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Music as metaphor for the interpretation of a play: examples from Sarah Ruhl's theater

Julie Vatain-Corffdir, Paris-Sorbonne

Abstract

Comparing the script of a play to a musical score suggests a physical approach to the text, based on resonance, voice and silence, and away from “psychological” acting techniques. It also carries connotations of precise timing, bringing to the fore the notion of rhythm, as well as that of leeway or margin of interpretation left to the performer. This article seeks to explore such questions in three plays by Sarah Ruhl, focusing on her use of stage directions, on the way dialogue is arranged on the page, as well as on the sheer sonority of words and lines. The metaphor of the script as score highlights the poetry of Ruhl's drama in performance, and helps to define the way her writing functions.

Résumé

Comparer le texte d'une pièce à une partition musicale suggère une approche physique et sonore du dialogue, fondée sur l'alternance entre voix et silence, à l'opposé des techniques de jeu « psychologiques ». Ce parallèle connote également la précision, la cadence : il met en avant la notion de rythme, ainsi que celle de liberté, de marge de créativité laissée à l'interprète. Cet article creuse ces problématiques au fil de trois pièces de Sarah Ruhl, en explorant l'écriture des didascalies, la disposition des dialogues sur la page, la résonance du mot et de la réplique. La métaphore de la pièce comme partition met en relief la poésie scénique du théâtre de Sarah Ruhl, et contribue à définir le fonctionnement de son écriture.

In *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*, Sarah Ruhl likes to discuss playwriting in pictorial or rhythmical terms rather than psychological ones. She prefers the idea of a need for “contrast in color and shade” to the standard American call for “conflict” in drama (81), and uses graphics to characterize plot: “Different plays have different shapes – spheres, rectangles, wavy lines, and of course the ever-discussed and ubiquitous arc.” (15). Such images effectively highlight the materiality of a text as an intrinsic part of its meaning and style. They point to the physical nature of the script, placing the focus on its sensory and evocative qualities, rather than purely on narrative progression or character development. They also remind us of the synesthetic tendencies of theater, which solicits more than one sense, and draws on more than one art form, by combining writing with performing as well as visual arts, choreography – or again music, a recurring parallel under Ruhl’s pen.

As Henri Meschonnic notes in his seminal work on rhythm, enquiries into the likenesses or contrasts between language and music, as well as debates about the prevalence of one over the other, are as old as poetry itself (including dramatic poetry).¹ Meschonnic’s own definition, equating rhythm in language with the most subjective aspect of a subjective form of expression,² seems to lend itself to the analysis of dramatic language, since it places great emphasis on orality and on individuality of voice. Yet, as far as contemporary drama written in prose is concerned, the relationship between text and music is not broached by scholars as often as one might expect, since criticism has tended to focus on more radical or experimental pieces. Illuminating pages have been written on musicality of voice and *mise en scène* as “theatrical signs” in postdramatic performance (Lehmann 143-146), and 21st-century critical works have pointed out compelling intersections between performance art and music (Auslander). But Ruhl’s plays, like those of a prolific generation of young American playwrights who are making their mark Off-Broadway (Baker, Herzog, Gionfriddo, Joseph, Ferrentino to name but a few), do not fall under the category of fragmentary “postdramatic”

aesthetics. Without being aristotelian, without being conservative – or, a worse indictment, “commercial” – they are innovative dramas, with a clear sense of authorship and a keen interest in form, not freer performance pieces. And since they are not musicals – which would open up another, abundant field of scholarship – the question of their potential relationship to music, other than as incidental enhancement, has been little considered except by the authors and artists directly involved in the productions.

When I asked Sarah Ruhl about the relevance of a comparison between the text of a play and the score of a piece of music, her response was: “Yes; they’re definitely similar. It’s all about rhythm”.³ And tellingly enough, the 2006 edition of *The Clean House and Other Plays*, a collection of her first four stage successes, features musical notes, rather than words, on the cover. The detail of the photograph by Ralph Gibson shows a close-up of a goldfish bowl resting on a piece of sheet music set on the top of a piano. This points to the musical consciousness of Ruhl’s plays, which not only call explicitly for the addition of a score in performance, but also fully enter into a dialogue with music and song. There are musician characters, musical indications in the stage directions, and a recurring use of music as a metaphor for dramatic composition – her 2003 play *Late: A Cowboy Song* is thus presented as a piece of music from the very title. With a more classical inspiration, Ruhl’s 2003 *Eurydice* reinvents a musician’s myth, and is therefore composed not of acts, but of “movements,” much as a symphony would be. The dialogue of the play is filled with Orpheus’ instrumental images and melodic thoughts, has characters speaking in “syncopated” time (397), and even turns the tragic mistake into a problem of rhythm. A third, and even more striking, example is to be found in *Melancholy Play*, a “contemporary farce” first produced in 2002, where the score is presented as a member of the cast in the introductory notes:

The score is another character in this play, scoring transitions, underscoring dialogue, moving the actors into song, and creating an entire world. The score should be treated

with the utmost musical, theatrical and mathematical sensitivity. The music should be integrated early and often in rehearsal, rather than being the icing on the cake. (228)

Such a deliberate personification of the music makes it an essential element in the overall balance of the piece. It also raises questions as to the kind of parallelism that can be drawn between music and text, and its possible reciprocity. If music can be written as one of the characters, should the other characters be read as music? How far can one carry the parallel between words on a script and symbols on a score? And more importantly, what does this comparison reveal about the way Ruhl's theater functions, and about the performative presence of the playwright in her text?

It is my contention that the musical score, as an object to be read and deciphered, can aptly function as a metaphor for the interpretation and performance of Ruhl's work. Reading a scene as a score is an invitation to look at what is encoded in the text – its shape, sound and plasticity – beyond the simple progression of dialogue. Since Ruhl's foremost interest is and remains language, this analysis will prove deliberately theater-centric, using music (or perhaps a certain idealized conception of music shared by theater practitioners) as a mirror and a foil for the text. Examples will be drawn mainly from three of Ruhl's plays: *Melancholy Play*, *The Clean House*, and *Eurydice*. These early pieces, written in the first few years after Paula Vogel had encouraged Sarah Ruhl to switch from poetry to plays, reveal traits of Ruhl's originality which are confirmed in her later work. I shall first focus on the dialogue she initiates with directors through stage directions, before studying the musical potential of sound and line arrangement.

Directing actors from the page

In the previously quoted note from *Melancholy Play*, music is associated with preciseness – the adjective “mathematical” implies a scientifically correct approach to

rhythm, while Ruhl's advice about integrating the music early on in rehearsal highlights the importance of practicing dialogue in musical time. Extrapolating from this, one might hypothesize that viewing the play itself as a score is an invitation to focus the performers' attention on the playwright's indications as to delivery, be they explicit or latent, and on rigorousness of timing, as opposed to more impulsive reactions. This broadly echoes one of the main evolutions in acting techniques and their representations since the Romantic age. While 19th-century actors, both in Europe and the United States, tended to foreground ideas of inspiration and emotion in the presentation of their craft,⁴ 20th-century rhetoric has switched to a vocabulary of discipline and conscious control which still thrives today. In many ways, the history of American acting since the "sensation school" of the Gilded Age (Watermeier 458-459) has been the history of meticulous, all-but-scientific training getting the upper hand over more elusive approaches. "The more talent the actor has the more he cares about his technique," is perhaps the very condition of existence of the influential Stanislavski system (Stanislavski 289). In that context, dancers and musicians, with their daily practices and their attention to the writing of the music, have been cited by acting coaches across the US as examples of a conscientiousness and dedication devoutly to be wished by theater actors: "The actor's technique provides a musculature similar to that developed through the dancer's barre work or the pianist's and singer's practice of scales. The key word is command," writes an artistic director of the drama department at NYU (Bartow xii).

This inclination to reference music as an art of ideal preciseness – which might well be reductive from the point of view of music, but is nonetheless pervasive in theatrical discourse – prompts a further inquiry into the way stage directions are written and interpreted. The word itself, "directions", while originally bearing a pedagogical meaning close to the etymology of the French equivalent *didascalie* (from the Greek *διδασκαλία*, "instructions"), can today be read in a more modern and more directorial light. Since the 19th century, the general tendency

has been for dramatists to move beyond the simple indication of “stage business” to elaborate detail concerning the visual aspects of the performance, its pace and emotional color. To compare a particularly striking pair of examples – too extreme to be archetypal, but nevertheless evocative – the opening stage directions to George L. Aiken’s 1852 adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, one of the most performed melodramas of the 19th century, are six words long and entirely factual; while that of O’Neill’s 1946 masterpiece *The Iceman Cometh* run close to two thousand words, minutely depicting the state of the room and curtains as well as the characters’ buck teeth, scars, histories and tempers. Sarah Ruhl herself, like many contemporary playwrights, maintains that stage directions should be treated as a fully literary part of the play rather than as mere suggestion:

... if they are as important to you as the dialogue, as they are to me, do not put them in parentheses, and insist on using your own punctuation, as any novelist or poet would. [...] I think many more directors would begin to treat stage directions as visual speech rather than as filigree if they were not always hiding in parentheses. (Ruhl, 2015 199)

The (un-parenthetical) status of stage directions raises questions as to convention and control. Unlike the composer, the playwright cannot refer to well-established codes specifying the pace with a time signature at the opening of a scene, or describe the length of a pause as whole, half, quarter, eighth or sixteenth. In the absence of bars and symbols, the tools at her disposal are italics, bold print, capital letters, spacing on the page, punctuation and, traditionally, a certain number of abbreviations to designate the layout of the stage, as well as adverbs or past participles to refer to acting attitudes. There is no universal way, for instance, to indicate the length of a silence, which is perhaps why playwrights tend to try out various codes. To take a few sundry examples from the American stage – Arthur Miller alternates between a “*slight pause*” and a “*brief pause*,” without specifying which is the shorter, (Miller, *All my sons* 121; 125), while Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee try to introduce

objective measures for the length of a silence, with “*silence for five beats*” (Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* 72), or “*a rather long silence; five seconds, please*” (Albee, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 62). And in a more original way, Suzan-Lori Parks creates a system all her own, giving what she calls a “road map” at the beginning of *Topdog/Underdog*:

(Rest)

Take a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition.

A Spell

An elongated and heightened *(Rest)*. Denoted by repetition of characters’ names with no dialogue. Has a sort of architectural look:

LINCOLN.

BOOTH.

[...] While no action or stage business is necessary, directors should fill this moment as they best see fit. (5)

This illustrates an interesting tension between control and leeway. Parks is initiating her directors into a very individual and demanding use of silence, while at the same time relinquishing control over the fulfillment of her directions. This conscious combination of constraint and freedom might suggest an extension of the script-as-score metaphor into a correspondence between the role of the director and that of the conductor. Though the symbols on a score are internationally recognizable, mathematical and, to a large extent, binding, “interpretation remains subjective,” as Alain Altinoglu puts it (Proust), and musicians agree that the conductor’s personal choices have a considerable influence over the pace, color and emotion of a piece of music. To varying degrees, musical symbols and stage directions raise parallel questions as to the balance between authority and license.

Sarah Ruhl’s use of stage directions appears accordingly double-edged, at once precise, with notes at the beginning of each play, and open to interpretation. In her own words, she

provides “stage directions that are both impossible to stage and possible to stage” (Ruhl, 2015 169). Compare the presentation of the set in the three plays under study:

Place – Illinois

Set – [...] A mirror. A potted palm. A red velvet chair or two. A few chandeliers. A victrola? Perhaps. [...] (Ruhl, *Melancholy Play* 226)

Place – A metaphysical Connecticut. Or, a house that is not far from the sea and not far from the city. (Ruhl, *The Clean House* 7)

Set – The set contains a raining elevator,
a water pump,
some rusty exposed pipes,
an abstracted River of Forgetfulness,
an old-fashioned glow-in-the-dark globe. (Ruhl, *Eurydice* 331)

The directions are at once explicit, with state names and a list of elements for the set, and dreamily indeterminate, with question marks and hypallages. The focus is on the achievement of an aesthetic effect, not on realistic ways to attain it. Stage indications thus shift from objective facts – as one might expect to find in the minute description of the set at the beginning of an Ibsen play – to subjective impressions, thus continuing in the vein of Williams’ poetic and symbolical sets, though in a more restrained fashion. This tension between direct and indirect hints also applies to directions for the actors. For instance, in her “surreal comedy” (Isherwood) *The Clean House*, a particularly unfeeling remark made between two sisters, Lane and Virginia, leads to this unique indication – which is partly meant to be projected on stage as a subtitle:

A pause.

*For a moment,
Lane and Virginia experience
a primal moment during which they
are seven and nine years old,
inside the mind, respectively.
They are mad.
Then they return quite naturally
to language, as adults do. (30)*

Rather than specify the length of the pause, Ruhl suggests it visually, with something close to a poem. The first line, “*A pause*”, reads as a title, followed by a long sentence arranged in irregular lines, featuring a relative clause, appositions and an awkward enjambment between subject and verb. Syntax and typesetting here combine to materialize the strangeness of the sisters’ mental landscapes. As the following line condenses the moment’s violence in a three-word statement – “*They are mad*” – the rhythm quickens, to mimic a heavier tension, and possibly the characters’ shortened breaths, before returning to a more flowing transition back to speech. This provides an apt theatrical illustration of Meschonnic’s analysis of rhythm as subjectivity: the emotional presence of the subjects (the characters) is written into the text by the author through the meandering arrangement of words, both in the syntax and on the page, so that the actresses may in turn perform the breathing and feeling awkwardness of the moment even through their silence. The Theater on Film and Tape Archive of the New York Public Library holds videos of this scene as staged in two varying ways by the same director, Bill Rauch: for the Yale Repertory production, Elizabeth Norment and Laurie Kennedy clenched the armrests of their chairs and turned their faces to the audience, grimacing like children, in a droll expressionistic display; while in the Lincoln Center production, Blair Brown and Jill Clayburgh simply stared straight at each other in a more understated fashion,

letting the subtitle provide the humorous subtext. Both choices proved effective, mixing the comedy of the moment with a slight sense of danger, though perhaps the expressionistic version more convincingly conveyed the dynamic of the “primal”, sub-language, moment of anger.

Ruhl’s stage directions thus tend to function through suggestion by shape, sound and image rather than direct demand. This is also illustrated by the tragic moment when Orpheus looks at his wife, all too soon, in *Eurydice*. The dialogue of the scene is understated, using words with a restraint that allows tragedy to be choreographed rather than spoken, and silence to resonate as the only response to catastrophe. The stage directions themselves are remarkably sober, with few adverbs or qualifiers, and no enquiry into the characters’ motivations.

Orpheus walks slowly, in a straight line, with the focus of a tightrope walker.

Eurydice moves to follow him. She follows him, several steps behind.

THEY WALK.

Eurydice follows him with precision, one step for every step he takes.

She makes a decision. She increases her pace.

She takes two steps for every step that Orpheus takes.

She catches up to him.

EURYDICE – Orpheus?

He turns towards her, startled.

Orpheus looks at Eurydice.

Eurydice looks at Orpheus.

The world falls away.

ORPHEUS – You startled me.

A small sound – ping.

They turn their faces away from each other, matter-of-fact, compelled.

The lights turn blue. (396-397)

Besides the capital letters for “*THEY WALK*” – used to indicate the solemnity, and perhaps the length of the walk, in an iconic tableau that echoes many pictorial and sculptural interpretations of the myth – no emphasis is used. The phrasing is as matter-of-fact as the characters’ attitudes, with short, often parallel sentences describing the sequence of events, line by line. The tragic separation is marked not by words or music but by a trivial sound, “*ping*”, echoing the presence of an elevator on stage and heightening, by contrast, the density of the irrevocable silence. Tragedy is conveyed physically, through improper pacing and blue lights, as the text leads the actors in careful choreography to the only metaphorical stage direction in the scene, “*the world falls away.*” Only at this point does the suggestion become an internal image; for most of the scene, the emotional weight of the moment must be inferred by *listening to* – rather than reading – the shortened breathing and chiasmatic poignancy of the stage directions.

Both these examples show how Sarah Ruhl creates her own system of emphasis, subdued suggestion and careful pacing, in order to convey emotions that are either sub-language or beyond words. Deciphering them requires a musical attention to the texture of the text on the part of the performer. In an oblique way, Ruhl uses the very big – the primal moments, the world falling away – and the very small – a small sound, a change in pace – to suggest the weight of a dramatic instant. The actors are not confined to any one mode of interpretation, but compelled to embody an emotion, which is evoked by the visual and sound shape of the stage directions, as well as by their meaning.

Reading dialogue as music?

This idea of the physical power of language leads me to turn to the words spoken on stage and the way they are voiced by performers. The cultural supremacy of movies, the teachings of Lee Strasberg and the prominence of great “realistic” plays in the American canon – however delicate the definition of such a genre may prove to be – have led to a strong association between the mainstream American stage and naturalistic, psychological acting. “Even in stylized dramas, American audiences prefer to be tethered to acting behavior they perceive as real,” as Bartow summarizes (xx). This dominant tradition is still alive today, though the range of performing styles has been broadened by the introduction of opposing trends through the avant-garde groups of the 1960s and 1970s. The heyday of the performance movement brought about a wealth of alternative approaches, foregrounding artificiality or hybridity between the arts, and often cancelling any idea of character psychology in favor of theater as an event (Pasquier). Ruhl belongs to a generation of authors who came to playwriting after the “great explosion” of the performance movement– to borrow Pasquier’s phrase –, and after the relative institutionalization of postdramatic theater. These authors, who have very distinctive voices, do not by any means present a unified aesthetic, but it could be argued that their text-based theater tends to revisit early and mid-twentieth century tradition, “post-performance,” in a more open and personal way, for instance by seeking to push realistic drama to its very limits (Annie Baker), or by confronting it with other art forms, or indeed technologies (Jennifer Haley; Lindsey Ferrentino). Defining the manifold trends of new writing lies far beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to suggest that they broadly substantiate Jean-Pierre Sarrazac’s most recent claims as to the persistence of the drama on contemporary stages, in freer form but not without form, admitting of irregularity and hybridization without forsaking the “rhapsodic urge” to tell a story.⁵ In this context, the metaphor of the text as a score can, without forswearing plot in

favor of solely musical associations, provide an interesting approach to the rendering of sound.

The idea of searching the dialogue both for character motivation and for musical quality and structure, can be a way to renew its perception. “[I]s there an emotional melody or rhythm underlying a play that is beyond translation?,” Ruhl asks herself, while mesmerized by a performance of one of her plays in German, before adding: “Is it possible that merely by being attentive to the rhythm of the language [...] the actor can attend to the style of the piece, without worrying about stylized gestures?” (Ruhl, 2015 91-92) Her suggestion about the power of rhythm, even in a language unfamiliar to the audience, finds itself literalized in *The Clean House*, which opens with a monologue wholly in Portuguese, and ends with the whispering of “the perfect joke” in one of the characters’ ear. As the stage direction specifies: “*We don’t hear [the joke]. We hear sublime music instead.*” (105-106) When the language becomes foreign, or turns to melody, intellectual responses must give way to imagination and emotion.⁶ *The Clean House* is framed by words of which the audience can only grasp the musicality – literally or figuratively, paving the way for the humorous and poetical last words: “heaven is a sea of untranslatable jokes – only everyone is laughing.” (109)

A playful attention to the materiality of words can also be felt in Ruhl’s use of onomastics; in *Melancholy Play*, the protagonist’s name and job title contradict her melancholy in vivacious paronomasia (Tilly the teller), the mysterious sound of the therapist’s name places him as bewitchingly foreign from the word go (Lorenzo the Unfeeling), while a pair of estranged twins are identified by their alliterative names (Frank and Frances). The latter also share echoing lines:

FRANK

When I gave up accounting

I found myself sitting in

public places

I pretended

to the other people in the room

they were accountable

I lost my watch.

I didn't buy a new one.

FRANCES

When I gave up physics

I found myself sitting in

public places

libraries, restaurants, movie

theatres

that I was accountable

and that furthermore

to me.

I lost my watch.

I didn't buy a new one.

Much of this speech reads as one sentence divided up between the two siblings, with the syntax and placing of the lines indicating who speaks when. These parallel monologues function as a duet, bringing to mind lyrics on a libretto. Frank and Frances speak in echoes and counterpoints, before reaching final unison: the spoken dialogue is so lyrical in structure that composer Todd Almond was able to adapt *Melancholy Play* into a “chamber musical” (2012) without rewriting any lyrics. Interestingly, Ruhl recounts this process of adaptation

from a sensory point of view, saying she “felt there was more music” to the play, because of the “heightened” nature of the characters and situations. As she said in a radio interview: “I gave the play to Todd and said ‘Do I hear more music?’ and he said ‘I hear it almost sung through with a string quartet and piano’ and I said ‘Let’s do it.’” (WBEZ interview)

The physicality of words proves equally important in less heightened scenes. I have argued elsewhere that dramatic language can be analyzed as active and alive even on the page, calling for its own embodiment through the suggestive arrangement of sound, and playing the part, in turns, of a director, an actor and a musician.⁷ For the performers, dialogue functions as an acting tool: vowels and consonants provide support for the voice and emotional hints, while the rhythm written into the echoes and contrasts suggests movement, as is palpable in this excerpt from *Eurydice*:

EURYDICE: When are you going to play me the whole song?

ORPHEUS: When I get twelve instruments.

EURYDICE: Where are you going to get twelve instruments?

ORPHEUS: I’m going to make each strand of your hair into an instrument. Your hair will stand on end as it plays my music and become a hair orchestra. It will fly you up into the sky.

EURYDICE: I don’t know if I want to be an instrument.

ORPHEUS: Why?

EURYDICE: Won’t I fall down when the song ends?

ORPHEUS: That’s true. But the clouds will be so moved by your music that they will fill up with water until they become heavy and you’ll sit on one and fall gently down to earth. (338-339)

The return of interrogative pronouns here suggests a fluid sequence, as well as the words which reverberate from one line to the next – “song”, “hair”, “instrument” – and the first- and

second-person pronouns which are intertwined throughout the excerpt. The rhythm alternates between short and long, much as the images alternate between flying up and falling down, lending a vivacious quality to the scene and suggesting variation in the staging. No parenthetical adverbs are needed here to indicate how much they are in love – the dialogue is its own stage direction. Even phonetics have an implication on the acting, as the necessary re-accentuation on the second word forces the actor to over-articulate the phrase “hair orchestra” in order for this unusual association to be clearly understood by the audience. The strange – and perhaps comical – beauty of the conceit Orpheus uses to unite his love for Eurydice with his love for music is thus highlighted by its very pronunciation, in a linguistic echo of the imaginative aesthetics which have often been identified as idiosyncratic to Ruhl’s style: “Ruhl’s currents of desire whirl and eddy into fantastical shapes not to distract, but rather to reveal [...]” (Al-Shamma 5).

Against the trend of experts advising playwrights on their storytelling,⁸ Ruhl writes that “a writer’s special purview and intimate power is how a word follows a word.” (Ruhl, 2015 25-26) This reads as an invitation to listen to the text as it unfolds on the page, and shows rhythm and breath to be as central to the interpretation of a play as they are to that of a score. That is not to say, however, that the metaphor is without limits. As Meschonnic points out, when music and language are compared in terms of rhythm, the history of the concept usually tips the scale in favor of music, hailed as the purer, more absolute expression of rhythm.⁹ For speaking voices, music remains an ideal, a longing, as Ruhl expresses when she writes: “I long for that alchemical thing where the meaning *was* the *sound*” (Ruhl, 2015 46). But even so, a final virtue of the comparison between plays and scores is not to point out the shortcomings of spoken dialogue but, rather, to reassert the collaborative nature of theater. It takes a musician to read a score, but anyone can read a play; it is therefore easier to forget that

theater is not theater until it is performed. Looking at the play as a score forces one to include the interpreters, and to remember that, no matter how thorough the playwright may aim to be, a dramatic text is necessarily an *open* one. The art of theater implies a collaboration between author, artistic team and audience – collaboration which, in the writings of Edward Gordon Craig, even becomes a synthesis between the arts themselves, a sort of aesthetic synesthesia:

STAGE DIRECTOR: No; the Art of the Theatre is neither acting nor the play, it is not scene nor dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which is the very spirit of acting; words, which are the body of the play; line and colour, which are the very heart of the scene; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance.

(Craig 73)

In this famous quote, the human metaphors used by Craig root the universality of theater in personal perception, and resonate interestingly with Ruhl's assertion that "directors with synesthesia are the proper people to direct plays," suggesting that the dramatic stage is an appropriate space for the blurring of boundaries – between senses as between categories of art or theatrical genres (Ruhl, 2015 205).

It is therefore no surprise that Ruhl's plays should be reviewed in terms that compare her drama to a range of artistic disciplines, as here in the *New York Times*: "[*Eurydice*] has some of the subliminal potency of music, the head-scratching surprise of a modernist poem and the cockeyed allure of a surrealist painting." (Isherwood) Such aesthetic fluidity is part of Ruhl's original and contemporary revisiting of the American dramatic tradition, along with her poetic fondness for placing realistic dialogue in unrealistic sets, or her "long[ing] for meter" while writing in a prosaic register (Ruhl, 2015 92). The prevalence of musical images in her work does not merely testify to a strong thematic interest and a desire to enhance the text through a range of music styles, it also acts as a revelatory force on a deeper level. Envisaging the play as a score highlights the performative presence of the playwright in her

text, as well as that of the words themselves. It also reminds us of the hybrid and ambiguous status of words in a play – at once written and spoken, fixed and always renewed, at once meaning and symbol. If theater creates worlds from words, the worlds of Sarah Ruhl’s stage are unusual enough to require oblique definitions, in order to encompass the visual and sound landscapes brought into existence by her plays with, at their core (or perhaps *as their score*), “nothing but language to rest on”. (Ruhl, 2015 98)

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¹ Though this falls outside of the scope of this paper, it is nevertheless worth noting that, more recently, enquiries into the parallels between music and language, and the interface between the two, have increasingly been made by cognitive neuroscientists. See for instance Aniruddh D. Patel's *Music, Language and the Brain*.

² See section III of Meschonnic's *Critique du rythme*, in particular subsection 1, "Rythme, sens, sujet." For instance: "Le langage est un élément du sujet, l'élément le plus subjectif, dont le plus subjectif à son tour est le rythme." (Meschonnic 71)

³ Private interview with the author in Brooklyn, October 27th, 2015.

⁴ A striking example of this tendency is the internationally influential Sarah Bernhardt who, though extremely well-trained, built her career and reputation on the foregrounding of emotional coincidences between her roles and her own personality, and on heaven-sent bursts of inspiration. In her memoirs, she thus relates a fainting fit during a particularly intense performance of *Phèdre* in London, drawing the following conclusion: "Le dieu était venu." (Bernhardt, 353).

⁵ While Sarrazac's *Critique du théâtre I* (2000) analyzed the decline of theater viewed as a great critical tool in the second half of the 20th-century, his *Critique du théâtre II* (2015) takes issue with the prevalence of postdramatic ideology, challenging the idea of the disappearance of the drama and highlighting aesthetic correspondences between early 20th-century and early 21st-century stages. Though Sarrazac's examples are mostly drawn from European playwrights, I suggest that contemporary new writing in America supports these ideas.

⁶ On this point, see the many analyses of performances in foreign languages collected in *La Scène en version originale* (Vatain-Corfdir 2015).

⁷ See *Traduire la lettre vive*, in particular pages 282-286. For instance: “Le langage dramatique est *metteur en scène* au sens où les répliques, avec ou sans l’aide des didascalies, contiennent les actes et donnent des indices de placement, de mouvement, d’occupation de la scène en rapport avec l’occupation de la parole; il est *comédien* dans la mesure ou l’expressivité des phrases, le choix des exclamations et des ripostes, suggèrent les tons et les caractères; enfin il est *musicien* car il emplit la salle de mots, de sons qui surgissent du silence et suscitent l’émotion des spectateurs par leur résonance et leurs connotations.” (Vatain-Corfdir, 2012 284).

⁸ The Hollywood model has increasingly influenced the world of playwriting in the US: plays are frequently workshopped and given public readings with a view to testing the story and advising the author. Ruhl deplors the negative effect of this process on young authors in particular: “playwrights are viewed mainly as storytellers whose stories might have flaws that can be fixed by experts.” (Ruhl, 2015 26)

⁹ See section IV of Meschonnic’s *Critique du rythme*. For instance: “L’histoire du rythme vient de la musique. Le langage ne vient pas de la musique. [...] Situer la métrique, et le rythme, dans la musicologie, relève d’[...]une quête mythique d’unité. [...] Étant une origine, et si ancienne qu’elle était déjà perdue à l’époque d’Alexandrie, l’union de la poésie avec la musique a orienté une nostalgie, vers un âge d’or du rythme. Vers un triomphe de la musique.” (Meschonnic 121-125)