

IN THE NEXT ROOM

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Donna Summer probably would approve of the latest Berkeley Rep offering, although it does appear more than a couple straitlaced critics seem to have missed the boat on the production in their attempts to appear "broadminded."

The world-premier production of Sarah Ruhl's latest offering, "In the Next Room (The Vibrator Play)" is not without its problems, but we think the play is a strong offering from the Rep and succeeds more often than falls short with a total effect of a resounding success well-earned by a topnotch cast and quietly effective set design by Annie Smart and marvelously executed period costumes by David Zinn.



(l to r) At Berkeley Rep, Stacy Ross, Maria Dizzia and Paul Niebanck star in a new comedy about marriage, intimacy...and electricity. The world premiere of *In the Next Room (or the vibrator play)* reunites MacArthur genius Sarah Ruhl and Obie Award-winning director Les Waters. Photo courtesy of kevinberne.com

The play involves the turn of the 20th century psychiatric practice of a physician, steeped in Freudianism, who employs the newfangled invention of electricity to power the equally newfangled invention of the vibrator to "elucidate paroxysms" and so cure "hysteria" caused by "congestion in the womb."

Berkeley Rep dramaturgs and Stage Managers went into Deep Mode to research the issues and history of this complex of issues, discovering a whole culture of nascent orgasm devices, which -- to our modern astonishment -- seemed entirely disassociated from sexual impulse.

To fix a few facts here regarding the early days of electricity, some of which events are directly referred in the play, lets set the record right.

Thales of Miletus (640-546 B.C.) is credited with the discovery that amber when rubbed acquired the property of attracting light objects. The word electricity comes from "elektron" the Greek word for amber. Otto von Guericke invented the first static electric generator in 1675, while the first current generator was made by Alosio Galvani in 1780. But except for some supposed medicinal applications, electricity had little use.

Thales is referenced by the "student of Greek" Annie, the doctor's midwife helper, who turns out to be quite as learned as the best of the scientists.

The first major AC power station was built at Niagara Falls in 1888, and the success of this generator basically doomed Edison's DC current ideology.

During the period defined by the play, Edison went at loggerheads with Tesla, his former employee, over the issue of DC versus AC current. Edison, a brute-force inventor, lacked the math skills to understand that Tesla, sometimes regarded as the founder of modern physics, was correct in his assertions about the practical delivery of electricity. Edison held public demonstrations in which various animals were electrocuted to death to "prove" that AC was more "dangerous" than DC. The incident referenced in the play in which an elephant was electrocuted occurred in 1887 in Coney Island as part of the "war of the currents" between Edison and Tesla.

A lot of this background resides behind the play, and more besides, as Ruhl is a fairly well-educated playwright, but fortunately none of this matters.

What is important to know is that as the clock ticked over from the 1800's to the Edwardian 1900's, a social malaise of detachment nearly paralyzed society

and human relations in Europe and the Americas. This malaise acquired the term "hysteria" as borrowed from the young genius of a Viennese doctor named Sigmund Freud. Succeeding generations, more impressed with genius than with the effort to redefine something that seemed so conveniently provided, have absorbed Freud's formulation of the Unconscious with religious, and, dare we say, Victorian rigidity.

When the effects of the Unconscious are made to boil to the surface, as during orgasm, they can no longer be called "unconscious" by definition, but they certainly will cause some changes and disturbances.

As Dr. Givings affects a "scientific detachment" during sessions that administer orgasm after orgasm to woman after woman, plus an occasional man, he innocently is opening up a Pandora's box of disturbances (pun intended). It is the effect of these changes on a couple of his patients, a woman and a male artist, and their effect upon his wife that cause the crisis of the play.

Mrs. Givings, portrayed wonderfully by a blithely chatty, yet nuanced Hannah Cabel, appears to be the most post-Victorian character in the play, seemingly free of the interior inhibitions that so block the majority of the characters from self-realization and happiness.



(l to r) At Berkeley Rep, Maria Dizzia and Hannah Cabell star in the world premiere of *In the Next Room (or the vibrator play)*.

Her husband, however, is the cause of much of her trouble. In the second act she erupts with anger about the unfairness towards her. "You! You are always in the next room. With other women! And men!"

It turns out the doctor is the most hysterically inhibited to the extent of stinting his own wife as she bounced between lesbian affection and impulsive self-destructiveness, asking the artist to take her to Paris with him although it is clear he is not attracted to her sexually in the slightest. In one of the kindest put-downs ever presented, the artist, played by Joaquin Torres tells her, "You don't really love me. You don't. And I actually prefer . . . different . . . eyes. Eyes, yes! I

cannot see your soul through your eyes. You see . . . ?" It is subtly done, for it is not so much the eyes as a different gender he "prefers."

In the end, Mrs. Givings discovers a strength in herself to save her marriage and her husband in a way that feels anachronistic, which is a criticism levied by some of the critics out there.

Most of the characters are quite post-Victorian in their eager willingness to explore their sexuality, and so veracity of time and place is damaged, but in the end, who really cares about that? If the play were a period piece devoted to restoring a time, we all would be quickly bored to tears. One might as well spend the evening watching another interminable performance of Shaw or Ibsen. The play is about our current issues, very much alive and with us, of associating sex and love and the necessity for both as well as the necessity of truthfulness to one's own feelings.

In fact, the more the actors adhere to period manners and stilted delivery, the less the play works. The sooner such things are put aside, the more the play is able to breath, like the artist played by Joaquin Torres, who comes on speaking with a faux British accent until he loosens up a bit with the help of the good doctor's "Chattanooga device." In a glorious fit of creative impulse, he arranges to paint the wetnurse as a "Madonna" doing pretty much what wetnurses do. "Why is it so few madonnas are painted giving suck? Have you ever thought about that?" he says. Take note, Facebook.

So we observe some characters wearing scarves and funny hats that call forth another age. Well and good. The Past is dead and good riddance to it. Lets

use them to comment on our time today. In this Ruhl succeeds quite well. The final image, which features two characters standing naked in the garden somewhere in upstate New York as the snow falls is clearly an idealization and not meant to be taken as a "realistic" evocation of a time and place at all. From subject matter that includes electric vibrators, orgasms, sex, prudery, Freudianism, an awful lot of face-slapping, and infidelity, we arrive at the representation of ideal love in the form of two people forming "snow angels". There you go.

Ruhl has created a beautiful image and Les Waters has directed that well. So we leave you with that.

Kudos to Melle Powers as the wetnurse, Elizabeth, for delivering an emotionally powerful soliloquy on the death of a child. Ah yes, there is that as well. While Mrs. Givings has the lion's share of one-line zingers in the play, Elizabeth presents the solidity of sincerely felt emotion that the other characters find lacking. When Elizabeth suggests that one can experience ecstatic happiness with one's husband, as opposed with with a machine, Mrs. Givings and Mrs. Daldry burst out with incredulous laughter. "With one's *husband*?! Oh God!" In Elizabeth is the foil of human warmth to Dr. Giving's starchy pomposity, a warmth that only Mrs. Givings appears to sense is absent in herself and others.

It is a mark of hope, as presented by playwright Ruhl, that Mrs. Givings is not only able to recover this warmth in herself but find the resources to resurrect the long buried humanity in her husband at the end as well.



(l to r) At Berkeley Rep, Melle Powers, Hannah Cabell and Joaquín Torres star in a new comedy about marriage, intimacy...and electricity. Photo courtesy of mellopix.com.

“In the Next Room (or the vibrator play)” runs through March 15 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2025 Addison Ave. Information: +1-510-647-2949; <http://www.berkeleyrep.org>.

PERSONNEL

Sarah Ruhl, Playwright
Les Waters, Director
Annie Smart, Scenic Design
David Zinn, Costume Design
Bray Poor, Sound Design
Russell H. Champa, Lighting Design
Jonathan Bell, Composer
Madeleine Oldham, Dramaturg
Michael Suenkel, Production Stage Manager
Amy Potozkin, Casting
Janet Foster, Casting
Mina Morita, Assistant Director
Larry Dunlap, Pianist

Hannah Cabell, Catherine Givings
Stacy Ross, Annie (the midwife assistant)
Paul Niebanck, Dr. Givings
Maria Dizzia, Sabrina Daldry
John Leonard Thompson, Mr. Daldry
Melle Powers, Elizabeth (the wetnurse)
Joaquín Torres, Leo Irving

All actors in this world-premier are Equity members.