

*For North Country Public Radio
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THE CLEAN HOUSE by Sarah Ruhl is the final addition to Syracuse Stage's 2010/11 season. I'm not sure what I'd call this fascinating play – perhaps a quasi-absurdist romantic tragi-comedy. In other words, there's a lot going on. To quote the playwright, "Cleaning is emotional surgery." The play deals with tidiness of both surroundings and emotions, death, love, cancer, medicine, the nature of humor and gives new meaning to the cliché "die laughing". Although the play juxtaposes American order with Latin ambiguity, the five very different characters eventually form a surprisingly functional ménage.

The cast is without doubt one of the strongest and most balanced I've seen at Syracuse Stage. We first meet Matilde, the young Brazilian maid who hates cleaning and prefers to make up jokes. She's extremely well-played by Gisela Chipe. She captures the character's inner pain, while trying to find the perfect joke in order to deal with her personal grief.

Carol Halstead is thoroughly believable as Lane, the clinically cool wife and doctor whose detachment disintegrates. Her scene that alternates between crying and laughing is beautifully done.

As Virginia, Lane's sister who only finds meaning in her life by cleaning, Linda Marie Larson is a tightly covered simmering cauldron of suppressed emotions. Her ultimate eruption is one of the comic high points of the play. David Adkins is very good as Charles, Lane's surgeon husband who is caught up in a "love at first sight" affair with a breast cancer patient.

As the Argentinean Ana, the aforementioned patient, Alma Cuervo simply glows. This most alive of the characters accepts the flaws and realities of life and death, dealing with it all with subtle humor. Miss Cuervo gives us not only charm, but depth.

John Iacovelli's stunning white-on-white set with its curving staircase provides not only an atmospheric playing space, but a perfect canvas for Thomas C. Hase's beautiful lighting – not to mention Kate Freer's and David Tennent's terrific projections.

Oana Botez-Ban's costumes are lovely. Her color choices for the characters and the subtle color changes for Act II work on an almost subliminal emotional level. Ryan Rummery's sound design is excellent and the music choices, whether his or the director's, are effective and often very funny.

Speaking of the director, Michael Barakiva has done a splendid job of staging and directing THE CLEAN HOUSE. I love the way he handles the scenes of what he refers to as "magic realism," especially the surgery scene. Mr. Barakiva and his excellent cast maintain the delicate balance required by this complex play.

To quote the maid's philosophy, "If the floor is dirty, look at the ceiling." In other words, THE CLEAN HOUSE provides a very entertaining evening that is also thought provoking. I'll never bite into an apple again without thinking of this play.

On a scale of one to five the Syracuse Stage production of THE CLEAN HOUSE gets five oranges. For North Country Public Radio I'm Connie Meng.