



**Melancholy Play: A Contemporary Farce** by Sarah Ruhl  
Dramaturgy Packet by Alex Shelbourne and Kenjiro Lee (NTI-AP '21)

# Production History

By Alex Shelbourne

- Melancholy Play premiered at the Piven Theatre, Evanston, Illinois, running from June 28, 2002 to August 4, 2002. Directed by Jessica Thebus, the cast featured Polly Noonan as Tilly.
- It was later produced in October 2002 at Princeton University; in May 2005 by The Echo Theater Company in Los Angeles; in June 2011 by the Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati; and in January 2012 by Upstart Productions in Dallas, Texas.
- The play was presented by 13P in Brooklyn, New York in July 2012.
- Internationally, it was produced in Singapore by Couch Theatre in July 2013.

## Chamber Musical

The play has been reworked to be a chamber musical, with music by composer Todd Almond, featuring a string quartet and pianist to complement the play. This version was presented at the Piven Theatre Workshop in May 2015 to June 21, directed by Polly Noonan (the original Tilly).

The chamber music version was originally produced by 13P in New York City in July 2012.

Almond recalls: "Sarah wanted me to look at an early play of hers called Melancholy Play, a play that had a musical element already but that she felt wanted more exploration...**I didn't want to write songs (music and lyrics), I wanted to simply set the entire play to music. Many lyricists, including myself, toil endlessly to say in lyrics what Sarah says so naturally in dialogue....And suddenly it was written.** The whole thing. Her beautiful, strange play was now a sung-through — well, nearly sung-through — musical..."

## Characters

### By Kenjiro Lee

- FRANK: A tailor
- TILLY: A bank teller
- FRANCES: A hairdresser
- JOAN: A British nurse
- LORENZO THE UNFEELING: A psychiatrist
  - He is described as having an “unidentifiable Italian accent” on page 235.
- JULIAN: A cello player
  - Does not speak and remains outside the action

## Who is Sarah Ruhl?

By Kenjiro Lee



Born in Wilmette, Illinois, Sarah Ruhl received dramatic training from Piven Theatre Workshop in Evanston. Credits it with teaching her about the role of language and narration. Also went to Interlochen Arts Camp in Michigan for several summers. She planned to be a poet, but switched to playwriting after studying under Paula Vogel at Brown. Graduated from Brown with a BA in English in 1997, and MFA in Playwriting in 2001. She spent a year of graduate work studying English literature at Pembroke.

Ruhl rose to fame with her 2004 play *The Clean House*, which was a Pulitzer finalist. She also wrote the plays *Eurydice*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)*, and *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage*. Also an adaptation of *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf. Her most recent work is *Becky Nurse of Salem*, which premiered at Berkeley Rep in December of 2019.

*Melancholy Play* is an earlier work of hers, and as a whole relatively sillier than the work she became known for. The characters are considered “cyphers more than fully fleshed out people.” Although Ruhl herself bristles at these adjectives in her *100 Essays* book, *Melancholy Play* is a prime example of the kind of “whimsy” and “quirkiness” that critics often see in her works, with characters existing on the threshold of the real world and a “suspended state.” Amy Muse argues *Melancholy Play* and her works such as *Demeter in the City*, *Eurydice*, and *Scenes from Court Life or the whipping boy and the prince* play with the “actual and magical.” This makes them feel “whimsical,” but they actually work as “philosophical comedies that plumb the depths with a light touch.”

From “Surreal Life”

“Writes in a poised, crystalline style about things that are irrational and invisible.”

Her plays celebrate “the pleasure of heightened things.”  
Characters occupy “the real world and also a suspended state.”

First book, “Death in Another Country,” a collection of verse, published when she was 20. Sees plays as “three-dimensional poems.”

### **Excerpts from *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write***

In 2015, Ruhl published a collection of essays which offer insights into her process as well as her feelings on her own plays. Excerpted here are essays that may prove helpful in approaching her texts.

#### Ruhl on comedies:

“Inasmuch as plays are machines, comedies work when they make people laugh and tragedies work when they make people weep. We are, after all, in a bodily enterprise.

But occasionally people dismiss comedies precisely because they have made people laugh. It is thought that the laughter was cheap, or of the wrong quality, and perhaps it was. I suppose the underlying assumption when people dismiss comedies for having made people laugh is that theater should not operate like a machine; it is, rather, art. And you cannot measure art by laughter or tears, there is a third unruly thing at play, the invisible.

**But my worry is that if plays (in order to be art) ought not to be too funny, or not funny in a certain way, because it cheapens their aesthetic status, then theater is relegated to the mode of ballet or opera—neither of which is ever too funny.**

If plays had their roots in vaudeville as much as they had their roots in Passion Plays, then their roots are cut off when laughter itself is viewed as cheap. “*It was like a sitcom*” is one of the most feared criticisms of a “serious” comedy on Broadway...**But my fear is that, if this is so, we theater-lovers have lost ground, if television is now the only sacred province of dumb jokes.”**

#### Ruhl on rule of acting in plays of hers (13 from 100 essays): Subtext to the left of the work and not underneath the work.

“If you’re acting in play of mine, and I say this full of love for you, please, if you will, **don’t think one thing and then say another thing. Think the thing you are saying.** Do not think of the language of the play as a cover or deception for your actual true hidden feelings which you’ve felt compelled to invent for yourself. Don’t create a bridge between you and the impulse for the language—erase the boundary between the two. Think of subtext as to the left of the language and not underneath it. There is no deception or ulterior motive or “cover” about the language. There are, instead, pools of silence and the unsayable to the left or to the right or even above the language. The unsayable in an ideal world hovers above the language rather than below. Think of the word *hover* over and above the word *cover*. Perhaps it is because I am from the Midwest but I think it is almost ontologically impossible to truly think one thing while saying another thing. It creates an acting muddle in the theater and a sociopath in life.”

#### 74: The meaning of twins on stage

I gave birth to twins a year ago, one boy, one girl. And that got me thinking about the meaning of twins on stage. (When I am thinking at all.) Twins on stage seem to stand in for: surprise, excess, the world upside-down when the twins are separated, the world ordered when they are reunited. They are more curiosity than real people; they are both more than people and less than people, they stand in for doubleness. They are a plot device: fraternal twins separated at birth and reunited. Or identical twins: mistaken identity (convenient for the virtuosity of one actor being able to play two parts).

**Why is it satisfying to watch twins reunited on stage and is it different from or just a variable of the satisfaction we get at the end of the play when two lovers are married.** The coming together of that which was once separate. The hybrid nature of identity. Narrative doubling, the doubleness of two plots coming together. Undoing the status quo-- disrupting patrilineage. (Who would be the next king or who would inherit the land if there were two of them, born at the same time?) The Shakespearean image of twins separated in a storm, separated at birth...does it reflect the primordial feeling that we have been separated from our other, our true self at birth, or during some other great storm in our lives? And yet Shakespeare, of course, had real twins in his own life. One assumes, then, that he wasn't interested in twins as a purely literary conceit.

Now that I have real twins I find I am leery of twin-as-symbol. My twins were a great surprise to me. They bowled me over with the strange audacity and unpredictability of the natural world (perhaps in the future twins will come instead to signify the strange audacity and controlled nature of the medical world, now that twins are becoming more ubiquitous with the advent of in vitro fertilization.)

At any rate, my twins were a surprise, (perhaps genetically bequeathed to me my great-aunt, whose never-discussed twins were stillborn) and the pregnancy was difficult and Victorian. I went on bed-rest for three months. When I was on bed-rest my friends would give me books to read and for some reason on all of their pages I found casual mentions of a dead twin. *Little Dorrit*. Mention of a dead twin. Out it went. I was terrified. Why were there so many literary dead twins? In the Elizabethan era or the 19th century I'm sure it was a fact of life. But on the symbolic level why all the dead twins? Because two was an impossibility, symbolically? Or because it was a symbol of double loss, a yearning for that which was once whole? We come into the world alone, and we die alone. Not so for twins.

Another thing about twins. I think, on a daily level, I find not only their doubleness overwhelming but also their lack of sequence, that is to say their constant simultaneity. The eye never rests. The eye is always on two stories, unfolding at once. Two protagonists. One climbs a chair, one reaches for an electrical outlet. One invents a new word while the other is inventing a new gesture. You cannot watch one story unfolding, then another. You cannot fall in love with

one protagonist, and then another. You must fall in love with two protagonists at once. This also disrupts the usual narrative structure. The eye looks everywhere at once, the stories unfold at once, and the heart must expand to identify not singly, but doubly.

After I gave birth to my twins the nurse laid them on the gurney and they held hands. Before I held them, they held each other. Together, they are something larger, and different somehow from mere siblings. And yet somehow I resist thinking of them as part of a whole. If they are part of a whole that means they are halves, and of course they are not halves, they are complete unto themselves. I dislike the word “multiple. How can a person be a multiple, a multiple of what? The word seems to assume one is the main signifier and the second is a multiple of one. But of course multiple births are not a multiple of one unit; they are discrete identities.

Every day I insist upon this: to love two as though they are one and one. Not to be terribly interested in their doubleness as a curiosity or symbol but to be interested in their particular and individual natures. Perhaps having children, generally speaking, makes one increasingly distrust the symbolic world. Because suddenly nothing is as important as the very real particular.

An essay in praise of smallness:

**I admire minimalism.**

# Unpacking The Note

## By Kenjiro Lee

- “A contemporary farce”
  - What is contemporary?: Ultimately, this could mean anything, but in the sense of theater it refers to something that is supposed to take place in the present day (or the present day of the time the play was written), and eschew that which we call classical. For what it’s worth, Ruhl puts in her opening note that the time is “the present moment”
  - What is farce? Farce is a comic dramatic (as in theatrical) work using buffoonery and horseplay and typically including crude characterization and ludicrously improbable situations.
- The Anatomy of Melancholy, 1632
  - This was the fourth edition of the book by Robert Burton--it was originally published in 1621 but he kept updating it for 17 years. It is presented as a medical text but delves more into philosophy than a typical medical text. The melancholia Burton describes is now widely considered to be the modern-day clinical depression. The book is known for its satirical humor (Burton signs the preface as Democritus Junior, a reference to the philosopher Democritus.)
  - Why’d she include this quote? This is a play very much divided up by sections and with different approaches to dealing with melancholy.
- “This play is dedicated to everyone who... has traveled to an almond state”: As in became so overcome by melancholy they turned into an almond.
- Set
  - Chaise: Kind of like a lounging chair.
  - Victrola: A generic name for a phonograph, named for the Victor Talking Machine Company. Note she follows that with a question mark and a “Perhaps.”
- How to use the set
  - Found objects: A natural or man-made object, or a fragment of one, used by an artist due to some value it holds.
  - Chamber piece: A chamber play is a play, usually three acts, performed with a small cast and practically no sets or costumes in a small space. Became popular in the early 20th century thanks to Max Reinhardt and August Strindberg. The name is derived from the term “chamber music.”
  - Site-specific piece: Self-explanatory, but implying Ruhl wants as little transformation of space as possible.
  - Arret (as in commedia): An arret is a judgment, decision, or decree of a court or sovereign, typical of the King or Parliament of France. Commedia refers to *commedia dell’arte*, an early form of comedy professional theatre from Italy characterized by improvisation and extreme character types denoted by types of masks. Essentially, Ruhl wants the scenes to be broken by some sort of simple, quick signifier.
  - Tableau: In a tableau, participants make still images with their bodies to represent a scene. It can be used to quickly establish a scene involving a large number of characters.



- Big takeaway: Ruhl wants as few set pieces as possible, the simplest possible set pieces when used, and basically no huge transitions – it’s the actors’ performances that drive different locations.
- The music
  - “The music exists in a parallel world”: It’s non-diegetic music. The performer is onstage and the actors respond to it, but its source isn’t within the world of the show.
  - “It would be nice if the actor who plays Julian were from a country other than the United States”: You get a third-generation Asian American or a white person.
  - “And he or she should be a very good cello player”: None of the actors we have play cello to my knowledge. Alternatives: A different instrument, vocal effects, or pre-recorded music. Decide as early as possible.
  -
- Costume
  - Joan’s old-fashioned nurses uniform:



■ Something like this?

- Notes on Tone
  - Jacobean direct address: A practice of characters speaking directly to the audience without any sort of elaborate framing device. It dates from the Jacobean era of England (reign of James I, lasting 1603-1625). It was preceded by the Elizabethan era. Shakespeare’s plays used JDA. The idea of JDA is to unify the story with the audience – the audience is addressed the same way other characters are.
  - Sarah Ruhl is not making a recommendation by saying the play is fast – when she says this play is fast, funny, and bold, she really means it.
- Amygdala: The greek word for almond, the amygdala is one of two almond shaped clusters of nuclei located within the brain. Primary role in the processing of memory, decision-making, and emotional responses.
- Mandorla: An ancient symbol of two overlapping circles which become an almond shape when a line is drawn around the two circles.

### **What Has Sarah Ruhl done for the American theatre?**

Sarah Ruhl is sometimes listed as one of the U.S.'s most prolific contemporary playwrights, and with good reason given her words. Amy Muse argues that Ruhl is an example of an "artist-thinker" or "new alchemist": "artists and scientists who are re-enchanting the world through a grounding in the world." Ruhl invites audiences into conversations with the stage, rather than looking at the stage as a place for detached analysis. Todd Landon argues that Ruhl's plays offer lightness in dark situations.

# Magical Realism

By Alex Shelbourne

Magical realism (also known as magic realism or marvelous realism) is a genre in which fantastical or impossible events seamlessly occur within an otherwise realistic environment. These moments of the “marvelous” are accepted as part of the story’s reality, and can invite deeper consideration into life’s capacity for grand, unpredictable, or even irrational situations.

Magical realism as a distinct literary genre has its roots in mid-20th century Latin America. The region’s background in ancient folklore and the miracles of Catholic tradition, combined with ongoing political instability, cultivated a society uniquely rich in imagination and the sense that anything could be possible. Put off by the formulas European art was using to depart from realism—the juxtaposition of disparate objects and qualities (such as Dalí’s melting watches) or overused medieval tales like the legends of King Arthur—it calls for a more authentic storytelling that is only possible among those who truly believe in a marvelous component to life. This is not, of course, to say the events of such a story must be taken as scientifically accurate; but rather, it purports that magic can reveal genuine truth about the human experience that could not be fully captured in literal, rational descriptions.

The Nobel Prize-winning career of Gabriel García Márquez, whose *100 Years of Solitude* remains a seminal work in the genre, has also been a major (if not the major) force in ushering magical realism into the popular lexicon. But magical realism is not limited to Latin America. Decades after it emerged as a literary genre, we see it represented in the work of authors such as Salman Rushdie, Sherman Alexie, Anne Carson, and Toni Morrison and playwrights such as Tarell Alvin McCraney, José Rivera, and Tony Kushner.

When Ruhl received a MacArthur Fellowship in September 2006, the announcement of that award stated: "Sarah Ruhl, 32, playwright, New York City. Playwright creating vivid and adventurous theatrical works that poignantly juxtapose the mundane aspects of daily life with mythic themes of love and war."

John Lahr, in *The New Yorker*, wrote of Ruhl:

“But if Ruhl's demeanor is unassuming, her plays are bold. Her nonlinear form of realism—full of astonishments, surprises, and mysteries—is low on exposition and psychology. **"I try to interpret how people subjectively experience life,"** she has said. "Everyone has a great, horrible opera inside him. I feel that my plays, in a way, are very old-fashioned. They're pre-Freudian in the sense that the Greeks and Shakespeare worked with similar assumptions. Catharsis isn't a wound being excavated from childhood."

In a discussion with Paula Vogel for *BOMB Magazine*, Ruhl described the psychology of her plays as "putting things up against Freud ... it's a more medieval sensibility of the humors, melancholia, black bile, and transformation." Rather than "connect the dots psychologically in a linear way," Ruhl prefers to create emotional psychological states through transformation of the performance space.

Ruhl: “I get impatient with the compound noun magic realism although I love novelists who are called magical realists (apparently many of them, like Marquez, also get impatient with the term). I do like

magic. But I don't like realism. And I don't necessarily like getting cordoned off into any particular aesthetic and stuck there. I like fabulation, I like creating new forms and new worlds. I like starting new with every play and not knowing where it will end up."

## Glossary

By Alex Shelbourne

“Sleeping beauty’s baptism” (234): Reference to the wicked fairy godmother who comes uninvited to the princess's christening and declares that "because you did not invite me, I tell you that in her fifteenth year, your daughter will prick herself with a spindle and fall over dead". A good fairy mitigates the curse so that the princess will only fall into a deep sleep and the king attempts to protect her by removing all spindles. Named “Maleficent” in Walt Disney Media.

“Sweetmeats” (238): Food items that are rich in sugar and carbohydrates. Exact definitions are difficult. In general, though, confectionery is divided into two broad and somewhat overlapping categories, bakers' confections and sugar confections.

“Word in Japanese for being sad in the springtime” (240): *Mono no aware* can be translated as ‘the sadness of things’. It comes from the words 物 (mono – thing) and 哀れ (aware – poignancy or pathos). The ‘sadness’ in question comes from an awareness of the transience of things, as taught by Zen Buddhism. When we view something exceptionally beautiful, we might feel sad because we know it won’t stay so beautiful forever – but appreciation only heightens the pleasure we take in the beautiful thing in that moment. The best example of *mono no aware* in Japanese culture is hanami, the ritual of appreciating the cherry blossoms each year. Cherry blossoms are very special to the Japanese, but the flowers bloom for only two weeks in the springtime. We appreciate the flowers even more because we know they will fall soon.

“Deja vu” (244): the feeling that one has lived through the present situation before. This is a French phrase that translates literally as "already seen". Although some interpret déjà vu in a paranormal context, mainstream scientific approaches reject the explanation of déjà vu as "precognition" or "prophecy".

“There’s a word in Portugese...means melancholy” (248): *Saudade* in Portugese refers to melancholic longing or yearning and evokes a sense of utter loneliness and incompleteness. In a casual sense, it can be used to describe the sad feeling when you miss someone even when you are going to meet the person or thing in near future.

“Chaise” (250): A chaise longue is an upholstered sofa in the shape of a chair that is long enough to support the legs.

“Piazza” (251): The veranda of a house. Or a public square or marketplace, especially in an Italian town.

“Word in Russian...means melancholy” (260): *Тоска* (tas-'ka) roughly translates as emotional pain or melancholy. At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody of something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom.

“Maybe late 60s French” (279): Perhaps artists such as France Gall, Christophe, Michel Polnareff, or Jacques Dutronc.

“Carpe diem” (291) : Latin for “seize the day” used by the Roman poet Horace to express the idea that one should enjoy life while one can.

“Nasturtiums” (293): a genus of roughly 80 species of annual and perennial herbaceous flowering plants. Known for growing annually.

“Marzipan” (299): a confection consisting primarily of sugar or honey and almond meal, sometimes augmented with almond oil or extract. It is often made into sweets; common uses are chocolate-covered marzipan and small marzipan imitations of fruits and vegetables.

“Collected tears in little vials” (299): Tear bottles were fairly common in Roman times, around the time of Christ, when mourners filled small glass bottles or cups with tears and placed them in burial tombs as symbols of respect. Sometimes women were even paid to cry into these vessels, as they walked along the mourning procession. Those crying the loudest and producing the most tears received the most compensation, or so the legend goes. The more anguish and tears produced, the more important and valued the deceased person was perceived to be.

“Fjords” (315): long, narrow, deep inlets of the sea between high cliffs, as in Norway and Iceland, typically formed by submergence of a glaciated valley.

“Victrola” (324): a record player.

**Questions? Put them here, we will try to answer them when we can!**

1. Why does Tilly ask why Frank is like an almond?
2. Why does Joan's accent get noted in the note but Lorenzo's doesn't?
3. Why *do* they turn into almonds?