

March 7 – April 22, 2012

In the Next Room or the vibrator play

By Sarah Ruhl
Directed by Laura Gordon

A stimulating
comedy sure to
create a buzz!

Play
Guide

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**MILWAUKEE REPERTORY
THEATER**

108 E. Wells Street
Milwaukee, WI • 53202



IN THE NEXT ROOM or the vibrator play PLAY GUIDE

Milwaukee Repertory Theater presents

In The Next Room or the vibrator play

March 7 – April 22, 2012

Stiemke Studio

By Sarah Ruhl

Directed by Laura Gordon

“Sarah Ruhl is one of today’s most brilliant writers. Only in her 30’s, she has already been nominated for two Pulitzers, including one for *In the Next Room*. While the title sounds titillating, at its heart it is a love story about a repressed woman and her even more repressed husband. We are thrilled to bring you this exciting piece.”

-Mark Clements, *Artistic Director*



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Grant Goodman, Cassandra Bissell, Cora Vander Broek and Matthew Brumlow. Photo by Alan Simons.

THE SYNOPSIS

What exactly were doctors thinking back in the 1880s at the dawn of the age of electricity, when they utilized vibrator therapies on their female patients in the name of medical treatment? And what did the women think was happening to them when doctors allayed their so-called ‘hysteria’ with a very personal machine? That’s what playwright Sarah Ruhl wondered when she set out to write *In the Next Room or the vibrator play*.



Cora Vander Broek and Cassandra Bissell. Photo: Alan Simons.

“Hysteria” was a real diagnosis (symptoms included: faintness, nervousness, insomnia, shortness of breath, irritability, emotional instability, panic, and many more), and a quite common one given to women in the Victorian age. The “disease” came from men’s inability to acknowledge the fact that women had feelings, and their inability to understand them. Just as common was medical treatment with electrical stimulating machines (the vibrators of the day), to ease their “condition”.

In the Next Room or the vibrator play is a provocative, funny and touching story about a young doctor, his wife, and the society in which they live. Dr. Givings is obsessed with the marvels of technology and how they can help his patients. As he treats his patients, his wife, Catherine, is excluded from her husband’s world, listening at the door from the next room.



Grant Goodman, Cassandra Bissell, Jenny McKnight and Cora Vander Broek. Photo by Alan Simons.

Dr. Givings is not sure exactly how the vibrators help the women he treats, but the women keep coming back. The only woman whose problem is not helped by the doctor is his own wife who longs to connect with him emotionally. She tries to bring herself into his world and to understand what he does. At its heart, *In the Next Room or the vibrator play* is a story about equality in a relationship, and a true partnership with one’s spouse.

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Interesting Tid Bit

Hamilton Beach of Racine, Wisconsin, patented its first take-home vibrator in 1902, making the vibrator the fifth electrical appliance to be introduced into the home, after the sewing machine and long before the electric iron.

CHARACTERS

**DR. GIVINGS**

Grant Goodman

A man in his early forties, a specialist in gynecological and hysterical disorders.

**CATHERINE GIVINGS**

Cora Vander Broek

His wife, a woman in her late twenties.

**SABRINA DALDRY**

Cassandra Bissell

His patient, a woman in her early thirties.

**ANNIE**

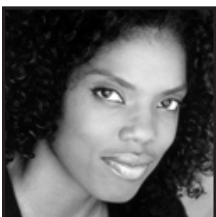
Jenny McKnight

A woman in her late thirties, Dr. Givings' midwife assistant.

**LEO IRVING**

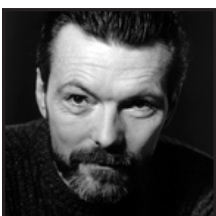
Matthew Brumlow

Dr. Givings' other patient, an Englishman in his twenties or thirties.

**ELIZABETH**

Tyla Abercrombie

An African-American woman in her early thirties, the Givings' wet nurse.

**MR. DALDRY**

Jonathan Smoots

Sabrina Daldry's husband, a man in his late forties.



Cora Vander Broek and Grant Goodman; Cassandra Bissell and Jenny McKnight; Grant Goodman and Tyla Abercrombie. Photos by Alan Simons.

“A MAN-MADE MACHINE”

In the Next Room examines the Victorian era's foreplay: the first stirrings of women's rights.

By Kristin Leahey, *In the Next Room* Production Dramaturg at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and Victory Gardens Theater, Resident Dramaturg at Northlight Theater.

A popular early 20th century periodical, *Heart's International*, advertised the latest home electrical appliance with the following slogan: “A Gift That Will Keep Her Young and Pretty: Star Home Electric Massage.” Thomas Edison's channeling of the electrical current made way for the invention of small machines, such as the 1870s electric massager. This new-fangled device, considered as innovative as the vacuum cleaner, made young men's sweethearts youthful and vibrant once again. By simply flipping an on-off switch and applying the gyrating head to the point of distress, physicians miraculously transformed their female patients into their finer selves. During the mid-nineteenth century, the very curious and popular male-driven invention called the vibrator treated common afflictions from headaches, to backaches, to hysteria – the malady associated with the weaker sex.

Around 300 BC, Hippocrates defined hysteria (from the Greek word “hystera” meaning “uterus”), as suffocation or madness of the womb. During medieval times, the renaissance period, and throughout the mid-twentieth-century, symptoms including anxiety, sleeplessness, nervousness, sensations of heaviness in the abdomen and lower pelvic region, and vaginal lubrication led physicians to the diagnosis of hysteria. Although “the disease” concerned the female sex organs, the associations with pleasure, eroticism, and physical love (or lack thereof), remained naively absent from the conversation. As Rachel Maines notes in *The Technology of the Orgasm*, men drew no association between women's possible sexual dissatisfaction in their lives and hysteria. Paradoxically, a 1910 study by Havelock Ellis found that half of all American women were not sexually excitable, primarily because Ellis reasoned they lacked the sexual drive of men. Yet again, society blamed women for their apparent frustration and “melancholy.” Furthermore, men blamed women for their lack of enthusiasm because, as 1848 French writer Auguste Debay surmised, “Men like to have their happiness shared.”

Around 300 BC,
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Second-century Greek philosopher Galen believed that the movement of the womb throughout the body caused hysteria, and that coaxing the uterus back into the normal pelvic position would inspire the expulsion of fluids and the vexing hysteria would subside. During the Elizabethan age, doctors believed vigorous horseback riding cured the illness. In the Victorian era, although it took time and precision, manual manipulation by physicians and midwives induced a “paroxysm” (i.e., an orgasm), in an effort to alleviate the affliction. Along with the dawn of the electric age, came the electromechanical

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Include the special connection, three applicators and handle. Not necessary to buy a complete vibrator if you have the Home Motor. Shipping weight, about 8 ounces.
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Continued on next page



Jenny McKnight, Grant Goodman and Cassandra Bissell. Photo by Alan Simons

“Mrs. Daldry, we are going to produce in you what is called a paroxysm. The congestion in your womb is causing your hysterical symptoms and if we can release some of that congestion and invite the juices downward your health will be restored.”-*Dr. Givings*

Continued from page 5
vibrator to sooth the female syndrome that Freud characterized as “frigidity.” As with all high functioning industrial machines, it increased efficiency and required little skill to operate. And while the device primarily served the physical (and sensual), needs of women, discovery of the syndrome, the invention of the instrument, and even the marketing for it was created by and geared towards men and lacked any sexual connotation. Sears, Roebuck and Company’s 1918 Electrical Goods catalog encouraged husbands to purchase the appliance to restore their wives’ bright eyes and pink cheeks.

Vibrators’ appearance in 1920s pornographic films broke their wholesome, asexual image and solidified the connection between clinical orgasms and sex. With this taboo identification, the general public no longer associated vibrators with healthcare but rather with amoral sexual pleasure. Not until the 1970s, with the embracement of free love and the continuance of the women’s movement, did vibrators reemerge in the popular American zeitgeist. For instance, in 1977, sex therapist Dr. Joani Blank opened San Francisco’s Good Vibrations, a shop that actively serves female constituents and houses the largest collection of vibrators in the country. With women as designers, marketers and consumers, vibrators became part of the contemporary urban landscape as tokens of pleasure, health, and free sexual expression. In concurrence with this movement, Dr. Annie Sprinkle (former porn star, current performance artist and professor), writes, “Our sexuality is not only something that can be used for the enhancement of an intimate relationship, for physical pleasure, or procreation; it can also be used for personal transformation, physical and emotional healing, self-realization, spiritual growth, and as a way to learn about life and death.” With *In the Next Room or the vibrator play*, Sarah Ruhl examines the Victorian era’s foreplay: the first stirrings of women’s rights.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Intimacy and Etiquette in the Victorian Period

Intimacy was rarely discussed in the Victorian Period. Victorian men and women valued etiquette above all else. Etiquette books were extremely common, and breaking the rules of common etiquette would have been a serious mistake for upper-class Victorians. Men and women were not to be seen even walking hand in hand until they were engaged, people left calling cards when they stopped by and the person they wished to see was not home, and a true gentleman only kissed a woman on the hand, forehead, or at the very most on the cheek. As a result of this clinical view of life, intimacy went unspoken and occurred only behind closed doors, if at all.

Male Hysteria

Many records of female hysteria exist from the Victorian Era, but male hysteria was less discussed. Men at this time were believed to be saner, more in control of their emotions, and less likely to have a hysterical outburst. As almost all doctors were male, and being “hysterical” would have been seen as not masculine, there is very little written about the subject. However, male hysteria was not unheard of. Men who were given the diagnosis were typically classified as being “nervous”. Where it was seen as a negative disorder in women, in men it was seen as a sign of maintaining a refined, civilized manner. Symptoms such as emotional instability, irritability, and a loss of appetite were all seen as part of a nervous disposition, being more in touch with emotion. It was also typically a label applied to upper-class men (sometimes even self-applied), and was never diagnosed among the lower classes.

Wet Nurses

In *In the Next Room*, the Givings hire Elizabeth, an African-American woman to be the wet nurse for their baby. Elizabeth is still nursing after the recent loss of her baby and the family believes that Mrs. Givings’ milk is not adequate. Wet nursing was extremely widespread throughout history. The Islamic prophet Muhammad had a wet nurse, as did Louis XIV and Sigmund Freud. The Romans even believed that their founders, Romulus and Remus, were wet-nursed by a wolf. Although wet nursing was widespread during the Victorian era, many thought it was dangerous and wrong. Some people saw hiring a wet nurse as bad parenting, as the bond between nursing mother and baby is often very strong. Many times, if a wet nurse was also nursing their own child, their child would be attended to less often and sometimes the nurse would even give her child laudanum (known as opium today), to make the child sleep through the afternoon, often resulting in death. Other wet nurses, like Elizabeth, were simply mothers who had lost their infants.

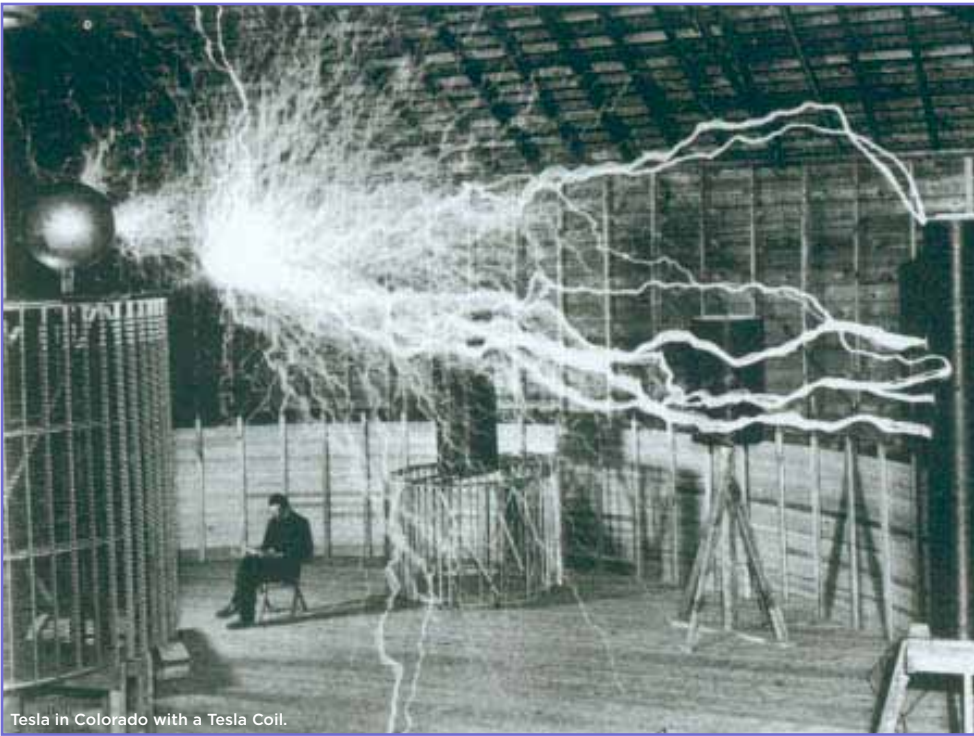


Symptoms of Female Hysteria

The diagnosis of hysteria was so commonplace during the Victorian era that there were countless recorded symptoms. At one point, a Victorian physician had a list that was 75 pages long. Some of the common symptoms included: faintness, nervousness, insomnia, fluid retention, heaviness in the abdomen or limbs, muscle spasms, shortness of breath, a loss of appetite for food or sex, emotional instability and wild painful cries.



Matthew Brumlow, Tyla Abercumbie. Photo: Alan Simons.



Tesla in Colorado with a Tesla Coil.

Direct Current:

An electric current that moves in one direction. Direct current is not used for long-distance power transmission because it is difficult to step up the voltage to a level that is efficient for energy transfer and then to step the voltage back down again for safe domestic use.

Alternating Current:

An electric current that repeatedly changes its direction or strength, usually at a certain frequency or range of frequencies. Alternating current can be used for long distance power transmission.

Continued from page 7

The War of the Currents

In 1884, Nikola Tesla moved to New York and began working for Edison Machine Works. When he started, Thomas Edison told him that if he redesigned his direct current (DC) generators, and made them more efficient, he would give Tesla \$50,000.00. In 1885, when Tesla completed the challenge and asked for his payment, Edison replied, "Tesla, you don't understand our American humor."

Tesla quit and began work on the alternating current (AC) polyphase system. In 1887, Tesla submitted seven US patents for polyphase AC motors and power transmission. George Westinghouse saw the potential and bought the patents for \$60,000 and \$2.50 for every horsepower of electrical

**"Go to the club.
And argue about
the benefits of
alternating current
over and above the
direct current."**

-Mrs. Givings

capacity sold. Over the next 13 years, an industrial war erupted pitting Westinghouse and Tesla's AC with Edison's DC. During this time, Edison used propaganda tactics to make the more reliable AC look dangerous, including a film in which Edison electrocuted a circus elephant named Topsy, and secretly paying the inventor of the electric chair to use AC. The war ended on May 1st, 1893, at the Columbian Exposition when President Grover Cleveland pushed a button and illuminated the fairgrounds with 100,000 incandescent lamps. Tesla's "City of Light" proved to the public the usefulness of alternating current. Today more than 80 percent of electrical devices use AC.

📖 FURTHER READING

AC/DC: The Savage Tale of the First Standards War, by Tom McNichol

Tesla: Man out of Time, by Margaret Cheney

Hysteria beyond Freud, By Sander L. Gilman

Why Freud Was Wrong: Sin, Science and Psychoanalysis, by Richard Webster

SARAH RUHL

Sarah has written numerous award-winning plays including *Eurydice*, which made its West Coast premiere at Berkeley Rep in 2005, and *In the Next Room or the vibrator play*, which was commissioned by Berkeley Rep, premiered there in 2009 and earned a Tony nomination for Best Play when it reached Broadway. Sarah's other scripts include *The Clean House*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *Demeter in the City*, *Late: a cowboy song*, *Melancholy Play*, *Orlando*, *Passion Play: a cycle*, and *Stage Kiss*. She is the winner of a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, as well as a Fourth Forum Freedom Award, a Helen Hayes Award, the Helen Merrill Award, the PEN/Laura Pels Award, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, a Whiting Writers' Award and nominations for the NAACP Image Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Her plays have been performed at theaters across the country, including Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Arena Stage, Clubbed Thumb, Cornerstone Theater, the Goodman, Lincoln Center Theater, Madison Repertory Theater, the Piven Theatre Workshop, Playwrights Horizons, Second Stage, the Wilma Theater, Woolly Mammoth and Yale Rep. These scripts have also been produced internationally and translated into Arabic, German, Korean, Norwegian, Polish, Russian and Spanish. A member of New Dramatists and 13P, Sarah received her MFA from Brown University, where she studied with renowned playwright Paula Vogel.



Sarah Ruhl

**“One of the most
gifted and adventurous
American playwrights”**
-*The New York Times*

Other Plays by Sarah Ruhl

Melancholy Play

Virtual Meditations #1

Passion Play

*Eurydice**

Orlando

Late: A Cowboy Song

*The Clean House**

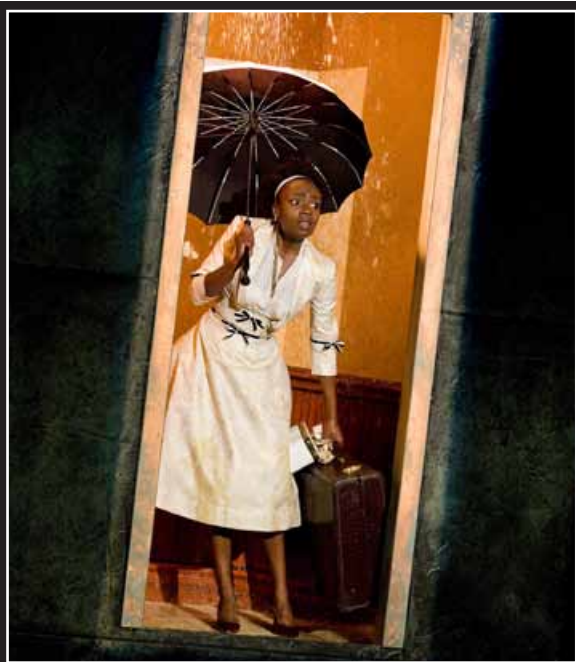
Demeter in the City

Dead Man's Cell Phone

*In the Next Room (or the Vibrator Play)**

Stage Kiss

*Indicates Sarah Ruhl plays produced by Milwaukee Repertory Theater.



Lanise Antoine Shelley in The Rep's *Eurydice*. Photo: Jay Westhauser.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR LAURA GORDON

with Jordan Hunt, *Education Intern*

Jordan Hunt: So, I have to ask, what is it like directing a play about vibrators?

Laura Gordon: Directing a play about vibrators is a unique and oddly challenging proposition!

JH: This play is about much more than just vibrators. Why is this story worth telling?

LG: I think this play has a lot to say about love and intimacy, and about courage and discovery. All the characters in the play are searching for something . . . they don't even necessarily know what is missing from their lives, but they're trying to figure it out.

JH: This is a co-production with the Actors Theater of Louisville. How has collaborating with both theaters influenced the process?

LG: The two spaces that the production will perform in couldn't be more different. We played in the large space at Actors Theatre, a space comparable to The Rep's Quadracci Powerhouse. The show in Milwaukee will be playing in the Stiemke Studio, which has very little backstage



Jonathan Smoots. Photo by Alan Simons.

space, no fly space, no trap room, no big stage crew. Therefore, the design decisions we had to make were driven by what could be accomplished within the limitations of the Stiemke Studio. But sometimes necessity can indeed be the mother of invention, and I'm so thrilled with how our set designer, Philip Witcomb, creatively and beautifully solved that dilemma. And I'm very much looking forward to the experience of watching the play in the smaller, more intimate space.

JH: What are some of the challenges that are unique to this play?

LG: The action of the play takes place in two rooms: the Doctor's examination room, and the family's living room. For most of the play, things are happening in both rooms at the same time. It's a challenge to orchestrate simultaneous action, so that it's complementary rather than distracting. And the subject matter has its own unique challenges. We are dealing with intimacy and sexuality and vibrators!

JH: What does the historical context of the late 19th century bring to the issues discussed in this play?

LG: I love that Sarah Ruhl has set her play in the 1880s. We get all the decorum of the very proper Victorian age . . . sex was simply not talked about. But we're also poised at the dawn of an era of great invention and discovery. Electricity is just making its way into people's homes. In her playwright's notes, Sarah Ruhl writes, "Things that seem impossibly strange in the following play are all true . . . things that seem commonplace are all my own invention."



Laura Gordon

VISITING THE REP

Milwaukee Repertory Theater's Patty and Jay Baker Theater Complex is located in the Milwaukee Center downtown at the corner of Wells and Water Streets. The building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company.



Milwaukee Repertory Theater. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

The Ticket Office is visible on the left upon entering the Wells Street doors. The entrance to the Stiemke Studio is located to the left of the large rotunda staircase.

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- Educate over 20,000 students at 200+ schools in the greater Milwaukee area with Rep Immersion Day experiences, student matinees, workshops, tours and by making connections with their school curriculum through classroom teaching programs such as Reading Residencies and Scriptworks
- Maintain our commitment to audiences with special needs through our Access Services that include American Sign Language interpreted productions, captioned theater, infrared listening systems and script synopses to ensure that theater at The Rep is accessible to all
- Educate the next generation of theater professionals with our Artistic Intern Program which gives newly degreed artists a chance to hone their skills at The Rep as they begin to pursue their theatrical careers

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In the Next Room or the vibrator play

By Sarah Ruhl

Directed by Laura Gordon

March 7 – April 22, 2012

Stiemke Studio

Alway . . . Patsy Cline

Written and originally directed by Ted Swindley – based on a true story

Directed by Sandy Ernst

March 16 – May 6, 2012

Stackner Cabaret

Othello

By William Shakespeare

Directed by Mark Clements

April 3 – May 6, 2012

Quadracci Powerhouse



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