Directed by Lydia Milman Schmidt

Saturday, April 2, 2016 at 7:30 p.m.
Sunday, April 3, 2016 at 2 p.m.
GSU Center for Performing Arts

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SYNOPSIS

A retelling of the myth of Orpheus through a feminine lens: Eurydice’s point of view. Eurydice, a young woman who loves books is in love with Orpheus, a musician who plays the most beautiful music on earth. On their wedding day, Eurydice meets a strange man who claims he has a letter from her deceased father. She follows the man to his apartment where she falls down the stairs and dies.

Eurydice enters the Underworld where she is reunited with her father. After being dipped in the river of forgetfulness she has no memory of her father or her life. Her father patiently re-teaches her words and about life. Meanwhile, Orpheus grieves for Eurydice and despite his trouble communicating with words, he writes her letters.

Eventually, Orpheus is able to travel to the Underworld to retrieve Eurydice. Following the traditional myth, the Lord of the Underworld agrees to let Eurydice go with Orpheus under one condition: Orpheus must walk back to the world of the living without looking back to see if Eurydice is following him. Eurydice agonizes between staying in the Underworld with her father or rejoining the world of the living with her husband. Eurydice’s father encourages her to go with Orpheus. She follows Orpheus but calls his name, causing him to look back, breaking his agreement with the Lord of the Underworld. Eurydice returns to the Underworld to find that her father has dipped himself in the river of forgetfulness. Eurydice writes a letter to Orpheus, dips herself in the river and lies down next to her father. Orpheus arrives in the Underworld, it rains on him and he forgets. He finds Eurydice’s letter but cannot read it.

CHARACTERS

Eurydice: An intelligent young woman who loves books; in love with Orpheus.

Orpheus: A gifted young musician who is in love with Eurydice.

Father: Eurydice’s father who has died and resides in the Underworld.

A Nasty Interesting Man

The Lord of the Underworld: An annoying but powerful child played by the same actor as A Nasty Interesting Man.

A Chorus of Stones: a trio who reside in the Underworld; providing cold and apathetic commentary on the action of the play.

A Big Stone
A Loud Stone
A Little Stone
Sarah Ruhl was born in 1974 in Wilmette, Illinois. She originally planned to be a poet or an actor but fell in love with playwriting while studying with the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, Paula Vogel at Brown University. She wrote her first short play in response to a class assignment by Vogel, *Dog Play*. After graduating from Brown’s MFA playwriting program, she wrote and workshopped *Eurydice*. Considered to be her breakout play onto the national scene, it was later given its world premiere at Madison Repertory Theatre in 2003. At the age of 31, Ruhl was a 2005 Pulitzer Prize finalist for *The Clean House*. Since then, she has won a number of awards, including the prestigious MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship in 2006.

Ruhl’s poetic sensibilities and skill with language are hallmarks of her work. Ruhl’s birth as a writer is often connected to the 1994 death of her father from cancer. 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*. Ruhl stated, “The play is really dedicated to my father, who died when I was twenty and he was fifty-five...I wanted to write something where I would be allowed to have a few more conversations with him. A myth exploring the underworld and the connection between the dead and the living was a way to negotiate that terrain.”

**WORKS BY SARAH RUHL**

- *Melancholy Play* (2001)
- *Lady with the Lap Dog* and *Anna Around the Neck* Adapted from Anton Chekhov (2001)
• *Eurydice* (2003)
• *Orlando* (2003) An adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando*
• *Late: A Cowboy Song* (2003)
• *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* (2007)
• *In the Next Room or the vibrator play* (2009) Finalist for Pulitzer Prize. Nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play.
• *Stage Kiss* (2011)
• *Three Sisters* Adapted from Anton Chekhov in 2011

**THE MYTH OF ORPHEUS**

Orpheus leading Eurydice from the Underworld
by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, 1861.

There are many variations on the myth of Orpheus including versions by poets Ovid and Virgil. Orpheus’s origin changes depending on the version. In some versions, he is the son of the God Apollo or a Thracian King and the muse of Calliope. In every version, he is an exceptionally talented musician and singer. Orpheus appears in other myths; he is one of the Argonauts in the quest for the Golden Fleece with Jason. He is best known for his tragic love story with Eurydice.

Depending on the version, Eurydice is either or mortal woman or a dryad (a wood nymph or
fairy). While dancing on her wedding day, Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies and her spirit goes to the Underworld. In some of the versions of the myth, Eurydice is running from a shepherd’s sexual advances when she is bitten. Orpheus journeys to the underworld and his music is so beautiful that it moves the hearts of Hades and Persephone, King and Queen of the Underworld. Hades grants Orpheus’s plea to return Eurydice to the world of the living, under one condition. Orpheus must not look back at his bride before they reach the world of the living. If he turns back to look for her, she will be immediately returned to the Underworld for all eternity. Despite this warning, Orpheus turns back to look for Eurydice and she dies again. Orpheus returns to the word of the living, never to love again. When he dies, he is reunited with Eurydice in the Underworld.
THEMES

Growing Up  Loss and Grief
Communication  Interpersonal Relationships
Memory and Identity

MOTIFS

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.

In *Eurydice*, water quenches thirst, ushers souls to the underworld, replenishes life, erases memories and is present throughout the play as a sound.

Strings
The Fates
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.

Orpheus ties a string around Eurydice’s finger and Eurydice’s father constructs a room for her out of string.

Orpheus is known for playing the lyre, a stringed-instrument. He speaks of making an instrument out of Eurydice’s strings of hair.

Greek Chorus
The Stones in the Underworld serve as a Greek Chorus. In a traditional Greek tragedy the chorus consisted of 12-15 people and commented on the action of the play.
DISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Theatre and Performance Studies
Mythology
World Religions
Literature
History
Identity Studies
Gender and Women’s Studies
Communication Studies
Anthropology
Sociology
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

If you were Eurydice, would you choose to stay with your father in the Underworld or return to the world of the living with Orpheus? Why would you make that choice?

Why do you think the Nasty Interesting Man and the Lord of the Underworld are played by the same actor?

In the original myth of Orpheus, Orpheus turns to look for Eurydice without any prompting from her. In Ruhl’s retelling, Eurydice prompts this by calling his name. Why do you think Ruhl chose this? How does it change Eurydice’s role in the myth?