

EURYDICE
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The Significant Other propelled yet another drive in support of the arts by getting all of us into the final performance of the Berkeley Rep's *Eurydice*.

This adaptation of the Ovid fable by playwright Sarah Ruhl, and directed by Les Waters, has been held over from November 14th to today due to an exquisitely performed and elegantly staged performance.

Ovid devoted less than two summary pages to the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice which resulted in virtually every poet and dramaturge of significance to attempt adaptations for the page and the stage ever since. The vast majority of these works by Rilke, Cocteau, Haydn, Stravinsky, Weill, Rodin, Rubens, Anouilh, Offenbach, and many others, usually focussed upon the figure of Orpheus, in whom the principal author often saw parallels to the artist himself.

This production is notable in that the primary focus is upon the thoughts and feelings of Eurydice and substantially her relationship -- entirely invented by Ruhl -- to her father.

Scott Bradley, who worked with Mary Zimmerman on her adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and the *Notebooks of Leonardo DaVinci*, brought his love of water to the set design, featuring notably a striking effect featuring an elevator to Hell which opens out into waterfalls symbolic of the dunking into the river Styx.

A series of panels light up along the backdrop to indicate a descent to the doorway, which opens to reveal the dead soul drenched in flows that course across the stage into drains at the edge.

In Hell, run by a childish Lord riding a tricycle and wearing a red hood, Eurydice encounters her father who had died many years

previously, but whom had persisted in writing letters to her from the Beyond, despite the warnings of the Stones, a chorus of three.

This was not the wild triumph of Mary Zimmerman, but was nonetheless a welcome respite from the tedious theature we had been suffering lately and definitely a success to be counted in the feathers of Sarah Ruhl's cap.

It's a local debut that provides good evidence why Ruhl has rapidly gained a reputation as a young writer to watch. "Eurydice" premiered last year at Wisconsin's Madison Repertory Theatre and is receiving its West Coast premiere in the production that opened Wednesday in Berkeley. It's movingly and gracefully brought to life by a terrific cast in Associate Artistic Director Les Water's lucid and visually astonishing underground bathhouse staging on the Rep's versatile Thrust Stage.

Water oozes down the vast green-tiled walls and across the similarly covered floor of Scott Bradley's richly evocative set. Its drips fill the spaces between wonderfully eclectic rock and classical snippets in Bray Poor's compelling soundscape. It gushes from the vibrant blue antique pump that stands in for Lethe, the mythic river of forgetfulness in Hades, and it pours down in a heavy rain inside the ingenious elevator that serves as the River Styx.

Water plays a large part in death in "Eurydice," and in life as well, resonating with the Rep's recent trend towards employment of substantial water flows and water bodies on stage.. Maria Dizzia's glowing, enthusiastic Eurydice and Daniel Talbott's vibrant Orpheus -- energetically abstracted as his mind

keeps wandering to his music -- bask on a beach in the opening scene. They're young, full of life and head over heels in love, even if -- in Ruhl's playfully canny, poetic dialogue -- they can't help noticing certain defects in each other. Orpheus isn't nearly as interested in words or ideas as she is. Eurydice can't really carry a tune.

The tale unfolds with classical precision in a delightfully creative postmodern mix. Eurydice dies at the wedding. The heartbroken Orpheus searches for her, singing so mournfully -- as the legend has it -- that the very stones weep (and the Stones do). He wins the Lord of the Underworld's (Zeisler) grudging concession to let him retrieve Eurydice on the condition that he never look back to see if she's following him on the long trek back to life. Which, of course, he does.

Ruhl follows the essential outline of the tale as faithfully as most tellers have from Ovid to Monteverdi to Cocteau to Marcel Camus' "Black Orpheus." But she tells it from Eurydice's point of view and blends in elements of everything from "Alice in Wonderland" and the Big Bad Wolf to the myth of Persephone, "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree," "King Lear" and the Gershwins' "I Got Rhythm." She depicts the seductiveness of oblivion and mocks evil, turning the Lord of the Underworld into a dangerously spoiled brat.

Waters' sumptuously staged and musically paced production mirrors the script's playfulness at every turn. Bradley's stunning and versatile set is full of surprises reminiscent of the ingenious productions of Mary Zimmerman, for whom he's designed several shows. The whole piece is packed with delightful

grace notes, small and large, from the slash of a fluorescent blue tube and the flickering of the elevator's descent in Russell Champa's lighting design to the headphone logo on the music-obsessed Orpheus' shirt, the ephemeral house of string Eurydice's father builds for her or the intimations of torment in the ferocious fangs of a stuffed baboon.

Waters and his cast create a pregnant tension between comedy and pathos that serves the text well. They vividly contrast the passion of the distressed Orpheus with the timeless serenity of the Underworld. No matter how well we know what's bound to happen, Orpheus and Eurydice's attempt to return above ground attains its dramatic suspense amid a cacophony of sound and lowering lights.

More than anything else, Ruhl's "Eurydice" derives emotional depth from its multilayered depiction of a woman torn between her lover and her father. Robinson and Dizzia vividly bring the father-daughter bond to life just in the deeply touching way in which he walks her down the aisle -- once, by himself, in imagining her wedding, and again when he leads her to Orpheus in the Underworld. Their scenes in Hades, as he patiently restores the memories she's lost, are rich in beautifully observed tenderness.

The tragic story of Orpheus and Eurydice is a cornerstone of western mythology: shortly after her marriage to the musician Orpheus, Eurydice is fatally bitten by a snake and sent to the underworld, leaving her young husband behind to grieve. Seducing Hades, the lord of the underworld, with his beautiful music, Orpheus strikes a deal that will allow him to bring Eurydice back to life—as long

as Orpheus does not look back until they have left the underworld. Reimagining this classic text from Eurydice's point of view, with contemporary characters, ingenious twists and breathtaking visual effects, Sarah Ruhl's award-winning play is a truly original tale. Ruhl's lyrical writing and poetic imagery have marked her as a young playwright on the rise, talents confirmed by *Eurydice*, in which the age-old theme of "love and loss" takes on a whole new meaning.

One of the characters Ruhl incorporates into her version of Ovid's myth is that of Eurydice's father, exploring the relationship between the young woman's two loves. "I was interested in the triangulation between Orpheus, who she's about to marry, and the father," commented Ruhl, "and in the tumultuous feelings a young woman goes through to choose her husband over her father. I wrote it very much with my father in mind, who died when I was 20; so I wrote it, in a way, to imagine being able to talk to him—to have more conversations."

Eurydice had its premiere at the Madison Repertory Theatre in Wisconsin in September 2003, where it was directed by Rick Corley. The play has also been produced at Chicago's Piven Theatre, Seattle Repertory Theatre and The Williamstown Theatre Festival in Massachusetts. A staged reading of the play was held at Arena Stage during its 2002/03 Season.

Playwright Sarah Ruhl won a 2004 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for her play, *The Clean House*, and was the recipient of a Helen Merrill Award and a Whiting Writers' Award in 2003. In addition to *Eurydice*, Ruhl's body of work includes *Melancholy Play*, *Late: A Cowboy Song*, *Orlando*, *Chekhov: Shorts* and *Passion Play*. Her plays have been represented at the Sundance Theatre Lab,

New York Theatre Workshop, The McCarter Theatre Center, The Flea, The Ohio Theater, New George's, The Children's Theatre Company, Trinity Repertory Company, Annex Theatre, Chicago Dramatists and Victory Gardens, as well as at theatres in London and Germany. Upcoming productions of Ruhl's work will take place at Yale Repertory Theatre, South Coast Repertory Theatre and Woolly Mammoth, and will be available in an anthology published by TCG in 2005. She is a member of New Dramatists. Ruhl is a Chicago native and received her M.F.A. from Brown University.

The cast of *Eurydice* includes: Maria Dizzia, an artistic associate of The Civilians and graduate of the M.F.A. program at U.C. San Diego; Aimée Guillot, who has previously appeared at Berkeley Rep in *Big Love*, directed by Les Waters, and is also an artistic associate of The Civilians holding an M.F.A. from U.C. San Diego; Ramiz Monsef making his Berkeley Rep debut after appearing around the Bay Area and in Oregon and Seattle, where he graduated from Cornish College of the Arts; Charles Shaw Robinson, whose work for Berkeley Rep includes roles in *Homebody/Kabul* and *The Magic Fire*; Daniel Talbott, who previously appeared at Berkeley Rep in *Skylight*, for which he received a BATCC Award nomination, and is a graduate of Juilliard; T. Edward Webster, who has appeared around the Bay Area as a graduate of A.C.T.'s M.F.A. program and last worked at Berkeley Rep with Les Waters on *Suddenly Last Summer*, and Mark Zeisler, who appeared at Berkeley Rep in *Big Love* with Ms. Guillot.