was placed center-stage and umbrellas completed the aesthetics. Reds, pinks, and blues were used to enhance the set as stipulated in the script to “resemble the world of *Alice in Wonderland* more than it resembles Hades.” The Stones appear in 1800s attire, complete with bowler hats, but complimented by dark makeup causing them to resemble dark caricatures of a Dickens’ novel.

Off-Broadway premiere at Second Stage Theatre 2007
- Directed by Les Waters
- Used the same designs as Berkeley Repertory by Scott Bradley and Meg Neville

Yale Repertory Theatre 2008
- Directed by Les Waters
- Used the same designs as Berkeley Repertory by Scott Bradley and Meg Neville

*Eurydice* continues to be a popular piece to produce. Other productions include Rutgers University, The Wilma Theater, Artistic Repertory Theatre, Curiosity Theatre, Theatre Ink, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, A Noise Within and A Contemporary Theatre.
Motifs in the Play

The story invokes many images, and director Marc Masterson’s production emphasizes several of these motifs. Gerard Howland’s set uses string, water and pipes in creative ways to delineate the world and later the Underworld in the play. Water and string figure prominently in the dialogue of the characters and also have layers of resonance in other myths and cultures.

Water

- **Rivers of the Underworld:** In Greek mythology, the Underworld is surrounded by five rivers. Each river has a specific purpose.
  1. **Acheron:** the river of lamentation.
  2. **Cocytus:** the river of woe.
  3. **Lethe:** the river of forgetfulness.
  4. **Phlegethon:** the river of fire.
  5. **Styx:** the river of hate and the unbreakable oath and fatal to the living.

- **Water nymphs:** In the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, occasionally Eurydice and/or her bridesmaids are described as nymphs or naiads. Naiads are water nymphs that inhabit fountains, wells, springs, brooks, rivers, marshes, ponds and lagoons. In Greek mythology, naiads were friendly creatures who had the power of foresight, and were said to make prophecies.

String

- **The Fates** (also called the Moirai): In Greek mythology, string or thread is used as a metaphor for life and is governed by the three fates. Clotho spins the thread of life, Lachesis determines the length of the thread and Atropos cuts the thread in death.
- **The Red String of Fate:** In Chinese and Japanese legends, gods tie an invisible red string around the fingers of those who are destined for one another regardless of time, place or circumstances. This magical cord may stretch or tangle, but never break. This myth is similar to the western concept of “soulmates” or a “twin flame.”
- **String Theory:** A theory in physics that attempts to explain the entirety of how the universe works. The idea proposes that the fundamental ingredients of nature are inconceivably tiny strings of energy, whose different modes of vibration underlie everything that happens in the universe. The theory successfully unites the laws of the large—general relativity—and the laws of the small—quantum mechanics—breaking a conceptual logjam that has frustrated the world’s smartest scientists for nearly a century. It is the theory that Sheldon Cooper in the popular sitcom “Big Bang Theory” is attempting to prove.

Music

- **Lyre:** In Greek mythology, Orpheus plays a lyre, a stringed instrument. It is strummed like a guitar, although it often looks like a U-shaped harp. The legend goes that young Orpheus was given the lyre by Apollo who taught him not only how to play it, but also how to produce magical effects and charm anyone or anything that heard him play.
• **Greek Sirens**: In Greek mythology, the sirens are dangerous creatures that appear as beautiful women who are part bird. These women lure sailors to death with their song. Listeners would forget everything except for the music, and would starve to death.

• **Stone Markers**: Since ancient times, stacks of stones have been used as landmarks. Also called cairns, today they are most often used to mark mountain bike and hiking trails and other cross-country trail blazing, especially in mountainous regions at or above the tree line.

• **Stonehenge**: A monument in England, built sometime between 3000 and 2000 BCE, according to carbon dating. Archeologists believe that it was used as a burial ground for several hundred years. For more about Stonehenge visit: [http://www.usatoday.com/money/topstories/2008-05-29-1711958402_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/topstories/2008-05-29-1711958402_x.htm)

**Myths of The Underworld**

• **Hercules**: Traveled to the underworld for various reasons. On his most famous trip, recorded in *Hercules’ Twelfth Labor: Cerberus*, he is challenged by Eurystheus to go to the underworld and capture its guardian Cerberus, a three-headed dog. Hercules goes and defeats Cerberus, and brings him back to Eurystheus. When Eurystheus is satisfied, Hercules returns Cerberus, mostly unharmed, back to his post in Hades.

• **Radish**: In Chinese Buddhist mythology, a Buddhist disciple named Radish gives his mother, Lady Leek Stem, money to give to the begging monks. Lady Stem does not do it, but she lies to her son and tells him that she did. Because in the center of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The Ka’baa is honored by Muslims as an Islamic relic, and according to tradition, dates back to Adam and Eve. In Jewish tradition, stones are put on graves instead of flowers.

**Stone**

• **Religious Stones**: Feature prominently in several Judeo-Christian religions. In Christianity, God figuratively refers to Jesus Christ as a “stone.” The apostle Peter (whose name means rock in Greek) is also referred to as the cornerstone of the Christian church, in the New Testament (Matthew 16:18). In Islam, Ka’baa or Black Rock of Mecca is the ancient stone monument toward which Muslims pray every day. It’s located...
of the lie, when she dies she goes to hell. Meanwhile Radish is made a saint and is renamed Mulian. With Mulian's enlightenment, he is made aware of his mother's torment and goes to hell to save her. When he arrives, Yama, the king of hell, warns him that no one has the power to change a sinner's punishment. But by waving a wand that Buddha had given him, he is able to make all obstacles disappear. When Mulian finds his mother she is nailed to a bed and he can not release her; only Buddha can change a sinner's fate. Mulian asks Buddha for mercy for his mother, and after the proper prayers, Buddha releases Lady Leek Stem from hell.

- **Kwasi Benefo:** The Ashanti people in Africa tell the story of Kwasi Benefo, who goes to the underworld to find the souls of his wives. Kwasi Benefo marries four women, but they all die. Devastated, he decides to travel to Asamando, the land of the dead, to find his loves. He goes to the burial ground and passes through it to Amokye, the greeter of dead women's souls. Amokye is empathetic to Kwasi Benefo and allows him to cross the river, despite the fact that it is forbidden to the living. Kwasi Benefo finds the souls of his wives, but they tell him to marry again. They promise him that his new wife will live and that they will be waiting for him when he returns in his own time. Kwasi Benefo goes to sleep and finds himself in a forest. Back in the land of the living, he realizes that he has been given the precious gift of peace. With peace of mind he is able to marry again and lives happily for the rest of his life.

Adapted from: [http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/Tr-Wa/Underworld.html#b](http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/Tr-Wa/Underworld.html#b)
Sarah Ruhl exploded onto the American Theater scene in the early 2000s and continues to be one of its leading authors. She is a two-time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, in 2005 and 2010; a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship; and, with this fall’s production of *Eurydice*, a playwright to grace SCR’s stages four times over the past eight years.

Ruhl has been praised for her unique ability to marry comedic lightness with moments of genuine and mythic pathos. She traces her lineage more to Ovid than to Aristotle, and expresses a preference for stories with “small transformations that are delightful and tragic.” Ruhl says “I like plays that have revelations in the moment, where emotions transform almost inexplicably … psychological realism makes emotions so rational, so explained, that they don’t feel like emotions to me.”

Ruhl’s birth as a writer is often connected to the 1994 death of her father. She started writing poetry when, as an undergrad at Brown University, she came to the attention of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and professor Paula Vogel. Vogel recalls reading Ruhl’s first writing assignment—in which Ruhl wrote about a father’s death from the point of view of the family dog. Vogel says, “I sat with this short play in my lap in my study, and sobbed.” At Vogel’s encouragement, Ruhl pursued playwriting. She graduated from Brown, studied English literature for a year at Oxford, and then enrolled in Brown’s MFA playwriting program, where she was again under Vogel’s tutelage. After graduating, she wrote and workedshopped *Eurydice* at Brown. Considered to be her breakout play onto the national scene, it was later given its world premiere at Madison Repertory Theatre in 2003.

After first getting attention for *Eurydice*, Ruhl received widespread praise for her play *The Clean House*, which received its West Coast premiere at SCR in early 2005. The play went on to be produced around the world, including productions at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, in 2006; Wooly Mammoth Theatre Company in D.C., in fall 2005; and Lincoln Center Theater in New York in 2006. Other notable plays include *Passion Play; Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, produced at SCR in 2008; and *In the Next Room or the vibrator play*, produced at SCR in 2010.

Ruhl’s poetic sensibilities and skill with language are present in her all plays. In a 2008 interview in *The New Yorker*, Ruhl shared a story of her father taking her and her sister out for pancakes every Saturday morning when she was a child. Her father would teach them a new word, along with its etymology. This moment, and even some of his words—“ostracize,” “peripatetic,” “defunct”—appear in *Eurydice*, though Ruhl has recast the memory of filial affection against a mythic story of loss and longing.

Ruhl’s writing balances quiet intimacy with mythic grandeur: she brings a playful touch to the gravest of subjects without denying their complexity or trivializing their weight. In the prologue to her *Passion Play*—which juxtaposes different interpretations of Christ’s Passion throughout history—Ruhl addresses the audience in her characteristic style:

“We ask you, dear audience,
To use your eyes, ears, your most inward sight
For here is day (A painted sun is raised)
And here is night (A painted moon is raised)
And now, the play.”
A List of Ruhl’s Plays:

- **Melancholy Play** (2001)
  A woman’s journey with lovers and melancholy. Later adapted into a chamber musical with composer Todd Almond in 2012.
- **Virtual Meditations#1** (2002)
  An experiment in technology and interactive drama, where two audience members join the show.
- **Passion Play** (2003)
  The story of three communities (Queen Elizabeth’s England, Hitler’s Germany and Reagan’s America) attempting to stage the death and resurrection of Christ.
- **Eurydice** (2003)
  Produced at South Coast Repertory in 2012.
- **Orlando** (2003)
  An adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando*
- **Late: A Cowboy Song** (2003)
  The story of Mary’s search for love and understanding during her relationship with her husband and a cowgirl named Red.
  Performed at South Coast Repertory in 2005. Finalist for Pulitzer Prize. The story of a Brazilian cleaning woman named Matilde, who’d rather be a comedian.
- **Demeter in the City** (2006)
  A modern adaptation of the Greek myth of Demeter.
- **Dead Man’s Cell Phone** (2007)
  Performed at South Coast Repertory in 2008. A girl discovers a dead man in a café and keeps (and uses) his cell phone.
- **In the Next Room or the vibrator play** (2009)
  Performed at South Coast Repertory in 2010. Finalist for Pulitzer Prize. Nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play. A 19th century doctor treats women for “hysteria” by using a vibrator, while in the next room, his wife’s curiosity mounts.
- **Stage Kiss** (2011)
  A play tackling the complications of on-stage intimacy and the tricky business of keeping it solely in the limelight.

Ruhl’s Adaptations:

- **Lady with the Lap Dog and Anna Around the Neck**
  Adapted from Anton Chekhov in 2001
- **Three Sisters**
  Adapted from Anton Chekhov in 2011
PART III: THE PRODUCTION

Designing Eurydice

Long before the actors enter the rehearsal room, director Marc Masterson assembles a team of designers to begin imagining what the world of Eurydice will look like. Based on those conversations, the designers then begin to brainstorm and put pen to paper. From their drawings, a team of technicians at South Coast Repertory realizes their designs. Here are some drawings from costume designer Soojin Lee and an initial plan from set designer Gerard Howland. If you were given these drawings, think about how you might begin to create them in three dimensions. How do these drawings compare with what you see onstage?

Clockwise from top right: Soojin Lee’s costume renderings for Big Stone, Orpheus, Father and Eurydice.
Gerard Howland’s scenic design for Eurydice.
PART IV: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Before the Play

In the published version of *Eurydice*, before the text of the play begins, Ruhl describes the Setting:

>The set contains a raining elevator,  
a water pump,  
some rusty exposed pipes,  
an abstracted River of Forgetfulness,  
an old-fashioned glow-in-the-dark globe.

She further notes that “the underworld should resemble the world of *Alice in Wonderland* more than it resembles Hades.”

1. How would you interpret an underworld that looks like *Alice in Wonderland*? What colors would you use? What objects? Why?

2. In the script, Ruhl calls for a Chorus of Stones: Big Stone, Little Stone and Loud Stone. The only description she has for these characters says, “The stones might be played as though they are nasty children at a birthday party.” Based on their names and description, how do you think the characters of “The Stones” might be portrayed?

3. Ruhl was able to adapt an ancient Greek myth into something completely new. Do you think it would be easier or more difficult to adapt a story that’s already been written rather than writing something from scratch?
   a. Is it important for us to keep telling old stories? Why or why not?
   b. Should we be allowed to change old stories? Why or why not?

After the Play

1. When Eurydice crosses the River of Forgetfulness she can no longer remember her past life. What would be the benefits (if any) of not being able to remember in the Underworld?
   c. Eurydice remembers only specific things while she is in the Underworld and her father uses them to comfort her. How does he do this?

   d. What could be comforting about a room made of string?

   e. Would you want to remember your past life or be more like The Stones?

2. Near the end of the play Eurydice returns to the Underworld for a second time and discovers that her father has dipped himself in the River of Forgetfulness. Eurydice begins to cry. The Stones try to stop her by saying:

   STONES: Don’t cry! Don’t Cry!
   BIG STONE: Learn the art of keeping busy!
   EURYDICE: IT’S HARD TO KEEP BUSY
   WHEN YOU’RE DEAD!
   STONES: It is not hard!
     We keep busy
     And we like it
     We’re busy busy busy stones
Watch us work
Keeping still
Keeping quiet
It’s hard work
To be a stone
No time for crying
No no no!

What did you feel when you heard this? What do you think it means? What is the significance of the idea that “keeping still” and “keeping quiet” is hard work? Do you agree?

3. How did the portrayal of the stones differ from your imagination of what “The Chorus of Stones” might be?

4. In typical Greek plays such as Oedipus Rex or Antigone by Sophocles, Medea by Euripides, or Agamemnon by Aeschylus, the chorus has many functions. What are the functions of the Chorus of Stones in Eurydice? How do the classic functions differ from the functions of the stones?

5. Music plays an important role in Eurydice. What does the music in the play communicate? Which characters use it the most and why/when do they use it? Could you imagine a way this play could be performed without music? Why or why not?

6. What do you find amusing and funny in this play and the production? What contributes to the humor? What are some specific examples? The situations? The language? The actors? The staging?

7. Classicist M. Owen Lee said in his book Virgil as Orpheus, “A great artist never touches a myth without developing, expanding, and sometimes radically changing it.” Having had a brief history of the original myth from this study guide, do you think that Ruhl created a compelling piece of art from a myth? In what ways did she develop, expand, or even “radically change” it?
PART V: RESOURCES

Other Study Guides and Programs

Artists Repertory Theater Educator Resource Kit for Eurydice: A succinct view and vocabulary of Ruhl's play
www.artistsrep.org/media/72646/educatorresource_eur.pdf


Berkeley Repertory Theatre's online program notes for Eurydice: http://www.berkeleyrep.org/season/0405/ed_program.asp

Reference Materials

Orpheus in Nineteenth-Century Symbolism by Dorothy M. Kosinski
Explores representations of Orpheus from antiquity, with the bulk of the text focusing on portrayals of Orpheus in the 19th century.

Parallel Myths by J.F. Bierlein
 Discusses common threads in myths across cultures. One of the most relevant section is Chapter 10, “The Journey to the Underworld and the Path of Death.”

Virgil as Orpheus: A Study of the Georgics by M. Owen Lee
Covers the literary and historical background of Virgil's Georgics, with special emphasis on the concluding myth of Orpheus.

Articles

“Sarah Ruhl’s Eurydice: Love, death and a myth retold” by Misha Berson
From the Seattle Times, October 5, 2008
http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/thearts/2008164969_eurydice080.html

“Surreal Life: The plays of Sarah Ruhl” by John Lahr
From the New Yorker, March 17, 2008
An article about Ruhl as a playwright and her plays in general.
http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/03/17/080317crat_atlarge_lahr

“More Invisible Terrains” Wendy Weckworth interviews Sarah Ruhl
Theater, Volume 34, Number 2, Summer 2004, pp. 28-35

“Wild Woman: Playwright Sarah Ruhl speaks softly and carries a big kick” by Matthew Gurewitsch
Smithsonian magazine, October 2007
http://www.smithsonianmag.com/specialeditions/innovators/ruhl.html