İSTANBUL UNIVERSITY PRESS

Tiyatro Eleştirmenliği ve Dramaturji Bölümü Dergisi
Journal of Theatre Criticism and Dramaturgy
JTCD 2024, 39 : 82–91
DOI: 10.26650/jtcd.1498433

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

Metatheatre and Love in Sarah Ruhl's *Stage Kiss**

Büşra Erdurucan[1]

[1]Research Assistant, Istanbul Kültür University, English Language and Literature Department, Istanbul, Türkiye

Corresponding author/
Sorumlu yazar : Büşra Erdurucan
E-mail/E-posta : b.erdurucan@iku.edu.tr

*This study is an extended version of my conference paper titled 'As Simple As It is Real': Metatheatre and Love in Sarah Ruhl's *Stage Kiss*, presented at "16th IDEA: Studies in English Conference" at Cappadocia University, 24-26 April 2024.

ABSTRACT

Sarah Ruhl's *Stage Kiss* (2011) uses theatre as a metaphor for the condition of the contemporary individual, who is perpetually and fruitlessly in pursuit of an authentic self. The main characters, referred to simply as She and He, are actors performing both in *Stage Kiss* and in two plays. This layering causes identities, roles, scripts, relationships, and love stories to constantly merge and overlap. The destabilization of identities leads to a relentless, humourous search for stability and love, which Ruhl critiques by emphasizing the artificiality of her play's own construction. Themes such as identity, love, communication, and intimacy are central to the work, situating the audience in a self-aware, metatheatrical world that questions its own form. The characters' deep uncertainties about their identities preclude resolution, rendering authentic love and genuine connections unattainable.

Keywords: Metatheatre, Sarah Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, Contemporary Drama, American Drama

Submitted/Başvuru : 09.06.2024
Revision Requested/Revizyon Talebi : 19.11.2024
Last Revision Received/ Son Revizyon : 25.11.2024
Accepted/Kabul : 28.11.2024

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)

Introduction

A prolific voice in contemporary American drama, Sarah Ruhl is known for her innovative approach to dramatic form, blending historical periods, theatrical worlds, and dramatic genres. Her thematic interests often revolve around love, family, and interpersonal communication, to which she adds a witty, often comical twist. By employing diverse formal methods, Ruhl strikes an aesthetic balance, connecting these universal themes to a broader audience. For instance, in her adaptation of *Eurydice*, she revisits Greek mythology from a contemporary perspective, linking the present with the afterlife.[1] In *The Clean House*, she uses humour and unrealistic modes of representation to explore the possibility of human communication.[2] Similarly, In *Passion Play*, she adapts the medieval dramatic tradition of passion plays, infusing it with a metatheatrical perspective to probe the boundaries between artificiality and authenticity.[3]

This study examines Ruhl's 2011 play, *Stage Kiss*, a formally ambitious work featuring two plays within the play. Thematically, *Stage Kiss* builds on motifs present in Ruhl's earlier oeuvre, such as the authenticity of identity, the pursuit of truth, and the possibility of love. These explorations are intricately woven into the play's acknowledgment of theatre as an artificial construct. The main characters, She and He, are ex-lovers and actors, cast in the revival of *The Last Kiss*, a fictional 1932 melodrama. The plotline traces their rekindled romance, despite their existing commitments to others. Ruhl poses the critical question: How do actors navigate the boundary between their roles and their identities? Leveraging metatheatre, she further interrogates the tenuous distinction between reality and fiction. In doing so, she uses theatre as a metaphor for the contemporary individual's ceaseless quest for stability and genuine connection, even as they are ensnared by pervasive uncertainties.

At the outset, She and He are cast in *The Last Kiss*, years after their romantic relationship ended. In this melodrama, She plays Ada Wilcox, a terminally ill woman who reconnects with her ex-lover Johnny Lowell (played by He), who lives in Sweden. Ada's husband, mockingly portrayed as a noble man, accepts that Johnny stays with them in Manhattan for a month,[4] while Ada's health improves under Johnny's care. However, Johnny falls in love with Ada's daughter, Millie, who visits from Paris. The melodrama concludes with Johnny going back to Sweden with Millie, leaving Ada "*to pick up the pieces*."[5] The director acknowledges the failure of the play in 1932 but hopes for a better reception in the present.[6] Following the production of *The Last Kiss*, She and He begin an affair, and start to live together. However, due to financial strain, they agree to act in another play titled *I loved you before I killed you, or: Blurry*, which She's husband, Harrison, commissions. In this second play-within-the-play, She plays a whore, while He plays an IRA soldier. They meet while listening to street musicians in Washington Square Park, New York. They plan an escape to Dublin, where they dream of establishing an eye clinic for children. However, when she tells her pimp of her intentions to leave, he murders her. On seeing her dead body, he tries to kill himself but is instead killed by an IRA soldier. This vicious circle, where life imitates art and art imitates life, unfolds across two plays. The main plotline is triggered by the first play, while the second play eerily mirrors the supposed "reality" of *Stage Kiss*. Among love triangles, humourous interludes, emotional entanglements, and violent romance plots, the audience is drawn into a complex web of imitation and inauthenticity in multilayered worlds constructed by Ruhl.

Love in Liquid Times

The theme of love pervades all three plotlines in *Stage Kiss*. The characters frequently engage in affairs. In *Stage Kiss*, She and He betray their partners, while in *The Last Kiss*, She (as Ada Wilcox) and He (as Johnny Lowell) embark on an illicit relationship. This portrayal of romantic love reflects a broader response to disenchantment of love in contemporary culture. Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" aptly captures the context of *Stage Kiss*. According to Bauman, liquid modernity emerged from the dissolution of the solid belief systems in the aftermath of the modernist project. The subsequent loss of coherence, unity, and solidity "*cast us into a state of uncertainty never before so agonizing*."[7] These "liquid modern" times are characterized by uncertainty and fear concerning the present and the future. Bauman identifies key aspects of liquid modern life, such as "*[t]he permanence of transitoriness; the durability of the transient; the objective determination unreflected in the subjective consequentiality of actions; the*

[1] Deborah Geiss, "Sarah Ruhl," in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary American Playwrights*, eds. Martin Middeke et al. (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), 262.
[2] Geiss, "Sarah Ruhl," 263.
[3] Geiss, "Sarah Ruhl," 264.
[4] Sarah Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 2012), 10.
[5] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 10.
[6] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 11.
[7] Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, (Oxfordshire: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 21.

perpetually underdefined social role, or more correctly an insertion into the flow of life without an anchor of a social role."[8]

Within this context, disillusionment surrounds the sustainability of love. bell hooks states that "*[n]owadays the most popular messages are those that declare the meaninglessness of love, its irrelevance*."[9] Similarly, Eva Illouz argues that "*uncertainty and irony dominate the cultural climate of romantic relationships*."[10] Korbinian Stöckl also emphasizes skepticism regarding contemporary representations of love, stating, "*[t]he prototypical notion of romantic love, loaded with idealist qualities such as eternality, unconditionality, passion, and perfectness, is . . . regarded with due skepticism*."[11] These perspectives suggest that traditional notions of love and commitment no longer resonate in the contemporary moment.

This skepticism partly stems from how love is perceived, marketed, and represented in consumer society. Catherine Belsey contends that, because love lacks direct economic value, it transcends the boundaries of capitalist consumerism.[12] She asserts that "*the postmodern condition brings with it an incredulity toward true love*.[13] Therefore, the postmodern challenge to metanarratives extends to discourses of love. However, Belsey also notes that "*love occupies a paradoxical position in postmodern culture: it is at once infinitely and uniquely desirable on the one hand, and conspicuously naive on the other*."[14] Rita Felski notes:

> *[t]he erotic and the economic . . . are now intertwined in new ways. Sexual relations are increasingly viewed in instrumental terms and conducted to maximize individual freedom and pleasure*.[15]

This intertwining reflects the commodification of intimate relationships, where they are seen as tools for personal gain. Consequently, the economic framing of romance fosters disenchantment. The excessive use of romantic themes to market products further reduces love to a mechanism that sustains consumerism. Eva Illouz argues that "*[b]ecause of the ubiquitous use of romance to sell commodities, romance in real life has become an empty form, acutely conscious of itself as code and cliché*."[16] Additionally, cultural representations of love reinforce discourses on class, sex, and race. Lauren Berlant critiques such representations, asserting that they "*justify the economic and physical domination of nations, races, religions, gays, lesbians, and women by including the 'generic' subjects imagined in a love plot tend to be white, Western, heterosexual, and schooled to the protocols of 'bourgeois' privacy*."[17]

Discussions on the role of fantasy invested in the object of desire reveal the lack of authenticity in romantic relationships. Lauren Berlant distinguishes between desire and love. According to her, "*[d]esire describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it*."[18] Desire is paradoxical: "*it is a primary relay to individuated social identity. . . yet it is also the impulse that most destabilizes people*."[19] Love, on the other hand, "*is the embracing dream in which desire is reciprocated: rather than being isolating, love provides an image of an expanded self, the normative version of which is the two-as-one intimacy of the couple form*."[20] Both desire and love "*destabilize and threaten the very things (like identity and life) that they are disciplined to organize and ameliorate*."[21] Love cannot exist without fantasy,[22] and the object of desire becomes "*a cluster of fantasmic investments*."[23] Catherine Belsey emphasizes that "*[t]he role of fantasy in the construction of desire cannot be overestimated*."[24] Eva Illouz explains how fantasies are shaped within the context of consumer culture: "*Consumer culture – which forcefully articulates an emotional project of personal self-fulfillment – organizes the private modern emotional subject around his or her emotions and daydreams and locates the exercise of one's freedom in an individuality to be achieved and fantasized*."[25] Fantasies

---

8 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, (New Hampshire: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 147.
9 bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), xvii-xviii.
10 Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*, (Cornwall: Polity Press, 2012), 192.
11 Korbinian Stöckl, *Love in Contemporary British Drama: Traditions and Transformations of a Cultural Emotion*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 89.
12 Catherine Belsey, "Postmodern Love: Questioning the Metaphysics of Desire," *New Literary History* 25, no. 3, (Summer 1994): 683.
13 Belsey, "Postmodern Love: Questioning the Metaphysics of Desire," 683.
14 Belsey, "Postmodern Love: Questioning the Metaphysics of Desire," 683.
15 Rita Felski, "In the Name of Love," in *Love, Etc.: Essays on Contemporary Literature and Culture*, ed. Rita Felski and Camilla Schwartz (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2024), 4.
16 Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 293.
17 Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love*, (New York: Punctum Books, 2012), 112.
18 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 6.
19 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 13.
20 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 6.
21 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 112.
22 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 69.
23 Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 76.
24 Belsey, "Postmodern Love: Questioning the Metaphysics of Desire," 688.
25 Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*, 203.

can also arise through idealisation. Sara Ahmed refers to Freud's formulation of identification: "*identification is the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person*."[26] The person with whom the infant identifies becomes an ideal that the ego attempts to emulate.[27] Ahmed asserts that "*[t]he idealization of the object is not 'about' the object, or even directed to the object, but is an effect of the ego*."[28] She connects identification and idealisation to cultural issues, particularly race:

> *identifying oneself as a white woman and as a white Aryan would mean loving not just men, or even white men, but white men who also identify as Aryan, who can return the idealised image of whiteness back to oneself. To love and to be loved here is about fulfilling one's fantasy image of 'who one would like to be' through who one 'has.'"*[29]

Therefore, love and desire involve projection rather than experiencing the truth of the other person in their entirety. Moreover, As Ahmed demonstrates, fantasy and idealisation operate within broader cultural frameworks.

In the epilogue of *Stage Kiss*, Ruhl includes a quotation from Iris Murdoch: "*Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real*."[30] This definition resonates with philosopher Jean Luc Nancy's perspective of love. Nancy contends that "*love is the extreme movement, beyond the self, of a being reaching completion*"[31] and that "*[i]t is always the beating of an exposed heart*."[32] This openness stems from completely opening up to the Other

> *who comes and cuts across me, because it immediately leaves for the other: it does not return to itself, because it leaves only in order to come again. This crossing breaks the heart: this is not necessarily bloody or tragic, it is beyond an opposition between the tragic and serenity or gaiety.*[33]

Thus, love is an experience wherein the Self is reminded of its vulnerability in the face of something greater. For Nancy, love is about recognizing one's ontological limits. While the play highlights the difficulty of opening up to the Other, Ruhl explores love in *Stage Kiss* from a different perspective, as the characters struggle to define their own identities, let alone open up to others. Consequently, this profound experience of love remains marginal, suggested by the placement of Murdoch's quotation solely in the epilogue. Ruhl constructs characters without names and assigns multiple roles to most actors. This implied plurality, however, is neither celebrated nor cherished. Amy Muse notes "*[a]lthough Stage Kiss is farcical and bubbly, it also delivers some of Ruhl's most serious considerations of marriage and intimacy*."[34] Beneath its humour, the play underscores the absence of genuine human connection.

A Web of Plays

The play's thematic emphasis on inauthenticity and imitation is reflected in its form. The simple, almost cliché, main plotline parodies the melodramatic mode in that the villain – He – is defeated at the end, the husband takes his revenge, and everything reverts to "normal." Wylie Sypher asserts that "*the aesthetic category of melodrama becomes a modality of the 19th Century mind*"[35] and elaborates:

> *[m]elodrama cannot admit exceptions, for they would immediately involve the action too deeply within the context of actuality and trammel the gesture. The types must behave with a decorum of extremes; the resolution must be vividly schematic.*[36]

The melodramatic mode, then, implies the existence of clear boundaries between opposites and reassures the restoration of accepted values. *Stage Kiss* deconstructs this ideal by merging melodrama with other forms and by drawing attention to its artificiality. In *A Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon argues that "*[t]he auto-reflexivity of modern art forms often takes the form of parody and, when it does so, it provides a new model for artistic process*."[37] Ruhl revisits the play-within-the-play to represent her thematic concerns. For Hutcheon, parody can serve diverse purposes, ranging "*from the ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing*."[38] In *Stage Kiss*, Ruhl employs a combination of these modes. Its self-reflexivity and humourous undertones render the play ironic and playful, yet beneath the surface, it offers a bitterly humourous critique of the lack of authenticity in interpersonal relations.

---

26 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 125.
27 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 125.
28 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 127.
29 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 129.
30 Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, n.p.
31 Jean Luc Nancy, "Shattered Love," in *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 87.
32 Nancy, "Shattered Love," 90.
33 Nancy, "Shattered Love," 98.
34 Amy Muse, *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl*, (London: Methuen Drama, 2018), 91.
35 Wylie Sypher, "Aesthetic of Revolution: The Marxist Melodrama," *The Kenyon Review* 10, no. 3, (Summer 1948): 436.
36 Sypher, "Aesthetic of Revolution: The Marxist Melodrama," 437.
37 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 5.
38 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 6.

Ruhl uses a commonly used dramatic tool to convey her thematic explorations and emphasizes the play's self-awareness of its constructed nature through metatheatrical devices. The play-within-the-play mirrors theatre's "*dual reality*" and acts as "*an artistic agency of self-reference and self-reflection*."[39] Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner assert that "*the play within a play would seem to be a particularly apt device for the expression of playful self-referentiality of the post-modern condition*."[40] Eugene McNulty furthers this by arguing that "*[metatheatre] is marked not simply by self-conscious (meta) plays, but by a strongly focused interrogation of the entire process of theatre in all its complexity*."[41] Although self-reflexivity and metafiction are often associated with postmodernism, metatheatre is not a novel formal tool. Earlier works also utilized it. A famous example is the mousetrap scene in *Hamlet*, where the metatheatrical move plays a role in getting at the truth by provoking a reaction from Claudius. Bill Angus, examining the use of the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet*, contends that "*[a]t the discursive intersection that is early modern metadrama exists a complex interplay of legitimations and delegitimations of artistic, political and individual authority. . . based on the policing of representations of real situations and people. . . foregrounds the contemporary instability of authority as a concept*."[42] Thus, the destabilization of authority, often associated with postmodernism, was also articulated in earlier drama through metatheatrical devices.

In 20th-century drama, metatheatre is used for various purposes: to deconstruct dominant ideologies, challenge the authority of the playwright over the text, and underscore the instability of universally acknowledged truths. In Brechtian drama, breaking the fourth wall reflects the dramatist's political objectives, exposing dominant ideologies as mere constructs. Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) dethrones the author, dismantling the notion of the playwright as the sole generator of meaning. Timberlake Wertenbaker's *After Darwin* (1998) uses metatheatre to challenge the supremacy of scientific discourse, and connects the past and the present to highlight the blind spots in the theory of evolution. The playwright "*emphasizes how theater can be important in the ongoing 'search for justice' that must continue at all costs, and science can be a fertile ground for this search, given its potential for both harm and good*."[43]

A Web of Affairs

In *Stage Kiss*, the process of staging a play, preparing for a role, and making directorial choices are deliberately brought to the forefront. Both the characters and the play itself oscillate between reality and fiction, placing the audience in a world keenly aware of its artifice while staging a quest for solid, stable truths. *Stage Kiss* explores the condition of individuals who lack a stable sense of self. Although employing fluid and mutable identities is a common trope in contemporary drama, Ruhl amplifies this tendency by introducing an acute awareness of the slippery nature of identity. In doing so, she responds to the crisis of the contemporary individual in the present cultural moment.

As previously cited, Zygmunt Bauman identifies uncertainty as a defining trait of contemporary culture. Adina Sorian observes that "*Bauman defines our times as precarious, because they are radically uncertain, ungraspable in their consequences, resulting in a cultural climate that he believes stifles or discourages any genuine ethical discourse*."[44] In *Stage Kiss*, the impossibility of fostering genuine ethical discourse is mirrored by the creation of unstable characters. Recognizing the performative nature of identity, the audience perceives the characters as products of Ruhl's imagination and artistic quest. The unnamed main characters of Ruhl's play are fluid and they take on the roles which the scripts assign to them. Indicating to the artificiality of theatrical world, the young actress who plays Millie in *The Last Kiss* says:

> *I'm actually twenty-three. People always cast me as teenagers. It's so annoying.*[45]

Both She and He grapple with attaining a sense of self, often experiencing confusion about who they are beyond the confines of their scripted roles. She states:

> *This— here—this feels like my real life. I don't want to be me. I want to be Ada Wilcox.*[46]

---

[39] Csilla Bertha, "Theatre within the Theatre, Play within the Play—Self-Reflexivity in Jim Nolan's *Blackwater Angel*," in *Focus: Papers in English Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Maria Kurdi, (Pécs: University of Pecs Press, 2012), 93.

[40] Gerhard Fisher and Bernhard Greiner, "*The Play within the Play: Scholarly Perspectives," in The Play within the Play: The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection*, ed. Gerhard Fisher and Bernhard Greiner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), xiii.

[41] Eugene McNulty, "Parody, Metatheatre, and the Postmodern Turn: A Secret History of Irish Drama," in *Drama and the Postmodern*, ed. Daniel K. Jernigan (New York: Jernigan, Cambria Press, 2008), 62.

[42] Bill Angus, "Metadrama, Authority and the Roots of Incredulity," in *Drama and the Postmodern*, ed. Daniel K. Jernigan (New York: Jernigan, Cambria Press, 2008), 55.

[43] Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Science on Stage: From Doctor Faustus to* Copenhagen, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 50.

[44] Adina Sorian, "Living in Liquid Times: Precariousness and Plasticity in Forced Entertainment's *Tomorrow's Parties*," in *Of Precariousness: Vulnerabilities, Responsibilities, Communities in 21st-Century British Drama and Theatre*, ed. Mireia Aragay and Martin Middeke (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 151.

[45] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 30.

[46] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 68.

Acknowledging that the role of Ada Wilcox has supplanted her sense of reality, She seeks a stable identity by immersing herself in the character. Similarly, He adopts the outdated language of the character he portrays in *The Last Kiss*, prompting Harrison to admonish him: "*Would you please stop talking like you're in a 1930s drama*."[47] The affair between She and He begins during rehearsals and their identities blend with their characters' scripted actions. Despite their romantic entanglement, there is no genuine connection between them—they have previously experienced a failed relationship and continue to face miscommunication and discord outside their roles. As She's husband observes, "*She always falls in love with whoever she's in a play with*."[48] This suggests that She blindly follows scripts handed to her, and "becomes" the character she portrays. Attempting to anchor her in reality, Harrison calculates the extent of their staged intimacy:

> *You and—Johnny here—have kissed each other— let's see—nine times a night, eight shows a week, four-week run, two hundred and eighty-eight times. That's not love. That's oxytocin.*[49]

Harrison's remark underscores the biochemical underpinnings of romantic feelings, implying their insincerity. By referring to He as "Johnny," Harrison emphasizes that the person She claims to love is merely a construct of the script. Under the influence of the script and performance, She falls in love with the character played by him.

Not only does Ruhl portray identity as fluid but she also creates various layers of reality using metatheatrical devices. The play's self-referential nature amplifies the sense of uncertainty. The overlapping theatrical realms gradually merge into each other and evoke a sense of disorientation. The artificiality of the embedded plays is emphasized, as seen in a conversation between He's girlfriend, Laurie, and She:

> *Laurie: You must be so relieved. It must have been so exhausting. Night after night... all those lines.*
> *She: Once you know them, it's not really very tiring to repeat them.*[50]

This exchange suggests that acting involves mechanical repetition. Initially, the boundary between the setting of *The Last Kiss* and the actors' "real" lives is clearly delineated. A stage direction highlights "*[t]he contrast between the fake world of their costumes and the real world*."[51] However, as preparations progress for the revenge play commissioned by Harrison, these distinctions dissolve. The director takes a picture of their apartment and replicates it for the set design of *I loved you before I killed you, or: Blurry*. Stage directions emphasize the lack of distinction between their staged and real environments:

> *A tech rehearsal. Detroit.*
> *No set change.*
> *It is, oddly, an exact facsimile of He's apartment from New York. But now it is a set. Maybe there are curtains above it. or a new lighting instrument above it.*
> . . .
> *She: It's a little weird – don't you think?*
> . . .
> *They even got the stain, on the couch.*[52]

The replica of their apartment creates a profound sense of disturbance for her. She finds herself in a facsimile, disrupting her perception of reality. The stage direction "no set change" and the word "oddly" underscore the crisis that the audience is meant to experience, placing them in a position where distinguishing between the levels of fictionality in the play becomes impossible. This unease also arises from the realization that identity and reality can be imitated and duplicated. The play challenges the notions of uniqueness and authenticity, both in terms of personal identity and external reality.

The absence of a solid, unified sense of self is further emphasized through the theme of love. In Ruhl's play, love and intimacy devolve into shallow pursuits, as exemplified by the affair between the actors. Their relationships highlight the superficial and inauthentic nature of human connections. The artificiality is evident in the following dialogue:

> *He: Hold me forever. Curl up with me in a ball and shut the rest of the world out forever and come live with me in an attic or basement—who cares—and pretend we're the only people in the universe.*
> *She: . . . I thought it would be nice to reminisce with you one day but I feel like I'm drowning.*
> *He: It must be the hot and sour soup.*

[47] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 80.
[48] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 77.
[49] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 77.
[50] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 74.
[51] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 51.
[52] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 97.

She: Yeah. Poor Angela. I feel terrible.
He: She'll be okay. Don't think about her now. Think about me.[53]

He seeks refuge in fantasy and physical intimacy while remaining disconnected from She's deeper emotions. When She expresses regret over abandoning her daughter for him, He dismisses her concerns and shows no interest in exploring her genuine feelings, reducing their communication to superficial interactions.

Similarly, the idea that marriage provides security and happiness is deconstructed. She outwardly acknowledges contentment in her marriage:

We're happy. My husband, I mean. And me. We're happy.[54]

However, she goes on to confess her sense of disconnection from reality:

Ever since I left you I thought that in some parallel ghost world we had kids we rowed by a canal . . . I thought part of me would be a ghost forever, without you. I was no longer real even when I was happy. I was no longer real especially when I was happy. But no, all along in real time you've gone on being you and I've gone on being me and yes I really love you enough to be ghosted by you my entire life but my God I left you for a reason.[55]

Eva Illouz posits that "*distance enables idealization [since] it activates the 'other' form of consciousness: that is, the memory which reminisces about good experiences, and anticipation which organizes it in aesthetic vignettes*."[56] Distance allows She to construct an aestheticized narrative of romance in her imagination, but this idealisation conflicts with the reality of their relationship. She recognizes that He remains unchanged and remembers why their relationship ended. Her realization—that she clung to an unreal image of love while feigning happiness in her marriage—reveals the gap between fantasy and reality.

The theme of inauthenticity is further explored through the metaphor of the stage kiss. Performing intimacy on stage blurs the boundaries between the private and public spheres. The repeated onstage kisses lead the actors to attempt a romantic connection in their lives. According to psychoanalyst Adam Phillips the kiss is intimately personal:

[f]rom a psychoanalytic point of view, the kiss is a revealing sequence concerning personal history. The way a person kisses and likes to be kissed shows in condensed form something about that person's character.[57]

Nevertheless, *Stage Kiss* complicates the notion of the kiss as a straightforward act of affection by emphasizing its performative dimension. During rehearsals, the characters experiment with ways to convey the intensity of the kissing scene:

He as Johnny: To hell with the past and the future! To hell with all that!
They kiss.
She: I think it's more of a—
They do another kind of kiss.
He: Or I could sort of—
They do another kind of kiss.
She: There's no transition into the kiss, what if I, I don't know, slap him first?
Director: Try it.[58]

For the audience of *Stage Kiss*, however, the act of kissing becomes deromanticized due to the explicit staging of the actors' effort to make it appear genuine. In popular representations, kissing is often considered to be the quintessential symbol of romantic connection. Marcel Danesi observes that "*[r]omantic love and the act of lip kissing are now so intertwined in the popular imagination that people hardly ever stop to think not only why we do it, but also why we have developed a worldwide culture of lovemaking revolving around that act*."[59] Although widely seen as a token of affection, Danesi argues that the kiss possesses a subversive power, noting that "*it can occur outside of marriage, providing an opening gambit for escaping a boring situation and for entering into a world of enticement*."[60] The characters in *Stage Kiss* toy with this potential. By performing kisses on stage, they temporarily escape their mundane realities. In the first play, the kissing scene between She and He rekindles their former relationship. However, through repeated rehearsals and staging, the act loses its symbolic weight as a gesture of genuine affection. The artificiality of intimacy is acknowledged in a commentary on staged kisses:

53 Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 87.
54 Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 53.
55 Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 111.
56 Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*, 222.
57 Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993), 96.
58 Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 27-28.
59 Marcel Danesi, *The History of the Kiss!: The Birth of Popular Culture*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 15.
60 Danesi, *The History of the Kiss!: The Birth of Popular Culture*, 23.

> *She: Why do you think people enjoy watching other people kiss on stage, anyway?*
> *He: They tolerate it because it signifies resolution which people like to see on stage but they don't really like to see the act of kissing on stage, only the idea of kissing on stage. That's why actors have to be good looking because it's about an idea, an idea of beauty completing itself. You don't like to see people do more than kiss on stage, it's repulsive.*[61]

He summarizes the audience's conventional expectations of art: resolution and beauty. Stage kisses fulfill these expectations, offering viewers a sense of solace. However, in Sarah Ruhl's play, the kisses subvert this convention by introducing complications, including infidelity and relational conflict. Through its metatheatrical commentary, the play disrupts its own assertions, challenging audience assumptions about intimacy and performance.

Furthermore, the stage kiss dissolves the boundaries between authentic and fake experiences and serves as a bridge between the playwright's thematic and formal explorations. At one point, She reflects on this blurred line:

> *She: When I kissed you just now did it feel like an actor kissing an actor or a person kissing a person because I've kissed you so many times over the last few weeks I'm starting to not know the difference.*[62]

The lack of punctuation and the repetitive phrasing reflects her inability to make sense of her experience. In keeping with Ruhl's exploration of identity's fluidity, her words raise questions about the nature of acting and the requisite dissolution of self in assuming a role. Stripped of a stable identity, She struggles to differentiate between genuine intimacy and superficial infatuation based on physical attraction.

Through its intertwining plots of love triangles, which appear both in the frame play and the first play-within-the-play, Ruhl interrogates the possibility of forging and sustaining authentic connections. *Stage Kiss* concludes on a note of deliberate uncertainty. During the premiere of *I loved you before I killed you; or Blurry*, She notices her daughter in the audience, forgets her lines, and blurts out: "*I miss my husband*."[63] She and He end their affair, and Harrison reveals that he commissioned the second play as an act of "*revenge*" to "*wake [her] up*."[64] Although "waking up" suggests a revelation of truth, the play consciously rejects this resolution.

At the end, She reconciles with her husband, creating a semblance of closure. Yet the ending evokes a sense of suspicion about the viability of genuine love, as Harrison outlines his vision of their future:

> *I want you to take me to a theater and kiss me once a week, and pretend I'm someone else. Once a week I can be whoever you want me to be, and you can be whoever I want you to be. Kiss me in a place with no history and no furniture.*[65]

Moving on from the affair, the couple resorts to becoming someone else for each other. This dynamic is strengthened by their decision to visit a theatre and perform their kiss. In *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, Zygmunt Bauman suggests that consumer life "*favours light and speed*" as well as "*novelty and variety*."[66] In reconciling, She and Harrison opt for familiarity while simultaneously allowing space for versatility in their relationship. On the surface, they appear to have rebuilt their foundation. On catching them almost kissing, He remarks:

> *That was intimate. That was nice. I envy you.*[67]

Nevertheless, the insatiable search for novelty remains. The script, in a self-referential manner, describes the final kiss between She and Harrison as being "*as simple as it is real*."[68] Yet, as discussed earlier, the stage kiss is inherently unreal, and the resolution it symbolizes is illusory. The play thus negates the intimacy suggested by its final image. Furthermore, there is an implicit awareness of the difficulty in translating this direction into stage action. The play has already complicated the stage kiss, particularly through He's earlier observation that kissing on stage can never be conveyed as a simple, unambiguous gesture.

Conclusion

In *Stage Kiss*, Sarah Ruhl explores the enduring search for love within the contemporary cultural landscape. While modern individuals continue to desire love, a sense of disenchantment surrounds their pursuit. In consumer culture, the perceived abundance of romantic options tends to destabilize individuals.[69] The idealised images of romance fail to

[61] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 55.
[62] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 68-69.
[63] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 114.
[64] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 119.
[65] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 120.
[66] Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, 49.
[67] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 121.
[68] Ruhl, *Stage Kiss*, 123.
[69] Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 293.

align with real-life experiences. The fantasy inherent in romantic relationships raises questions about the authenticity of such connections. Ruhl's characters reflect the plight of individuals in a culture which distrusts love's viability.

Zygmunt Bauman observes that we are caught in an "*endless, forever unfinished and frustrating, search for certainty*."[70] Both the characters and the audience of *Stage Kiss* find themselves engaged in an unending quest for certainty. The characters grapple with their identities, adopting roles from the script as a coping mechanism for their uncertainty. In his *New York Times* review of *Stage Kiss*, Charles Isherwood concludes: "*Honoring the conventions of romantic comedy, it concludes on a sweet note that feels both grounded in truth and wholly satisfying, with a parting of the ways and a reunion*."[71] However, the review simplifies the play's complexities and focuses on the "happy ending" the play seems to offer by saving She and Harrison's marriage. Ruhl's objective is not to offer resolution to the audience. Rather, she is interested in probing issues of identity and the impossibility of love. She highlights the limitations of her formal approach, compelling the audience to engage with the performance on multiple levels. The audience must discern the actors' identities, navigate the layers of theatricality, and reflect on their own experiences with identity and love. However, the boundaries between reality and fiction remain elusive, as most distinctions exist only within the script. Ruhl's play resists delivering a comforting resolution, ultimately questioning the authenticity of love.

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee approval is not required for the study.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support: The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

ORCID:

Büşra Erdurucan 0000-0001-8178-8511

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

Angus, Bill. "Metadrama, Authority and the Roots of Incredulity." In *Drama and the Postmodern*, edited by Daniel K. Jernigan, 45-60. New York: Cambria Press, 2008.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Postmodern Ethics*. Oxfordshire: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, New Hampshire: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

Belsey, Catherine. "Postmodern Love: Questioning the Metaphysics of Desire," *New Literary History* 25, no. 3, (1994): 683-705. https://www.jstor.org/stable/469473

Berlant, Lauren. *Desire/Love*. New York: Punctum Books, 2012.

Bertha, Csilla. "Theatre within the Theatre, Play within the Play—Self-Reflexivity in Jim Nolan's *Blackwater Angel*." In *Focus: Papers in English Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Maria Kurdi, 93-104. Pécs: University of Pécs Press, 2012.

Danesi, Marcel. *The History of the Kiss!: The Birth of Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Felski, Rita. "In the Name of Love." In *Love, Etc.: Essays on Contemporary Literature and Culture*, edited by Rita Felski and Camilla Schwartz, 1-24. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2024.

Fisher, Gerhard, and Bernhard Greiner. "The Play within the Play: Scholarly Perspectives." In *The Play within the Play: The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection*, edited by Gerhard Fisher and Bernhard Greiner, xi-xvi. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007.

Geis, Deborah. "Sarah Ruhl." In *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary American Playwrights*, edited by Martin Middeke et. al, 261-278. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014.

hooks, bell. *All About Love: New Visions*. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Illouz, Eva. *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Illouz, Eva. *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*. Cornwall: Polity Press, 2012.

Isherwood, Charles. "'Stage Kiss,' a Sarah Ruhl Comedy, at Playwrights Horizons," *New York Times*, March 2, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/03/theater/stage-kiss-a-sarah-ruhl-comedy-at-playwrights-horizons.html.

[70] Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, 28.

[71] Charles Isherwood, "'Stage Kiss,' a Sarah Ruhl Comedy, at Playwrights Horizons," *New York Times*, March 2, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/03/theater/stage-kiss-a-sarah-ruhl-comedy-at-playwrights-horizons.html.

McNulty, Eugene. "Parody, Metatheatre, and the Postmodern Turn: A Secret History of Irish Drama." In *Drama and the Postmodern*, edited by Daniel K. Jernigan, 61-84. New York: Cambria Press, 2008.

Muse, Amy. *The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl*. London: Methuen Drama, 2018.

Nancy, Jean Luc. "Shattered Love." In *The Inoperative Community*, edited by Peter Connor, 82-109. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Phillips, Adam. *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Ruhl, Sarah. *Stage Kiss*. New York: Samuel French, Inc., 2012.

Shepherd-Barr, Kirsten. *Science on Stage: From* Doctor Faustus *to* Copenhagen. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Sorian, Adina. "Living in Liquid Times: Precariousness and Plasticity in Forced Entertainment's *Tomorrow's Parties*." In *Of Precariousness: Vulnerabilities, Responsibilities, Communities in 21st-Century British Drama and Theatre*, edited by Mireia Aragay and Martin Middeke, 141-155. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017.

Stöckl, Korbinian. *Love in Contemporary British Drama: Traditions and Transformations of a Cultural Emotion*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021.

Sypher, Wylie. "Aesthetic of Revolution: The Marxist Melodrama." *The Kenyon Review* 10, no. 3 (1948): 431–44. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4332964.

How cite this article

Erdurucan, Büşra. "Metatheatre and Love in Sarah Ruhl's *Stage Kiss*." *Tiyatro Eleştirmenliği ve Dramaturji Bölümü Dergisi* 39, (2024): 82-91. https://doi.org/10.26650/jtcd.1498433