

SPEAKEASY | STAGE

Sarah Ruhl Wins Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award

The \$200,000 cash award is one of the largest of its kind in the theater



NEW YORK, NY - FEBRUARY 23: Playwright Sarah Ruhl attends the first preview of 'Eclipsed' on Broadway at the Golden Theatre on February 23, 2016 in New York City. (Photo by Jamie McCarthy/Getty Images) *PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES*

By **BARBARA CHAI**

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Sarah Ruhl is the recipient of this year's Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award, the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust will announce Monday. The prize includes a \$200,000 cash award and is one of the largest of its kind in the theater.

Ruhl, 42, is based in Brooklyn and is the author of plays such as “The Clean House,” “In the Next Room, or the vibrator play,” “Passion Play” and “The Oldest Boy.” She previously won the MacArthur “genius” grant and is a Tony nominee and finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Ruhl says the Distinguished Playwright Award, which she is set to receive at the “Mimi” Awards ceremony on Nov. 14 at Lincoln Center, will help her focus on writing a new play

or two.

“I have been wanting an office of my own for a while. A place to write where I can shut the door. That might come first,” she says of how she will use the award. “Although the really boring and quite uninspiring answer is that some bills will get paid.”

“I’ve watched her work, from ‘The Clean House’ all the way on through to ‘The Oldest Boy,’” says James D. Steinberg, director of the Harold and Mimi Steinberg trust. “Certainly having seen most of her work, it’s a perspective that is new to me and I appreciate that. One of the things you go to the theater for is to find new perspectives on things. I think she certainly gives us that.”

Since 2008 the trust has granted, in alternating years, the Distinguished Playwright Award to established playwrights and the Steinberg Playwright Award to emerging playwrights. Awards are selected by an independent advisory committee. Last year, the winners of the Steinberg Playwright Award were Branden Jacobs-Jenkins (who won a MacArthur “genius” grant last week) and Dominique Morisseau.

“It makes a difference in these people’s lives, not only monetarily, but I think emotionally,” Steinberg says of the award. “It helps them because they really feel valued. Writers should feel valued.”

Ruhl emailed with Speakeasy about breaking into playwriting, why many playwrights also dip into writing for television, and the importance of financial support. An edited transcript.

The Steinberg Award exists to support playwrights. You’ve also won the MacArthur “genius” grant. Why is such support invaluable for playwrights?

Oh, God, it’s like manna from heaven. The MacArthur allowed me to pay for child care when my children were very small, giving me time to write. Child care in the theater is an issue I care passionately about, because often if you pay for child care and work in the theater, the equation comes out badly, so there is a lot of attrition in the child-bearing years. I also felt an ethical responsibility to the MacArthur [grant] to only work on plays and projects I deeply loved while I was being supported by that grant. I turned down projects that might have been lucrative but were not dear to me. It allowed me to create a body of work. It’s as simple as that. The Steinberg [award] has similar goals, I think—to help playwrights create a body of work, to help the theater continue as a cultural force. The awards also help with stamina and longevity—which are real challenges in the American theater. Often one feels that one’s work gets treated as one product at a time, to be excoriated or lifted up—and it’s hard to know how to play the long game, how to

simply stay in. Awards like these are crucial both for morale and also the economic well-being of playwrights.

The topic of child care in the theater isn't discussed often. What is lost, by your observation, when so many playwrights and theater professionals are forced to stop working because of the cost of child care?

Well, you lose a lot of women. I'm sure you lose men too, but I can attest, anecdotally speaking, that you lose a lot of women playwrights, designers, directors and actresses. It's appalling. And we need to do something about it.

You're a teacher at Yale. What do you find yourself telling younger playwrights?

I often start the year having my students read Lewis Hyde's "The Gift" and I talk about plays as living within a gift economy. (Which feels especially true right now as I'm so humbled to receive the gift of the Steinberg.) I encourage them to write gift plays for their fellow writers, or for other people in their lives. We are so focused on aspiration and striving in our culture, and I like to remind students if I can about waiting and grace.

Can you elaborate on what a "gift economy" is and how it works?

A gift economy means that art is given without thought of market value or reciprocity... It does not presuppose getting a return on the gift. For some reason most of the awards I've gotten have fallen from the sky without my applying for them. If I apply for something and exert my will I am invariably disappointed. So I cultivate radical passivity.

You're originally from Chicago, another theater city. Do you think young playwrights starting out should come to New York, or is it beneficial to write outside it?

I love Chicago and grew up on the theater there. The ensembles are so beautiful and strong there, and I think it's a great place for young writers to go make a life. In fact I think it's great for young writers to cut their teeth on other theater cities—Austin, Minneapolis, Seattle, Portland, the Bay Area—so they have more of a body of work by the time they get to New York, where they have to work three jobs just to stay afloat. If the goal is having time to write, living outside of New York can be really useful.

Has the landscape for playwrights changed since you began? As a career choice, is it harder or easier now to work as a playwright?

I never thought of it as a career choice, funnily enough. Is it harder or easier—I don't know... Certainly I think we're in a renaissance of extraordinary writers, and their work

is being done all over the place. But it's also the case that it's precious hard to make a living (if you read Todd London's book "Outrageous Fortune" you'd want to overhaul the economics of the playwriting profession.) Many playwrights are turning to television as a result—and I think it's made the theater profession a bit like a watering hole—writers and actors come back to the theater to drink the good water. The communal well is deep, but in danger of drying up when there is too much back and forth, not enough replenishing.

Were you ever tempted to work in television, out of interest or economic need? Why haven't you?

If the right project came along that felt like art I would work in television. And it's true, I have not until now worked in television, because the right project and collaborators have not come along. But I've been circling around a project right now that does feel like art to me.

What are you working on now and what's next?

I'm working on a play called "Scenes from Court Life" at Yale Repertory theater right now. And I'm also working on an opera and a musical. And a couple of other new plays, including one called "How to Transcend a Happy Marriage."

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