

British Theatre Guide

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Eurydice

Sarah Ruhl

An ATC / Drum Theatre Plymouth / Young Vic co-production

Northern Stage, Newcastle, and touring

(2010)

Over and above the best known one, there were numerous versions of the Orpheus and Eurydice story in classical times, including one in Plato's *Symposium* in which Orpheus is portrayed as a coward for not having the courage to die in order to be with his wife in the Underworld. This 2005 version by American playwright Sarah Ruhl, which had its European premiere at the Drum, Plymouth, in February and is currently touring before its London premiere at the Young Vic later this month, adds a fresh and very modern slant to the ancient story.

As Orpheus and Eurydice prepare to marry - he obsessed with music and she deeply interested in books - her dead father writes another in a series of letters to her. None, of course, have been delivered but this one is: it is found by the Nasty Interesting Man who, during her wedding, lures her to his apartment at the top of a high building where he tried to seduce her. She steals the letter and flees, falling down the stairs and dying - an echo of the story of how Aristaeus was the cause of Eurydice's death in Vergil's *Georgics* (yet another version of the story). She is drenched in the waters of Styx, thus forgetting everything, and, once in Hades, meets her father (who has somehow escaped the influence of the Styx) and he proceeds to re-educate her, to restore her memory.

And this is the central theme of Sarah Ruhl's reworking of the myth. This middle section of the play is full of gentle joy as Eurydice relearns being Eurydice. But it can't last, of course, and, as in the original, Eurydice is allowed to leave, following Orpheus, with the proviso that he does not look at her until they emerge into the world of the living. But this time there is a change: in the myth he can't resist turning back to look at her but here she calls out to him suddenly and this is what causes him to turn. She must return to Hades and, as she does so, learns that her father, in despair at losing her, has gained himself into the water of Styx and has forgotten her. She begins the process of re-educating him, to no avail. Then the Lord of the Underworld returns - looking uncannily like the Nasty Interesting Man - and orders that she marry him, which she cannot refuse. Then Orpheus arrives but, having passed through the Styx, forgets everything and we are left with the final image of him standing, oblivious and alone.

It's a fascinating reworking of the myth, with elements of surrealism and even comedy which comes mainly from three stones - Big Stone, Little Stone and Loud Stone - which combine their comic functions with those of a Greek chorus and a reminiscence of the original story in which Orpheus' lament for his lost wife even makes the stones weep.

It's well performed, too, with Ony Uhiara and Osi Okerafor childlike as Eurydice and Orpheus respectively, Rhys Rusbatch sinister as both the Nasty Interesting Man and the Lord of the Underworld, and Marsha Henry, Becci Gemell and Ben Addis entertaining as the stones. But it is

Geff Francis as Eurydice's father who really steals the show, with a delightful twinkle in his eye and an easy relationship with the audience.

Ruhl's language can be self-consciously poetic, even a little twee at times, and in the opening scene, in which Orpheus and Eurydice become engaged, it feels as though they are just discovering each other - and it's set on a beach where they are wearing 1950s bathing costumes. This is in the script, not a directorial decision, so one has to wonder: why? It can't suggest timelessness because it's so specific. Perhaps Ruhl sees the fifties as being an age of innocence? If so, it's obvious she wasn't there!

That's a minor problem, though. Of more significance is the fact that, at 90 minutes, the play is about fifteen minutes too long. This, I suspect, is a directorial decision by Bijan Sheibani, who keeps the pace slow and deamlike for most of the time.

Seth Ewin reviewed this production in [Edinburgh](#). Philip Fisher reviewed the [London premiere](#) at the Young Vic.

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)