

Dead Man's Cell Phone Mary-Louise Parker, with T. Ryder Smith, stars in Sarah Ruhl's new comedy, which opened on Tuesday night at Playwrights Horizons in Clinton.

A Nagging Call to Tidy Up an Unfinished Life

That commonplace gadget you are advised to turn off when the lights in the theater go down, or when the plane takes off, becomes a mysteriously powerful totem of transformation in "Dead Man's Cell Phone," the beguiling new comedy by Sarah Ruhl that opened on Tuesday night at Playwrights Horizons.

**CHARLES
ISHERWOOD**

**THEATER
REVIEW**

Mary-Louise Parker, her poker-faced style embellished with deliciously odd new flourishes, stars as an unexceptional woman who embarks on a loopy odyssey into the lives of others when she inherits — confiscates, really — the phone of a stranger she meets in a cafe.

As the title of this poetic fantasy intimates, that

meeting is a bit awkward because one of the parties happens to be dead when it occurs.

Hunched over a bowl of soup at lunch one day, the mousy-looking Jean (Ms. Parker) becomes flustered, then irritated, then quietly outraged as the phone of a man across the way trills insistently. He makes no move to answer, so Jean gingerly approaches, only to find that the man is not afflicted with rudeness but with a mild case of rigor mortis.

The phone continues to ring. And as Jean will later say with mournful truth, a ringing phone demands to be answered. So she flips it open. "Hello?" Pause. A side-long glance at the guy who failed to fog a spoon. "No, he's not. Can I take a message?"

Jean will proceed to take many for her new intimate, who turns out to be a man named Gordon Gottlieb (T. Ryder Smith, terrifically mordant in a monologue from the beyond). She will learn that Gordon has — had? — a frostily elegant mother, an emotionally estranged wife, a mysterious mistress, a lonely brother and a sinister career.

Clinging doggedly to the symbol of her life-changing communion with a corpse, Jean will not stop at playing the dead man's social secretary either. She also channels Gordon's spirit, after a fashion, by delivering messages to his survivors that she hopes will bring

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them succor, even if she has to fudge the truth. (She tells his mother, whose calls Gordon had stopped returning, that he'd tried to phone her on the day he died; her number was on the outgoing calls list — really.)

"I only knew him for a short time," Jean confides to the Almighty on a visit to church to pray for Gordon's soul, fudging even to the presumably all-knowing, "but I think that I loved him, in a way."

This seemingly absurd statement is typical of the startling leaps made by the characters in Ms. Ruhl's work, which blends the mundane and the metaphysical, the blunt and the obscure, the patently bizarre and the bizarrely moving. Characters in her plays, which include "The Clean House" and "Eurydice," negotiate the no man's land between the everyday and the mystical, talking like goofs one minute and philosophers the next. She writes surrealist fantasies that happen to be populated by eccentrically real people, comedies in which the surface illogic of dreams is made meaningful — made truthful — by the deeper logic of human feeling.

Her theme in "Dead Man's Cell Phone" is the paradoxical ability of the title device (and the people who use it) both to unite and isolate. Gordon's mother, played with glistening imperiousness by Kathleen Chalfant, ends her funeral oration by calling for a certain hymn by Rodgers and Hammerstein: "You'll Never Walk Alone."

"That's right," she adds dryly, her eulogy having been interrupted by the telltale sound of a muffled phone. "Because you'll always have a machine in your pocket that might ring."

But the machine in the pocket means that wherever you are present, you are potentially absent too. "I never had a cell phone," Jean reflects. "I didn't want to be there, you know. Like if your phone is on you're supposed to be there. Sometimes I like to disappear. But it's like — when everyone has their cell phones on, no one is there. It's like we're all disappearing the more we're there."

As the play takes surprising twists and leaps — right up into the stratosphere, actually — the lament for the supposed coziness of predigital culture (some of which we've all heard before) takes on layers of nuance and contradiction. In one scene Jean uses Gordon's phone as a tool of emotional withdrawal from his brother. (Anyone who has felt a twinge of jealousy toward a friend's Blackberry can relate.)

But it is the act of answering a phone that draws Jean into the mysteries of life, death and the

Dead Man's Cell Phone

By Sarah Ruhl; directed by Anne Bogart; sets and costumes by G. W. Mercier; lighting by Brian H. Scott; sound by Darro L. West. Presented by Playwrights Horizons, Tim Sanford, artistic director. At the Playwrights Horizons Mainstage Theater, 416 West 42nd Street, Clinton; (212) 279-4200. Through March 25. Running time: 2 hours.

WITH: David Aaron Baker (Dwight), Kathleen Chalfant (Mrs. Gottlieb), Carla Harling (the Other Woman), Kelly Maurer (Hermia), Mary-Louise Parker (Jean) and T. Ryder Smith (Gordon).



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mary-Louise Parker as Jean, and David Aaron Baker as Dwight in "Dead Man's Cell Phone."

ONLINE: THE ANSWER WOMAN

Mary-Louise Parker talks about performing in "Dead Man's Cell Phone":

nytimes.com/theater

varieties of love, from the compassion for a stranger that an overheard conversation can evoke to the continuing challenge of romantic intimacy.

Ms. Parker, who also stars as the pot-dealing soccer mom on Showtime's "Weeds," gives a bold, stylized performance in tune with the dreamy spirit of Ms. Ruhl's play. With a floppy hat pulled down over her ears, nerdy eyeglasses and a flowery dress over black leggings, Jean initially looks like a Roz Chast character who has escaped from the pages of *The New Yorker*.

But as the play proceeds, Ms. Parker eases up on the uncertain

gait, the deadpan nasal drone, transforming her character from a cartoon into a human being. A nice touch: the way this far-from-earthbound woman's heels never touch the ground when she's sitting down.

The director, Anne Bogart, best known for directing her own troupe, the SITI Company, is likewise sympathetic to the hallucinatory style of the play. The set by G. W. Mercier, mostly a series of colored panels, and the lighting by Brian H. Scott evoke the paintings of Edward Hopper: the lonely rooms, the slanted light, the night-tinted hues. (One epigraph to the text of the play is a quotation from the poet Mark Strand's book of commentary on Hopper.)

Ms. Ruhl's allegiance to whimsy can be exasperating. I could have done without the cloying bit in which Jean brings Gordon's family little gifts from the cafe where he died: a saltshaker, a

knife, a spoon. And the bond she forges with his brother, Dwight (David Aaron Baker), over the glory of embossed stationery rates too highly on the cuteness scale for my taste.

But her affection for the unexpected phrase, the kooky observation, the unlikely juxtaposition is essential to her central belief that the smallest and most trivial things in life — a bowl of lobster bisque, in Gordon's case — can be charged with meaning. And her characters' quirkiness is in keeping, too, with the play's doleful central theme, that each human being is a book full of surprises even to intimates, and one that is destined to be left unfinished.

That observation, quoted by Gordon's mother at his funeral, comes from Dickens's "Tale of Two Cities." I suspect the advent of the text message would not have changed his opinion.