



## THE BIG INTERVIEW SARAH RUHL

Richard Ouzounian's Saturday feature on the most intriguing names in entertainment

# The passion that drives a playwright

Ruhl is staging largest play so far in various locations around Riverdale

NEW YORK—Sarah Ruhl's plays may have titles filled with words like "Vibrator" and "Passion," but the woman herself is best described as beguilingly sweet, with shining red hair and a smile that could melt even a critic's heart.

Not that critics' hearts need melting when Ruhl is writing. Her works have been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award, while the woman herself has received a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship and the PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theatre Award.

Toronto has seen and cheered her work before, with the Canadian Stage production of *The Clean House* and Tarragon's rendition of *In the Next Room* (or *The Vibrator Play*).

But what could be her finest local moment takes place on June 10, when three of Toronto's best indie theatre companies (Outside the March, Convergence Theatre and Sheep No Wool Production) combine with Crow's Theatre to mount Ruhl's largest play, the 3-1/2-hour trilogy called *Passion Play*, which will be staged in various locations around Riverdale.

Ruhl sits in a quirky local café near the home in Brooklyn Heights she shares with her husband and three children and explains the simple beginnings that led to the work, which is getting such a huge staging.

"The question I kept asking myself was, 'What if there was a guy who always got cast as Pontius Pilate in a *Passion Play*, but wanted to be Jesus Christ instead?'"

The kind of piece Ruhl is describing has a long and checkered history on world stages, with small communities (like the Little Italy Good Friday procession in Toronto) and entire municipalities (like the Bavarian township Oberammergau) coming together on a regular basis to re-enact the story of Christ's suffering and death.

"It began as a play about actors, I suppose," she says, "but then, the more I started researching about passion plays, the more I learned about their role in history."

And so she wrote three separate plays about three places at distinct points in history having their lives wound up with the presentation of the passion play, the first occurring in 1575 in northern England.

"I was fascinated to learn about Queen Elizabeth I closing down all the passion plays in Elizabethan England and I started to think about the relationship between the historical moment and the village doing the play.

"I loved the Renaissance, but I also loved the idea of this one little town plodding on, mired in their own medieval sensibility."

That led to her investigating the history of the most famous passion play of all, in Oberammergau, only to discover that "Hitler had come there in 1934 to pay a visit and had been treated with enormous affection. I learned that the first two people in town to join the Nazi party were the director and the actor playing Jesus Christ.

"And the two people in the town



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who never joined the Nazi party were the actors playing Judas and Pontius Pilate. I thought that was so uncanny."

Ruhl relates how the Oberammergau residents "denied knowing about the camps, even though they were very near. They would say, 'We didn't know about this because there were no Jews in our town.' But I learned there was one that was sent away."

She left those two parts on their own for many years, but when Molly Smith (artistic director of Washington D.C.'s Arena Stage and a frequent visitor at the Shaw Festival) commissioned her to write "a play about America," she responded with the third part of the trilogy, set in Spearfish, S.D., during the years of Ronald Reagan's presidency.

"I took a road trip out there to see it. It's closed now. But I was fascinated by the intersection of religion and politics in the United States and that was how I finished the script, although I kept rewriting it for years. How many years? I began it when I was 21, I finally finished it when I was

36 and I'm 39 now."

Ruhl was born in Wilmette, Ill., growing up with her sister in a loving family that cherished the arts in all their forms.

"My mother did a lot of theatre when I was growing up and she loved to take me to the Stratford Festival, especially to see anything with Brian Bedford in it," she recalls. "She thought he was a sort of god."

In her teenage years, Ruhl wanted to be a poet and saw herself as "a kind of Emily Dickinson type," but by the time she was ready to enter Brown University, "I was sure I wanted to write philosophical novels."

Her father died of cancer when she was 20, an event that had a massive impact on her life, but she acquired an amazing mentor in the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel, best known for *How I Learned to Drive*.

"I met a drama teacher who was seminal at a crucial time in my life. That's why I became a playwright. If I had met a poet, I might still be writing poetry."

Ruhl praises Vogel for "her conjuror's way of tapping people and making them feel they can do something important with their lives."

Vogel sensed Ruhl had a lot of intense feelings about her father's death that she couldn't put into words, so she offhandedly suggested that she "write a play about a dog" as a way of getting to the truth in an oblique manner.

"Paula believes in the kind of formalism where you direct your gaze away from your conscious thoughts and use the unconscious to deal in a formal way with what you're really thinking and feeling about."

That opened the floodgates for Ruhl, with *The Dog Play* starting her on a successful career that included plays as diverse as the mythic *Eurydice* and the hypermodern *Dead Man's Cellphone*.

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"Every time I start to write a play, I

go through a period about two-thirds of the way through when I don't know if it really is a play. And then there's a horrific moment when I think, 'Oh God, its not.' But it somehow usually works out in the end."

Ruhl is working on a book of essays called *A Hundred Essays I Don't Have Time To Write*, which she describes as "a form of maternal survival, a way to save my thoughts on theatre, motherhood, everything. After you've breastfed twins, you don't want to go into rehearsal for a three-hour play."

But she's finding time to come to Toronto during the run of *Passion Play*, to see the production, meet with her mother and pay a return visit to Stratford, "hopefully when Brian Bedford, of course, is in a performance."

While in Toronto, the playwright will appear at "In Conversation with Sarah Ruhl," a live public interview with local playwright Julie Tepperman, on Saturday June 22, at 2 p.m. at the Tarragon Theatre Mainstage. Tickets are available through [outsidethemarch.ca](http://outsidethemarch.ca)

### > FIVE FAVE THINGS



#### DYLAN THOMAS

"My parents were in Wales when the contents of his estate went on auction and they purchased a lampshade from his house. I still cherish it."



#### VIRGINIA WOOLF

"The most amazing woman and the most amazing author."



#### YORKSHIRE GOLD TEA

"Every playwright has their stimulant of choice. Yorkshire Gold Tea is mine."



#### ATLANTIC OCEAN

"I love seeing the ocean, even the tiny little bit I can peek at through one of the upstairs windows in my house."



#### BROOKLYN CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL

"I think my children love this more than anything. They keep dumping handfuls of cherry blossoms in my pockets, in my purse, everywhere and I find them for weeks afterwards."