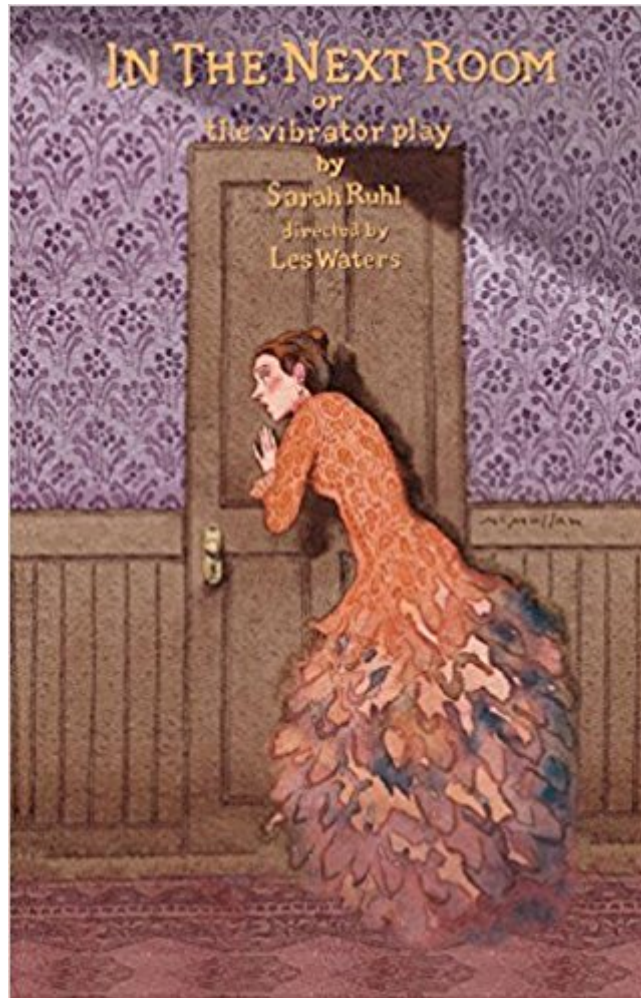




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# In The Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)



## Synopsis

“A fascinating, funny and evocative play. . . . Ruhl develops the story with the enticing blend of irreverent humor and skewed realism. . . . It’s beautiful.” —“San Francisco Chronicle” [This] breathtakingly inventive addition to Ruhl’s singular body of work . . . has the potential to be a modern masterpiece.” —“Los Angeles Times” Sarah Ruhl made her Broadway debut this fall with her latest effervescent comedy: a play about sex, intimacy, and equality, set in the 1880s, when enthusiasm for the electric light bulb gave rise to a handy new instrument to treat female hysteria. The story revolves around the medical office and home of Dr. Givings, who regularly induces “paroxysm” in his once high-strung patient Sabrina, allowing her to happily return to playing piano. Soon, Sabrina falls in love with the doctor’s assistant Annie, and also befriends his wife Catherine, who is dealing with her own neurotic misgivings about not being able to breast-feed her baby. With this new work, Ruhl once again uses playful symbolism and lyrical language as she makes seemingly effortless thematic leaps—crafting a play with tremendous critical and audience appeal, in her singular theatrical voice. Sarah Ruhl’s plays include *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, *The Clean House* (a Pulitzer Prize finalist), *Passion Play*, and *Eurydice*, all of which have been widely produced throughout the United States and internationally. She is a recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship.

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## Customer Reviews

Sarah Ruhl received the prestigious Susan Smith Blackburn Prize in 2004 for her play "The Clean

House," which has been produced at Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Wilma Theatre in Philadelphia, South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa, and Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, DC. Her play *Eurydice* has been produced at Madison Repertory Theatre and Berkeley Repertory

I am a big fan of Sarah Ruhl, so I am sorry to say I was disappointed by this, one of her most popular works. That said, I have only read it, not seen it performed. Perhaps my complaints are nullified by a competent production. The play deals with a doctor who treats women (and, rarely, men) for nervous "hysteria" as it was dubbed in the late 19th century, by using a newfangled machine to stimulate his patients into "paroxysm." This is entirely a medical procedure for the doctor, one from which he gets no titillation. As the story proceeds, the women become empowered and take the machine into their own hands, and elsewhere. It's a fun idea that plays with conventional stage ideas of prim ladies and stuffy men. But on the page, at least, the women come off as dizzy girls, and the men as harrumphing blowhards. It seems Ruhl is using these archetypes to parody them, by sending a message of modern empowerment through scenes of bodices and corsets, but at least as written, it does not really work.

This debuted in 2009 and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize Finalist for Best Drama. It's a decent play, but should not have been nominated for the top award. The play is set at the dawn of electricity, around the 1880s. Dr. Givings treats histrionic men and women by using a vibrator to help them achieve orgasms. His office is next to the living room of his house, and it is referred to as "the next room" instead of the operating room or doctor's office. His wife and infant son are often in the living room, where they interact with his patients and their relatives. Mrs. Givings is a bored housewife and feels like a failure as a mother. Her saving grace in the play is that she helps draw out the most interesting aspect of the other characters. Leo is young painter who has lost the motivation to paint. His talk about how much he hates the light-bulb instead of a candle is interesting - especially as he compares it to sex with a prostitute: "Well, then light without flame is like having relations with a prostitute. No flame of love or desire, only the outer trappings of -- the act. And without love -- without the mental quickening -- the eyes -- the blood -- without the heart -- or the intellect -- bodies are meat. Meat and bones and levers and technicalities." The play is a bit long winded, with a few too many scenes and a lot of predictable plot sequences. It's enjoyable, but it certainly shouldn't make any "best" lists.

Now that I have read this book, (Kindle edition) and seen the play, I am ready to render my thoughts. In short form: this is a much better play to watch than it is to read. Nowhere in the text is the pointed wit of an Oscar Wilde or the deep sophistication of a Tom Stoppard. The words are simple and as a read it is somewhat limp. As a performance, these problems disappear. Sarah Ruhl's play takes place in two rooms, sometimes simultaneously. Mostly we are in the front room of the home/office of Dr. and Mrs. Givings. The "Next Room" is his medical office. Dr. Givings's practice may include a variety of mostly female medicine as practiced in America, in the 1880's but here we only see him providing one service. He treats mostly women, and on rare occasion men for hysteria. Note that the word hysteria is from a Greek root meaning uterus. At this time a new machine, called the vibrator had been introduced for the purpose of treating female hysteria by inducing a paroxysm. There was, in America, at that time no medical notion of a female orgasm. And so Dr. Givings uses vibrators on women, and one man to relieve their medical symptoms. He seems to have the notion that this treatment, improperly applied is onanism (masturbation also a huge evil at this time) however he never connects his treatment with anything sexual. Over time Mrs. Givings tries to understand what is happening in The Next Room and to come to terms with her need for romance and sex. There is humor here in the form of the women, not realizing just what they are experiencing. There is humor in the "vibrator play" that takes place in "the other room". There is an especially humorous moment when the women, confronted with the idea that these paroxysms can be achieved during married sex and they are horrified! That sex should be pleasurable is not even imaginable.. "my husband is so considerate he only comes into my room when I am nearly asleep and tells me not to look" At its core this is a play about the thin line between ignorance and innocence. The women are innocent of their sexuality. One is a lesbian and has no way to understand or cope with this. The possibility of sex as both pleasure and an animal experience has no language among the cast. Dr. Givings seems to be ignorant of what he is doing, although he knows he is making people better. While he has a romantic side he has totally suppressed it in favor of what his machines can do. Should you get this book? I am glad that I had read it before going to a production. I liked reading it more, in part, because the live performance, made live the text and I did not have to worry over the occasional missed word. Some do not like a pre-event read because of the spoiler effect. If you are good at reading a play and seeing the performance in your mind's eye. You should enjoy this text. There is humor here, there is legitimate history and a deep appreciation of humanity. I had not understood why this was a prize winning play, and then I saw it and now I 'get it". Likely it was my fault that the text seemed a bland read. If you are a more imaginative reader you may be glad that you read it.

I really enjoyed reading this great play. It was extremely fun and sexy without sacrificing many opportunities to comment on serious questions of sexual expression, reproductive health, and structured family interactions across race, class, and gender -- although these interactions may be slightly oversimplified at times. If you are interested in "In the Next Room," I would also recommend Caryl Churchill's brilliant "Cloud Nine," of which this play is reminiscent.

This play is about the mechanics of life and the metallic, inanimate feeling of going through the motions. Through the play we see all of the different jolts and sparks that animate us, invigorate us, and light up the darkened shadows in our lives: true, genuine, sincere, embarrassingly sloppy and sanguine human interaction. From sunsets to snowfalls we see our vision of beauty, or lack thereof, colored and outlined by our relationships with others. Wonderful play!

This is a beautiful and fascinating play about the nature of intimacy, set in a bizarre period in history when women were treated by physicians with a vibrator for a medical condition called "hysteria" that did not actually exist. Must read, must see, must produce!

Funny and really lets you peak into the view of a woman's sexuality during this time period. I laughed out loud multiple times during this. Would be a joy to see on stage one day!

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