

## "Clean House" Full of Messy Problems

Published: Friday, May 06, 2011, 11:58 PM    Updated: Saturday, May 07, 2011, 12:04 AM

By **Tony Curulla**

Syracuse Stage's current offering, "The Clean House", by Sarah Ruhl is a serio-comic romp that is sure to please those who enjoy smart side-dishes of reality and imagination as accompaniments to their laughter.

Directed by Michael Barakiva, the play screams "contemporary" in every way. From its lavish, white and very clean set, to the evocative costuming that helps define the various roles, and even to its title, "The Clean House" suggests specificity in plot, character roles, and even location without really defining any of them. Ruhl seems to have created a reality that has enough of a resemblance to our own for identification, yet allows the play to function within its own sphere according to its own rules.

Matilde (Gisela Chipe) is a Brazilian maid in the house of Lane (Carol Halstead) and Charles (David Adkins), a married couple who are both doctors. Matilde spends a majority of her time trying to think up jokes in her search for the ultimate joke, rather than completing her household duties. We learn that her fascination with humor and joke telling stems from the happiness she witnessed as a child when both her mother and father seemed so happy because they were always laughing.

Ruhl's use of the joke "search" as metaphor for the search for happiness in Matilde's mind is buttressed by "visions" she has in reverie of her dead parents laughing and dancing in extraordinary costuming and ethereal lighting as she watches them in delight.

**Oana Botez-Ban's costume design and Thomas C. Hase's lighting design work in perfect harmony** as we, along with Matilde, witness the happy couple. Both David Adkins and Alma Cuervo play convincing double roles of Charles/Matilde's father and Matilde's mother/Ana (Charles' mistress), respectively.

Adding much straight-faced humor to this off-beat household is Virginia (Linda Marie Larson), Lane's sister and self-confessed devotee of household cleaning. In fact, she loves cleaning so much (it defines her existence), that she convinces Matilde, through some kind of a Tom Sawyerish reversal, to let her perform Matilde's duties in her sister's house. At one point, Virginia defines her husband as being like a well-placed couch—"he takes up the right amount of space".

Lane, the embodiment of perfection in physical attributes, clothing style, and professionalism is completely thrown into a quasi-disheveled existence when she learns of her husband's affair with Ana, a dying patient of Charles'.

"The Clean House" stretches the boundaries between the real and the romantic, while pondering what really constitutes true happiness.

John Iacovelli's very evocative set seems the perfect environment upon which these characters are able to cleanse more than bathrooms, furniture, and carpeting.