

Theatre Review: "The Clean House" is a demonstration of imagination

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The therapeutic power of cleaning is well-known. The stresses of the day seem to disappear, even if only for a moment, as we attack the stack of dirty dishes that have been slowly accumulating in the sink or spend Sunday night folding socks as we watch bad reality television. But are we actually exorcising our daily demons as we scrub away, or are we just pretending they don't exist for an hour or two? Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House*, presented through May 22nd by Syracuse Stage, tackles this question and many more.

Our guide for the show is Matilde (pronounced Ma-chil-gee) (Gisela Chipe), a Brazilian woman who is the only child of the two funniest people in Brazil. But her parents have passed—her mother died laughing, her father killed himself out of sorrow—and she has moved to America to become a maid for Lane (Carol Halstead), a talented doctor who “didn't go to medical school to clean [her] own house”. Rather than clean, however, Matilde much prefers to spend her time looking for the perfect joke. Fortunately, Lane's sister Virginia (Linda Marie Larson) loves to clean, and since her house is always spotless by three pm, Matilde graciously allows her to come over and clean Lane's house every evening. As the two bond over laundry, they discover a pair of panties that both agree are too sexy to belong to Lane, and in fact they do not—they belong to Ana (Alma Cuervo), a patient of Lane's husband Charles (David Adkins) who happens to be Charles' *bashert*, the woman he is destined to be with and, according to Jewish law, must marry. As the lives of all five characters intertwine, their individual threads begin to unravel along with the order and cleanliness by which they had been so safely surrounded, forcing them, for the first time, to face their issues rather than try to dust them away.

All five actors were excellent, though due to the nature of the show none of them was given an opportunity for a true tour de force performance. The events in the lives of these characters may be bizarre, but at their core they are ordinary people reacting in ordinary ways, and while capturing them well is an extraordinary feat, the result is five great portrayals, none of which were particularly memorable.

The production itself, however, is very memorable. The stark white set serves as more than just a symbol of the sanitary expectations Lane holds for her life, it also functions as a backdrop upon which subtitles, stage directions, and scene synopses can be projected. **Light and music are used to great effect:** when Matilde imagines her parents' courtship, they appear in the background (played by Cuervo and Adkins) framed in red, accompanied by a soft Latin composition. Act Two begins with an imagining of Charles' surgery on Ana, and their shadows are projected onto two curtains as they lip-sync an operatic ode to each other. Even scenes set in the real world aren't immune from a little theatrical imagination: as Matilde and Ana converse on Ana's balcony, they toss half-eaten apples into Lane's living room. Charles clambers across Lane's furniture doubling as an Arctic tundra, and when a few rogue snowflakes drift into the next scene, the characters observe their descent without saying a word. These vignettes speak volumes about the creativity of both the director and the playwright, and are all enchanting in very different but equally beautiful ways.

The plot, however, fails to reach the same heights. There is a saying in professional football: "If you have two quarterbacks, you have no quarterbacks." Just as a football team functions best when it has a single leader through which it can focus, so too does a play function better when its author explores all the depth and nuance of a single theme rather than splashing in the shallows of multiple themes. The title of the play (and an interview with Ms. Ruhl transcribed in the program) suggest *The Clean House* is mostly about the roles cleanliness and dirtiness play in our lives, but the play is bookended by scenes exploring the power and purpose of comedy, leaving us unsure of what Ms. Ruhl wanted to say on either subject. Her background is primarily in poetry, and between the fantastic nature and loose structure of the piece the influences of the art form are clearly visible. This is one of Ms. Ruhl's earliest forays as a playwright, and the tighter structure of subsequent attempts suggests that *The Clean House* is a transitional work as her style shifts from the page to the stage.

Regardless of thematic looseness, *The Clean House* features exceptional acting and is a captivating demonstration of all the storytelling advantages the theatre has over its more technological counterparts.