

Lincoln Center Theater's Platform series presents conversations with artists working at LCT before an audience of interested theatergoers. Admission is free and open to all. Platforms are held in the lobby of the Vivian Beaumont Theater. The following is a transcript, edited for clarity, of the November 15, 2006 Platform with Sarah Ruhl & Blair Brown:

Anne Cattaneo I would like to welcome you to our Platform Series event this evening, in conjunction with Lincoln Center Theater's production of *The Clean House*. I want to introduce the author of the play Sarah Ruhl. [Applause] And I really don't even know if I need to introduce Blair Brown, because you've seen her on our stage before and on many other stages – one of the wonderful members of *The Clean House*'s acting ensemble: Blair Brown. [Applause] We're very pleased tonight to have, following the Platform, a book signing for Sarah's volume of plays, which includes *The Clean House*.

I want to start by asking Sarah to tell us a little bit about how she came to be a writer. What was the first thing you wrote?

Sarah Ruhl Well, the first thing I wrote (in terms of theatrical writing) was a play about landmasses. Yes, it was a courtroom drama about landmasses, in the fourth grade. [Laughter]

AC And what did you write before you wrote that play? Did you start with plays?

SR Well, my mother claims that before I could write, I would dictate stories to her and she would write them down. So, I guess I started to with prose before I wrote a play.

AC Who were the writers of drama or fiction that you read when you were beginning your career? Maybe let's jump ahead from the fourth grade [Laughter] to your college years. Who did you love?

SR Well, I always loved my teachers. They were always important to me, and Paula Vogel, who I'm sure you all know, was my teacher at Brown. She was a huge inspiration to me. Also Tom Stoppard. I loved Tom Stoppard's work from a young age. Also Maria Irene Fornes. I studied with her in Mexico. She was a huge influence for me.

AC And both Paula Vogel and Maria Irene Fornes have been teachers: at Brown and at INTAR, respectively. Not only are they very important playwrights, but they have an eye and a nurturing ability that has allowed them to find and then encourage playwrights who have really changed the American theater.

SR Well, Paula is so generous. I mean they both are, and she also has this uncanny thing where she kind of looks at you and she knows what you need to do next. For instance, she looks at your work and she knows: this is the book you need to read next! The other thing Paula does is she says, "This could be a life, writing plays." So, it's not just that she's nurturing the writer. She's nurturing the idea of living in the theater. She took me to her house on Cape Cod when I was 21 and she said, "Look at this view. This is what playwrighting can buy." [Laughter]

AC Was that her house from *How I Learned To Drive*?

SR Yes, it was.

Blair Brown I once heard that she had an exercise for her students: she would ask young playwrights to write an un-produceable play.

SR Yes.

BB I remember hearing in the Directors' Lab here, a play that a student of hers had written about France falling on New Jersey, which was definitely un-produceable and it was fantastic.

SR Oh, I don't think that was un-produceable. I liked that play. [Laughter]

AC Did you go to Brown to be a playwright?

SR I actually wrote poetry then. I was much more serious about writing poetry. And the story is, I was writing poetry and I was doing work in English, and I had gone to Paula and said, "Paula, will you advise my thesis? I want to write a thesis about the representation of the actress in the nineteenth century novel." And Paula said, "No, I won't." (Laughter) "But if you write a play, I'll advise your thesis." And that was a big turning

point. It brought me from poetry into the dark side of theater. [Laughter]

AC And *The Clean House*, where does it stand in your canon? Our Artistic Director André Bishop asked Sarah if we could do this play some time ago, but it's taken a bit of time to traverse the United States and arrive here at Lincoln Center Theater. And you've since had other plays produced, so you're really in the middle of something that started a while ago, you're here now, and new things are burgeoning. I hope you're working on something new – not to mention your new baby daughter, who we just saw downstairs.

SR Yeah, she's the best part of all. But I'm working on a play about the history of the vibrator. I don't know if I talked to you about that. [Laughter]

BB I just got a card this week. It was sent here to the theater. A girl that I was in drama school with is doing *The Clean House* in Vancouver right now - the Canadian premiere. So, we've now contacted each other. We haven't been in touch in 20 years.

AC This is a good segue to allow me to ask Blair a question. Blair, you came out of a training program in an actors' repertory company, as opposed to an academic training program like Sarah attended that focused on working with new plays. Could tell us a little bit about how you got into theater?

BB Well, I was part of the baby boom, and when I got out of school I looked around and saw I had really smart friends who were graduating from Radcliffe and had to go to Katy Gibbs to learn secretarial skills. So, I thought, "I don't think there's really much point in my going." I wanted to be a heart surgeon, but I didn't like school, so that was sort of a problem. So, somehow acting seemed the thing to do.

AC Wait, you're in the wrong role in this play! You should be playing John Dossett's role since he gets to perform heart surgery on stage!

BB [Laughs] That's true. My friends all had pictures of, I don't know, Bob Dylan on the wall, and I had a heart with a left and right ventricle. I didn't want to go into a university situation, and at the time Juilliard had not started so it was hard to find a school that was simply dedicated to acting. And Michel St. Denis, before he started the Juilliard Drama Division, started a bilingual school in Montreal, Canada, and I went and got in because they were looking for a blank page who was ...

AC Brilliant, beautiful, talented.

BB No, it was just very good to have a blank page! My two audition pieces were *Medea* and the mother in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. I was, what, 19? Those roles seemed appropriate! [Laughs] And I went and studied there. But we were actually fed into Stratford, Ontario. We were trained as classical actors and we were going into what was then an exciting repertory system. You thought you would live your entire life doing Shaw, Chekhov, and Shakespeare. I think the most modern play we did was John Arden, and that was after a student revolt to get that. The remainder was all Restoration and classical plays. So, for the first eight years of my professional life, I wore a corset and curtsied. And at that point, the best place to do modern work was television and film because there weren't many new plays being done at these kinds of theaters. I worked on the main stages at the Guthrie and the Long Wharf and the Arena Stage. And it was all pretty classical at that point. But David Hare was coming in and Stoppard.

AC Sarah, one of the many charms of *The Clean House* is that it's contemporary, it's American, but then there's a whole other side to the play - which is a side that I'm curious to know how you came to - how you came to a Portuguese joke, how you came to your character of Matilde? Where did that begin?

SR Well, it's interesting. Sometimes I'm in an audition for *The Clean House* and the women coming in to audition look at me and say "Oh, you? That's not what I expected." There have been Brazilian actresses who assumed that I was Brazilian after reading the play, and I'm glad of that. But I've actually never been to Brazil. It was really that the germ of the play came to me at a party full of doctors. My husband's a doctor and I was with him at the party. A woman doctor came in and said, "Oh, it's been such a hard month. My cleaning lady from Brazil is depressed and she won't clean my house. And I took her to the hospital and I had her medicated..."

BB "... medicated and she still wouldn't clean."

SR "In the meantime, I've been cleaning my own house." It's Blair's first monologue. So, I knew that this real person in the world was Brazilian and I felt that I had to be true to the essence of how the play began. I did a

lot of research about Portuguese and was on a mad search for Portuguese jokes, Brazilian jokes I should say (because Brazilians think that jokes from Portugal are stupid) for the last four years.

BB How did you find them?

SR All kinds of places.

BB How did you know what they said? [Laughter]

AC And Blair was mentioning today - you performed a matinee this afternoon. We have a wonderful education program here at Lincoln Center Theater, working with public high school students. So, a portion of the house this afternoon was students who may be in social backgrounds closer to the maids than the doctors hiring the maids. And I'm curious to know what it's like to play to both of these types of audiences.

BB Well, it's actually very interesting. When we do the student matinees it becomes apparent that there is a part of this play that's about class. When we did the first few monologues today, part of the power and beauty of the play is that it changes and that issue is dispersed: it's thrown apart since everyone is learning something from everyone else. I never gleaned this from the play when I read it. I also didn't pick up - until we played it - the unexpected reaction to the parts about mature love. This is a cause of great hilarity and scorn on a student matinee day.

AC You mean people over the age of 30 have romantic lives? Oooh, disgusting.

BB But that's also very interesting because through the play the kids calm down and go on the journey with us. And because there are such tragic elements to this story and such funny ones, and they move back and forth with great alacrity, the students are able to find their way to it. And a lot of them, when you go to the student talkbacks, are quite taken with the play and don't really know how to process it. I think a lot of them are surprised that they care, in fact, that they really care about this story. You realize you're touching a lot of really human situations of love and illness and death that are in every family. And sisters! They respond very much to the cruelty of my character towards my sister and all that happens as a result of that. So, it's really interesting to watch the power of this play, which is not a play that automatically you would think would be great for high school students. But it really is.

AC I was thinking of Wendy Wasserstein when you were saying your friend in Canada has played the part in *The Clean House*. There seem to be certain plays of playwrights - you're probably going to be in this group now, Sarah - where the casts of the plays become friends. They've had the same experience ...

BB That's true.

AC ... like a large community of actresses who were in *The Sisters Rosensweig* or now in *The Clean House*. I'm curious, Sarah, how the play has changed for you as you've seen it in different cities. Is it about the productions, is it about the part of the country, is it about the times changing?

SR Well, each production has had its own integrity and I've seen about five different ones. And the birth of my child intervened in my seeing more, and it's probably good that I had to stop. The space of the theater where the play is done, I think, really changes the play. Because the Mitzi Newhouse here at LCT is in the round, it's a really different experience from doing it in a proscenium. The premiere was at Yale Rep and that felt very large and the stage went back very deep and the playing area at Woolly Mammoth Theater in DC was very intimate. I mean the play is kind of mythic, but it's also very intimate and personal, so that balance is different depending on the design and depending on how big the theater is.

AC Blair, when you read a script like *The Clean House*, and it comes from Lincoln Center Theater and Daniel Swee, our casting director says, "Would you like to play this part?" How do you make sense of it? It has its own style...how do you make your decision to accept the part?

BB Well, I had a quite different relationship with this script because I happened to be a judge of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize the year that Sarah's play was nominated. And it was one of the first plays I read. I sat down and I was laughing and then I was crying and then I was really crying and then I laughed and then I really cried. And I put the play down and thought, well, probably you shouldn't read anything else right now because clearly you're in a sort of fragile mood. And I waited and I read all the other plays and then I read Sarah's play again at the end, and it was the same experience. And so it went for everyone I knew who picked up *The Clean House*, it is so deceptively simple. It's like water running over your hand, and then you

find you are feeling some quite big, personal things and you think, "Well, this is just me, it's not anybody else." And interestingly enough, all the readers that year had the same experience, "Well, it must be just me." And when we realized what we shared, we thought, "Aha, this play is remarkable and this writer is remarkable" and she won the prize. It never occurred to me that I would have the good fortune to inhabit this play and to know the writer in a different way. When you inhabit a play, it's entirely different than when you read a play or see a play.

AC It is true. When you see the play, you have experiences that are very personal, and yet you recognize that it's speaking to others too.

BB I wrote a note to our director to say, "You know, this is the most curious play to play that I think I've ever done." And I've talked to the other actors in our company and they feel similarly. There are very few places where you say, okay, this moment lands like this every night. It varies widely because audiences are not told by the playwright, "Here comes the sad part, here comes the happy part." It's more, "Take it as you may." And, at the very same moment, we will hear somebody crying and we will hear somebody laughing. Initially it was very disturbing. [Laughs] Are we being mocked? And you realize, no, actually, it's all true. I don't know anything else that's like that except maybe, you know, some magic realist novelist. But I've never had the experience in the theater before.

AC We have time for some questions from the audience before we end the Platform discussion and allow Blair to go downstairs to put on her beautiful white suit. Anyone have a question they'd like to address to either Sarah or to Blair?

Q I've read the play and I really enjoyed the stage directions. What's in your mind when you say, "Virginia has a deep impulse to order the universe?"

SR Well, I think part of it comes from my background writing poetry, so that I wanted even the stage directions to feel part of the experience of reading the play. So that it wasn't just, "You read the dialogue and then you skip over the stage directions because they're boring and a director will figure that out and ignore them." I wanted the stage directions to feel like part of the world of the play. And I think in this play, in particular, I was interested in giving little love notes to the actors, like saying, "Oh, this is something between you and me, actor, that I'll share with you that maybe no one else will know, like you have a deep impulse to order the universe now, or right now you're going to fall in love very suddenly." And then later, I don't know when, someone said they're so much a part of the world, you really ought to use them as subtitles. And you haven't seen the play yet, right? Well, I don't want to spoil it, but some of them are projected as subtitles so that they're still part of the experience when you see it.

AC So, that was a production decision at one point, to add them in?

SR Yes, it was.

AC And, Blair, how do you rehearse them?

BB We tried them a lot of ways. Sometimes we tried acting them out, sometimes we tried, "What if we didn't do anything, if we just froze? What if we continued moving?" So, it was a process to find which way to make them work. What's really nice though is you'll do something and then all of a sudden the whole audience is responding and then the laughter comes like that. [Laughs] It's really interesting. It's this very odd moment; we're sort of in limbo. It's great.

AC We all have our favorite stage direction. How about, "The sisters share a moment when they revert to being seven years old again." How does it go exactly?

SR The primal moment of seven and nine.

AC Everybody can remember that!

BB And we had a very helpful lady today in the matinee who decided that she would read all the subtitles for everyone. [Laughter] So, we had a different kind of way that the subtitles worked today! [Laughter]

AC We have a question about Sarah's rewriting process. The questioner has just seen her play *Eurydice* at Yale and noticed it was slightly different from the published version. Sarah, how do you rewrite, when do you rewrite and why do you rewrite?

SR Well, in that case I'll answer specifically about *Eurydice*. There's a whole character that was cut: the grandmother. And in that case, the director, Les Waters, said, [with British accent] "I don't really understand this character." [Laughter] And a lot of directors hadn't, really good directors. It wasn't like one director missed it. It was like all of them were befuddled. And then you have the economic consideration of paying more actors, too. I mean that would never be my first reason, because I think you have to write what's in your imagination and then let people like Bernie handle it!

AC We're referring to Bernard Gersten, who's sitting in the back row, our Executive Producer at LCT.

SR So that he would figure out how to pay an extra actor. So, that wasn't the main reason. But it was really that, in terms of how the story was progressing, people weren't understanding how the character was moving through the play. So, I thought, well, I'll try it without, and then when we tried it without it actually had more of a flow in terms of the story. But in general, how do you rewrite? I mean a play is not really done until you hear actors do it. That's why it's frustrating, I think, for young playwrights when they're not getting their work produced, because you don't know it's done until you've heard actors do it.

AC Let me ask you about *The Clean House*. Did it change from when you finished writing it over the course of its productions?

SR Yes, little things - not huge things. Sometimes I'll change something very small, and to me that's an enormous rewrite. I changed a period to a comma or something at South Coast Repertory Theater. They said, "Sarah, we thought you were going to be doing rewrites." And I thought I did!

BB I like the one little section, though. There's one little tiny transition section [Laughs] that Sarah kept writing and rewriting. And today I went back and said an old line, just for fun, just to see what it was like. [Laughs]

SR There was one line I could not get right and I don't think I have, frankly. And it's because of a scenic change, where someone has to run down from the balcony and get to the living room. And when it's a practical kind of rewrite, it's sometimes very hard because it's not emerging organically from what must be said, and so I tried seven drafts and poor Jill and poor Blair ... What did you say last night?

BB Today I said, "Do you have to always talk?"

SR Oh, yes. It's the moment where all the air goes out of the theater. [Laughter]

BB And the actor stands slightly puzzled, and then we move on. One thing that's very beautiful about acting in Sarah's plays is that there's so much simultaneous action so there are all these spaces in which you are left to your own devices - you make up these little stories for yourself. You do little bits that are your real favorites that you think, "Well, no one's watching," and then somebody is! But it's very nice to have this private time to sort of act away in a little corner by yourself. It's really nice. [Laughs]

AC A question for Sarah from the audience: Could you talk about the un-produceable play you wrote for the assignment when you were at Brown?

SR The way Paula gave the assignment was: "write a play that is impossible to stage," which is slightly different from being un-produceable.

AC Yes, it is.

SR It's more epistemological. And I think I wrote a Noah's Ark kind of situation and a flood, and the audience also had access to the actors' thoughts.

BB It sounds really good!

SR There were moments of clairvoyance between the actors and the audience. It was a wonderful exercise and really good to do as students because what you find is: often things are much more possible to stage than you think they are, so it lets you take wild leaps of fantasy. Then you sit down and talk about it with your teacher. Like the Noah's Ark flood, you think, well, how could that be done? Oh, well, that's easy. You just get some fabric and, you know ... yeah. So, you realize that the bounds of imagination are actually unbounded in the theater. And it's good because so much of writing for theater right now is people in living

rooms, and it's like television, and I think we need to go back to a more permissive, wild imagination where you imagine: how can this be done? But you don't let yourself be stymied by that when you're writing. You let someone else figure it out.

AC You know who also wrote impossible scenes was Shakespeare - lots of scenes at sea.

SR Right. *The Tempest*, yes.

Q Can you give words of advice to beginning playwrights? What do you know now that you wished you had known when you started?

SR It's such a good question. Are you a playwright?

Q I'm starting.

SR That's wonderful. What did I wish I had known? Well, it's very fun, I think. I'm glad that no one sat down and gave me the hard knocks speech, even though it's true. It takes a while to make a life in theater; it takes a very long time. And I remember Paula sitting down with us at one point and saying, "You need to learn to love your rejection letters. There are three kinds of rejection letters and you have to love each kind. The first one is just a blank. There's no signature. And then there's a signature one. And then there's a very personal one saying 'Send your next play.' So, you have to know that you've actually made real progress when there's even a signature." It requires a lot of patience. Next, I would say, find your people. Find the people whose work you love as actors and directors, people your own age who are doing things you love, and form a little band. Get your work done sooner rather than later, so that your patience doesn't run out. You need patience over the long haul, but in the meantime you want to see your work.

Q How did you make the transition from poet to playwright?

SR Well, I think in some of my earlier plays, you'll see actual bits of poems that I snuck into the plays. It was in college when I was about 21 when I made the switch. When I saw the first play that I wrote on the stage, it was so exciting and so galvanizing to see everything in 3-D! Because when you're a poet you're alone. You write, and maybe you squirrel your writing away or maybe you read it in public, which I was always terrified to do. But actually to see it inhabited was so addictive, really, that that's what made me switch. And I think I had a lot of concerns that felt like they were beyond the scope of my poetry--things about politics or living in the world or things about visual landscapes--that you can work on in a play that are harder to work on in a poem.

Q I was struck by how much creativity comes out of a generation's knowing each other. I always had an image of an artist as a solitary figure and then I find out they all knew each other. How do you work as you're creating? Do you work in a solitary manner or are there creative groups that you are a part of?

SR I think that playwrights are very weird hybrids-- people who like to be alone very much, but then actually they're dying to go to a party and see people. So, I think: both. I love my solitude when I'm just alone at my desk, but then I love it when the first day of rehearsal comes and all the actors are in the room together. That's the most exciting time. So, I surround myself with a lot of other playwrights. A lot of my best friends are playwrights and we read drafts of our plays to each other, and I have a lot of actor friends and director friends. And I think the solitary artist is really a myth. It's just something people concocted in the nineteenth century. And there's that theory of shifting paradigms in science - that many discoveries (that may appear to be discovered by one individual) actually resulted from many people working on a problem. And I think it's like that in a lot of the arts. It appears to have sprung from one person, it appears to have sprung from Shakespeare but actually you read widely in Elizabethan drama and you realize it sprung from an entire culture.

Q Have you ever had a play rejected and then accepted?

SR They've all been rejected. I mean, every single one of them has been rejected by someone. I have a little file of them, a little file of rejection letters. And I have a friend, a short story writer, who actually papers his apartment with them. And I don't do that. I just keep a little file.

AC I've heard people also have barbecues with them. [Laughter] And my insides are curdling because I'm the staff person at Lincoln Center who writes these letters and ...

SR I bet you write very nice ones.

AC I always write back within eight weeks. I read everything and I sign them.

SR There you go.

AC But I must tell you all, the reason that even Sarah's plays are rejected is because theaters do four or five or six plays a year and we receive about 300 plays a year. So, we rarely get to say yes, and we would much rather say yes 300 times a year than six.

Q Can you talk about your *Passion Play* and its evolution?

SR *Passion Play's* basic premise concerns a man who was always cast as Pontius Pilate and he wants to play the role of Christ, played by his cousin. And so he's jealous. In a way it's a play about typecasting. But on a larger more mythic level, you know, I grew up Catholic, so I grew up with all the iconography, and I was purging all kinds of questions I'm sure that I've had since I was a child about the nature of belief and the nature of role-playing in religion. You do one thing but you think another, you believe one thing, do another. I was curious about what would happen if you played the Virgin Mary over and over and over every year, because that's what they did in these little villages. How would it affect you internally? And what if there was a big gap between who you were internally and the role you had to play?

Q How do you have the nerve to open your play with a joke in Portuguese that nobody understands?

SR Well, it is nervy maybe, but I hope that there are some Portuguese speakers in the theater on any given night. But when there aren't, I suppose I was really interested in what gets communicated when you don't know the language of a joke. I am always interested in seeing plays in a language that I don't understand because I think the language is, in some ways, the icing on the cake, and that you can understand even if you don't speak the language. If you go to France and you see a play, you can see, oh, he's telling a joke now; or, oh, he's forgiving her now; or, oh, he's proposing marriage right now. And so I was curious about what could be witty if you didn't know the language. It's kind of a strange experiment and a little joke I was having with myself. I'm probably the most tickled person every night when Matilde comes on and tells a joke that most people don't understand, but I find that with most audiences something is transmitted. To me that's very moving.

Q I have a question for Blair. Given any possible thing for you to do after you're done with this play, what would be your ideal job?

BB My ideal job is actually directing plays by young playwrights, and I'm working with two young playwrights right now, Sarah Treem and Tommy Smith, on new pieces of theirs. So far I'm not being paid for either, so you can't really call it a job but it's the best job I know. It's grand.

AC Thank you Sarah and Blair, and thanks to all of you for coming. [Applause]