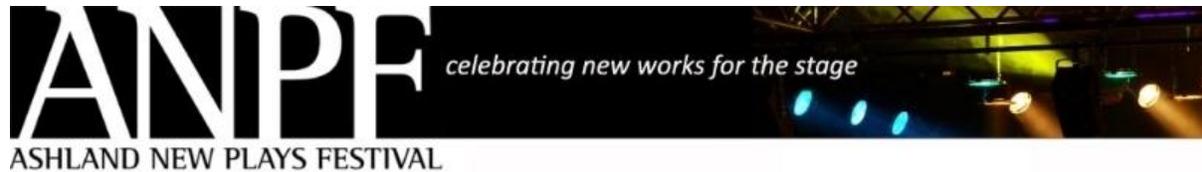


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Ashland New Plays Festival Spring 2014 Newsletter

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Don't miss Sarah Ruhl's wildly popular play *In the Next Room (or the vibrator play)* on **Monday, July 28, at 7:30 p.m.** at the Unitarian Center, 87 4th Street in Ashland. The reading is directed by Emily Sophia Knapp, and the cast includes Kate Hurster, Mark Bedard, Al Espinosa, Omoze Idehenre, Barret O'Brien, and Erica Sullivan.

A Victorian doctor has pioneered a new medical device powered by the recent innovation of electricity to treat his patients suffering a range of symptoms, all commonly attributed to "hysteria." In the next room, the doctor's young wife is curious about what is happening on the other side of the door. The drama tackles family power dynamics while exploring the institution of marriage and the meaning of love.

About the play's interesting title, Ruhl said in a 2009 interview, "For a long time, I used *The Vibrator Play* as a working title. I was never satisfied with it; it seemed so utilitarian. At some point while working on the play's production...at Berkeley Rep, I told myself: *The Vibrator Play* is too facile. The play is not a sex farce about vibrators. It's about wet nurses; it's about the body. It's misleading to say it's purely about the object. So I changed the title to *In The Next Room*, with *or the vibrator play* as the subtitle. I know that



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some people will still refer to the play by its subtitle. Subtitles are very nineteenth-century; a lot of great novels from that period have them.”

Tickets will be available in June. Watch ashlandnewplays.org and [Facebook](#) for more information.



Reading Committee Update

Kate Hurster Talks about Readings, Ruhl, and *Room*

By John Rose



Photo of Kate Hurster © 2014 Oregon Shakespeare Festival

On a recent Sunday, I talked with Kate Hurster about the upcoming reading of In the Next Room (or the vibrator play), which she selected and is performing in for ANPF on July 28. We met at Noble Coffee in Ashland in the middle of the afternoon while Kate had a loaf of bread rising at her nearby home and between what she called her “all too infrequent” sessions in her garden.

JR: What was it that prompted you to do this reading?

KH: Doug [Rowe, ANPF artistic director] asked me. We got to sit together on Boar’s Head; and his wife, Catherine, is my real estate agent; and they’re Dennis Arndt’s in-laws, too, so we got to hang out together. And he’s a Dodgers fan. I’m from St. Louis, so we have this baseball thing going, too.

JR: It sounded like it took you a while to choose a vehicle.

An unprecedented number of volunteer readers—56—joined the Reading Committee for ANPF 2014 and spent the winter months poring over the 190 play submissions that arrived from across the United States.

During an initial round of reading, committee members met numerous times in six discussion groups to analyze their assigned plays. Each play submitted was read, evaluated, and scored by five readers; and at the conclusion of round 1, ANPF’s tabulator-in-chief, Penny Mikesell, crunched all the scores and assembled a list of all 190 plays in rank order.

This year 27 top-scoring round 1 plays have been designated semifinalists and have moved into round 2, during which all plays will be read and scored by

KH: I wanted to do something dark that I don't get to do anyplace else. I wanted to do *Desire under the Elms*, but Doug said the cast is too big. And then I thought, *Well, what's the other end of the spectrum?* If people can't come see a rarely produced [Eugene] O'Neill, then they can see something funny, something touching. *In the Next Room* isn't a brand-new play—it's been out for several years now, and I've had friends who've done wildly successful productions of it and they loved doing it. I thought it would function well for a reading because there are these interesting things that have to happen onstage: we have to undress people; we have to attach these apparatuses to people to bring them to paroxysm. So some audiences might have a hard time sitting and watching that; they might find that shocking. But it might be a really fun thing to describe, and it would function very well in a reading format—like having Doug Rowe read, "He attaches the apparatus to her....She is brought to orgasm." That's kind of a fun thing for people to hear.

JR: Are the stage directions funny in that way—heard out loud?

KH: I think so. I mean, they're Sarah [Ruhl]'s, we can presume; I don't think they're an original stage manager's directions. I think they're wittily written. And many things happen: you see two rooms, and you see things happen in one room and then in the next, and I think that's fun to visualize, as well.

JR: But it's not particularly dependent on that.

KH: No, there's a lot of great dialogue, a lot of people mired in their own neuroses. And there are some very interesting female characters: two women of essentially the same station but very different experiences in their relationships. We have a black wet nurse, who has other entirely different experiences; and we have the doctor's assistant, who seems like a totally different species of woman, and I think it's so exciting to see all of that in contrast to one another.

JR: What do you find in Sarah Ruhl's work that other contemporary playwrights don't particularly offer?

KH: I think what I've enjoyed in her plays is just what I've mentioned: these very specific women. We get to see women of different statuses—socioeconomic, cultural, racial—their worlds colliding and their seeing each other anew. I think that's just something that we as human beings should do every day. It's so easy to be like, *Oh, there's that rich lady, and she has rich lady problems*. Well, she also has these other, really human problems. Or, *There's that wet nurse; she doesn't have any problems because her life is so simple; because, you know, what does she have to worry about?* That's not true.

all Reading Committee members. Discussion group meetings compose the heart of the ANPF process, and the lively discussions and heated debates that characterize these meetings will continue throughout the second round.

In May, after round 2 scores have been calculated, all readers will convene in a general meeting to debate the merits of all the semifinalist plays. After the meeting 12 plays will emerge as finalists, from which Artistic Director Douglas Rowe will select four winners to present to the public at our flagship festival in October.



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JR: And what you mentioned before—that she not only contrasts these characters but pushes them together so that something is created in terms of awareness, not only on their part but for the audience as well.

KH: Exactly.

JR: Do you find her women's roles richer, more authentic than a lot of other playwrights?

KH: She's a woman, and she knows women. I wouldn't say she knows them any better than other women, but what I appreciate is that I don't feel like I'm experiencing a stereotype or an archetype. We like archetypes—they're great to identify with or have as clear models—but I don't feel like I'm looking at archetypes when I read her women or when I see her women. I don't know that she writes them better than anyone else, but if you're a woman you know them a little bit better, in a different way.

JR: It's an issue with women actors isn't it—because older parts for women can be hard to come by, in film and television as well as theatre?

KH: There aren't many roles as we age, but there are great roles for older woman being written, and, you know, Shakespeare has a few of them, too. So I always say, when asked which are the roles I really want to play—you know I get to do *Richard the Third* this year; this is the third *Richard the Third* that I've done—but if I hang in for 20 years or more, I'll get to play Elizabeth and Margaret and all these great roles, maybe a couple of times each. And that's where all these rich characters are. I mean, Tracy Letts gave us Violet and all those sisters—those are roles I look forward to playing if people are still producing it in 10, 20 years.

JR: The vibrator play has eight roles?

KH: I can only think of seven.

JR: How did you assemble the cast?

KH: It's not totally assembled....I think I know who's directing it, but she hasn't said yes, yet.

JR: I heard that Tony DeBruno demurred.

KH: Tony DeBruno thought a woman's touch might be better—because all these women have to have orgasms. On stage. But I have people who I'd love to work with, who I think would be great in it; we'll be talking

This spring we rolled out a new

ashlandnewplays.org!

Check out these features:

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***In the Next Room* Legal Disclosure**

Original Broadway Production
by Lincoln Center Theater
New York City, 2009

In the Next Room (or the vibrator play) was originally commissioned and produced by Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Berkeley, CA. Tony Taccone, artistic director; Susan Medak, managing director

In the Next Room (or the

about that. Doug gave it to me to help figure out, so I'm going to say, "I really want Al [Espinosa] to play this role; I want to play that role; I want this couple to play these roles."

JR: So Al's in it; you're in it...

KH: Al and I are in it—and I really want Erica Sullivan and Barret O'Brien to do it, too. I hope Mark Bedard will do it. I'm hoping for Kjerstine Rose Anderson to do it. And I have someone else in mind, but I haven't even talked to her yet, so I don't want to mention her name. Those are all people I like in general, so if I have to spend time on my day off with them, it's not the worst thing in the world [*laughs*].

JR: What's the attraction for an actor in doing a public reading?

KH: Oftentimes readings are done for new plays, so it's a wonderful thing to get to have a relationship with a playwright, with a director who's working closely with that playwright. We often get tucked away in our own worlds, and it's a great way to meet new people and have a say in some ways and help develop new work. That's exciting. I've been in the Black Swan Lab, so I've had that experience working with many playwrights, and one of the benefits is sometimes you get considered for the role when it gets produced. Even if you don't, you feel a sense of ownership.

JR: This is the first time you've performed for ANPF, is that right?

KH: Yes! I have seen readings during the festival. I've had many friends from the [Oregon Shakespeare Festival] and from New York who've come into town to do readings. And I've talked with Doug about the process of submission—the readers doing the first round and the second round of reading and choosing plays. It's an awesome way for new playwrights or playwrights who have new work to be heard. And this is a community that's so fertile with creative energy and can support several theatre companies, a symphony, university theatre, this festival. It's just a rare thing that a town of this population can support all that, but it does, and it does it well.

JR: How does an organization like Ashland New Plays Festival with a competitive selection of new works contribute to theatre from an actor's point of view?

KH: Al got to do this reading at ANPF last year of a play about sexual assault in the military, which is so huge right now. Sometimes topical theatre is only producible because the topic is important in this moment. So is that play going to get a full production? Maybe it will; maybe it

vibrator play) is presented by special arrangement with SAMUEL FRENCH, INC.

In the Next Room (or the vibrator play) was developed at New Dramatists.

"If you want to know what professional theatre will be doing tomorrow, go to ANPF today."

Louis Pierotti



won't. But the fact that it has readings, multiple performances, it can seize the moment—and that gets a conversation started. So it's a matter of issues. It's also a matter of the development of roles. If it's a really great play, then we're creating work. I'm always excited about these big plays because every theatre says, "Yes, give us your two-hander, your four-person, your three-person play." And Lue Douthit's always saying, "I want 10 people or more in this play; 10 specific actors or more are needed for this play because that's what we need." We need plays that can use all these actors. And I like it when festivals like this one don't shy away from having a few people up there and doing it.

JR: Well, we limit it to eight, but only because of the space on the stage.

KH: Exactly! Exactly! But eight people are a lot of people today. With new plays it's just so common that you're going to have a small cast because that's what theatre companies feel they can afford.

JR: This is a bit of an esoteric question, but what do you as an artist learn from doing a reading, especially when it involves new works? How does it contribute to your artistic development and growth?

KH: It can be a challenge to make a bad play sound good, but if you have good actors, you can do it. A good play, you could have mediocre actors read it and it's going to sound wonderful. I like to bring my best work, but I also like a play that I don't have to do too much in to get great things coming out of it. So, to me it's an interesting challenge. If the playwright's in the room, I'm going to do my best for that person to make their play sound as wonderful as it can be. But I have this firm belief that you can have total amateurs read O'Neill and it's still going to be a good play—versus if you have some stellar actors sitting around gathered to read something mediocre, it's going to sound pretty decent. So I'm always trying to balance that. I want to help this artist really hear their words, reading what is there, and let the playwright hear what they have and do not have. Because that's a great contribution, I think. It's [been] in their head or on this page or on this screen for so long; to really kind of humanize the characters they've created is a challenge, and it's a gift.

JR: And what are you getting out of that artistically?

KH: The challenge itself—asking, *What is it I'm actually doing here? How do I humanize this person on the page with some objectivity? How do I not infuse it with more than it can hold at this moment in time, not putting too much of my own interpretation on it?* That's a challenge because, again, you want to give the playwright what they have.

JR: It goes back to David Mamet's book on acting, doesn't it? That the

role's on the page; you don't need to interpret it—it's there on the page. And it sounds like performing in a reading brings you back to that in a more fundamental way.

KH: I think so, especially when you can't go back to the archives or Netflix and say, "How did so-and-so do this?" or, "That person did that." You really have to go with what is there. What does the text give you? What do people say about the character? That's your defining line.

JR: You alluded to this before, but when you're doing a new play—not Sarah Ruhl but the plays that we do at ANPF—is there something about being able to say, "I'm the first actor to create this character—to make this character be alive in some way," even in a reading?

KH: Yeah. This person's been alive in the playwright's head for some time. And to try to fill out the bones of it is an honor—it's a huge honor—and you want to do a good job. And you want to play the role when it gets produced someday, sometimes, too. I get a huge kick out of it: *Wow. No one else has read this? I could see myself playing this. I would do it this way.* It's always exciting to get those wheels turning.

At that point Kate had to get home to turn her bread, although she wasn't sure if she'd have time that afternoon to get back to her gardening. For my part, I'd had a great time talking to one of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's truly talented actors, and I am looking forward to seeing her as part of what can only be described as an all-star cast reading a play by one of America's foremost contemporary playwrights. Not to mention getting to hear Doug Rowe reading descriptions of orgasms.

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