

# LETTERS FROM MAX, A RITUAL

Written by Sarah Ruhl

Based on the book by Sarah Ruhl and Max Ritvo

Directed by Kate Whoriskey



## STUDY GUIDE

# A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

I first met Max Ritvo when he was a Yale senior in my playwriting workshop. He had a luminous quick-silver mind, an open heart, a rare and unmistakable poetic gift, and a wild sense of humor. That fall, he also had a recurrence of Ewing's sarcoma, a pediatric cancer. He worked incredibly hard to graduate from college while undergoing chemotherapy, writing poetry madly all the while.

After his graduation, we wrote letters back and forth. Over the next three years, we became close friends and poetry confidants, and discussed everything from the afterlife to pop music to soup. We planned to make our letters into a book, and talked about how to arrange them. I am not the only one of his teachers who learned profoundly from Max; he taught me about writing, about how to live, and how to die.

After Max died, I finished making a book out of our letters as a way of grieving, and to help preserve his legacy. And now, a play. At first, I couldn't imagine writing a play about Max, partly because I couldn't imagine an actor "playing" Max; it seemed intrusive, or just plain wrong. But the more I did public readings of the book *Letters from Max* (often having another poet or actor read Max's letters), the more I found the process of dialogue brought Max back into the present tense. Max wrote in a poem: "Even present tense has some of the grace of past tense, / what with all the present tense left to go." It gives me comfort to think of Max speaking in the present tense, in the body of a young man.

I hope that this play can be an invitation into ritual or catharsis for whatever grief might be ailing you. I once asked Max in an interview: "How can the poetry world reclaim the world of the spirit in a secular age?" And I'll leave you with his answer:

"I can't think of anything... I could disqualify as the spiritual centerpiece of a poem. I don't think the spiritual world needs to be claimed or reclaimed by anyone or anything. Let religion lay hands upon it. Let secularity lay hands upon it. But let the hands be gently laid. Let anything that clasps offer the kind of prayer it wants to pray. ***Let this all be poetry.***"

Sarah Ruhl

# LUNCH WITH MAX ON THE UPPER EAST SIDE

By Sarah Ruhl

1.

The skinny women on the upper east side  
have eaten too many salads and  
have come to resemble their own salads.  
Dry and brittle, they push kale around on their plate.  
They need some cooked food, and quick.

You, a young man, also skinny,  
push the food around on your plate—  
but it's warm and has the flavor of the  
poison medicine doctors give you.

2.

The wildness of youth  
and the wildness of death—  
too much to bear, so close together.  
A big why called to God over ageless time...

Some loop closed by old age,  
the droop of an old man's head  
conferring a measure of acceptance,  
head already looking at the ground, thinking:  
when will a hole open up  
and I'll fall into it?

3.

We talk of Madame Bovary and whether her  
emotions are banal and whether the doctor's are really not banal  
and whether emotions can ever even be banal  
or if they only seem banal in art.

Health does not belong to literature.  
I wish it did.

Max is a poet.  
Max is a poem.

We all become poems  
in the end.



Jessica Hecht and Zane Pais, photo by Joan Marcus

# CHARACTERS

## \*SARAH (s)

a teacher who becomes a student.  
Soft-spoken.



Jessica Hecht

## \*MAX (m), TATTOO ARTIST, WAITER, ANGEL

a student who becomes a teacher.  
Not soft-spoken.



Ben Edelman



Zane Pais



**Sarah Ruhl** is a playwright, essayist, and poet. Her plays include *Becky Nurse of Salem*, *In the Next Room*, or *the vibrator play*, *The Clean House*, *Passion Play*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *Melancholy Play*, *For Peter Pan on her 70th Birthday*, *The Oldest Boy*, *Stage Kiss*, *Dear Elizabeth*, *Eurydice*, *Orlando*, *Late*, *a Cowboy Song*, and a translation of *Three Sisters*. She has been a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist and a Tony Award nominee. Her plays have been produced on and off-Broadway, around the country, and internationally, where they have been translated into over fifteen languages.

photo credit: Jonathan George



**Max Ritvo** (1990-2016) wrote *Four Reincarnations* in New York and Los Angeles over the course of a long battle with cancer. He was also the author of *The Final Voicemails*, edited and introduced by Louise Glück, and co-authored *Letters from Max* with Sarah Ruhl; both books were published posthumously. His chapbook *Aeons* was chosen by Jean Valentine to receive the Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship in 2014. Ritvo's poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker* and *Poetry*, among many other publications.

photo credit: Ashley Woo

# Your Next Date Alone

By Max Ritvo

The stage is empty.  
How do you fill it?  
With music.

The words will be the play,  
and the tune will be the body  
carrying the words,  
shaking with tears,

the towel torn  
so what he'd like hidden  
is exposed—

where his flesh is like a bruised heart.

If you wish to see me  
you'll have to sing.

I will soon have none  
of the ways earth plays

along with the soul:  
no grass, no wind.

*The stage is empty, how do you fill it?*

**SPEND 10 MINUTES WRITING, DRAWING, AND DREAMING.**



## AN INTERVIEW with Playwright Sarah Ruhl



### HOW DID YOU FIND YOUR WAY INTO THEATER, AND WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO PURSUE A CAREER IN THE ARTS?

I've always wanted to be a writer since I was a little girl. When I was at college, I met a wonderful teacher named Paula Vogel who taught playwriting. My mother is an actress, so I'd been around the theater a lot. I wrote my first full length play my senior year under Paula's guidance. It took me twelve years to finish, and it was called *Passion Play*. Knowing that I began my writing life as a rather retiring poet, Paula treated me with much tenderness and guile, sneaking my play into the New Plays Festival at Trinity Repertory Company in Providence. (This is one of Paula's chosen teaching methods, which she fully admits. She attempts to make students addicted to the actual dust back-stage, that barely-there stuff you have to inhale.)

The night of the opening, my mother flew into town from Chicago to see the play. We were driving down the hill towards Trinity Repertory Company to opening night when we were blindsided, hit by a car going very fast on Hope Street. I wasn't wearing a seatbelt in the back seat, and I hit my head and blacked out. Before I blacked out, I remember thinking: this is how death comes, quickly.

I woke up and my mother thought maybe we should go to the hospital for an MRI, and I said: are you kidding let's go to my play we're almost late. So we went to my play, and I remember feeling such an out of body sense of rapture seeing the play in three dimensions with actors acting and lights lighting and people watching. I knew then that I would spend my life doing this and not look back. (I got an MRI the following day. It was normal. It did not register the change of vocation.)

### LETTERS FROM MAX, A RITUAL IS ADAPTED FROM YOUR BOOK, *LETTERS FROM MAX, A POET, A TEACHER, A FRIENDSHIP*. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR FRIENDSHIP WITH MAX RITVO AND WHY YOU WANTED TO DOCUMENT YOUR RELATIONSHIP FIRST IN A BOOK AND NOW IN THIS PLAY?

Max was my student at a course I was teaching at Yale about 10 years ago. He was original and unusually brilliant, and he wrote extraordinary plays that were very poetic. He had a recurrence of Ewing sarcoma, which is a pediatric cancer. In the course of a class, Max, and I became close. When he graduated from Yale, we wrote letters back and forth, partly to distract him from radiation and chemo and just to keep in touch. We became really good friends. In some ways, Max became my teacher instead of the other way around.

We talked about making our letters into a book when Max was alive. When he died, I finished the project. I never intended to make it into a play until I started doing readings around the country of the book. I would often have an actor or friend or a writer play Max, and I would read my own words. I thought, “Oh, this actually is sort of theatrical.” There was something so moving to me about having an actor who was Max's age read his words and have his poetry embodied again.

## WHAT EXCITES YOU ABOUT THE PROCESS OF ADAPTATION?

I've done an epistolary play before, and I love the form. I almost think of it as a three-dimensional poem. It's one part poetry reading, one part epistolary drama, and one part its own strange beast. Since I was little, I always loved putting literature on stage. I'm from Chicago, where story theater was a big deal. I've never been afraid of narration on stage or breaking the fourth wall. For me, it's quite natural to have narration, poetry, and scene work all collide in one theatrical container.

## YOU'VE SPOKEN BEFORE ABOUT AN EXERCISE YOU LEAD AS A TEACHER, WHERE YOU ASK STUDENTS TO WRITE A PLAY AS A GIFT FOR A LOVED ONE. WHAT DOES APPROACHING A PLAY AS A GIFT UNLOCK? DO YOU SEE *LETTERS FROM MAX*, A RITUAL AS A GIFT PLAY?

Lewis Hyde wrote in his beautiful book *The Gift*, “A gift that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift.” I often begin teaching young playwrights by having them read *The Gift*. And then I have them write short “gift plays” to each other. I ask them to interview one another, and write short plays specifically made for each other, that never get seen by anyone else. I want to remind them that writing does not have to be an act of solipsistic catharsis; it can be a gift-giving. This is so different from the kind of gift giving we are accustomed to in America. The closest we get is the phrase “pay it forward,” which of course includes the word “Pay.” I definitely think of *Letters from Max* as a gift play, to Max. Really any play with a dedication is a gift play. It's about intention.



Sarah Ruhl and Max Ritvo

## HOW DOES RITUAL FUNCTION IN THE WORLD OF THE PLAY?

I remember when Max got married, he came to my apartment to ask my husband and me how we approached ritual when we got married. He asked because he was interested in secular ritual – ritual that wasn't bound to a religious practice. It feels somehow appropriate in this play, that question — how do you make secular ritual? — is foregrounded.

For me, theater really is a secular ritual. I think [for] so many people in the theater community it is a ritualized practice. There's a reason why theater is the land of superstition. After COVID, we lost so many in-person rituals and pretended they were expendable. I think we need to grieve together; we need to breathe the same air. We need to figure out how to have communal rituals again.



## YOU STARTED WORKING ON *LETTERS FROM MAX*, A RITUAL BEFORE THE PANDEMIC. ARE YOU EXPERIENCING THE PLAY DIFFERENTLY WITHIN THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE?

I think we're all a little more comfortable with talking about grief and illness. I lost my father to cancer when I was 20, so I've always been thinking about issues of mourning and loss, but I haven't seen it so heavily in our atmosphere. I feel like sickness and loss are things that we all pretend don't exist until someone suddenly falls into them. During the pandemic, we couldn't pretend as a culture that a huge amount of our population wasn't suffering. I hope this play allows people to feel their own grief and [that it] can fit into a larger narrative about how theater can be a place for grieving, ghosts, [and] for feeling things deeply together.

## YOU'RE A PLAYWRIGHT AND A POET. HOW DO THE TWO FORMS DIFFER OR COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER IN YOUR PRACTICE?

I started as a poet, and I've always wanted to bring poetry along into my playwriting. I think they're very similar because they're both about the speaking voice, ritual, speech as ritual, and speech as an entry point to song. The big difference with plays is they're often multi-vocal, and theoretically they have a story. For me, plays are poetry inside a vehicle, a little cart of story that's pushing it along. In this case, it's much more apparent because it's two poets talking to each other about poetry.

I used to be very reserved about sharing my poems with other people. I would show them to friends or my husband, but I never shared them widely. It was Max who really encouraged me to publish my poetry. I think when he was 21, and I was 20 years older, he gave one of my poems to his friend Elizabeth, who had it published, and I started being less stingy about sharing my work.



*Jessica Hecht and Ben Edelman, photo by Joan Marcus*



*Sarah Ruhl at first rehearsal. Photo by Jonathan George*

### **WHAT ARE YOUR THREE FAVORITE POEMS?**

That's a hard question. "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop, "Harlem" by Langston Hughes and "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" by Emily Dickinson.

### **YOU EXPLORE THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN THE PLAY, HOW DO YOU THINK THE ROLES OF TEACHER AND STUDENT CAN SHIFT OR ALTERNATE?**

I think teachers and students, when they're really bound together, shift roles all the time. It's not a binary. When Max was in my classroom, he was my student. When he left, we became friends. He had so much to teach me. I felt like his student in terms of his bravery around death, and his bravery around poetry. His mind worked so fast, and he was such a deep feeling human being. He knew vividly how to live in the present. I was always learning from him.





# WRITE A GIFT PLAY

In her interview, Sarah discusses how plays can be gifts. Following her classroom exercise, spend some time interviewing one of your classmates, taking notes as you go.

**Now write a short gift play specifically for your classmate.**



## **AN INTERVIEW** with Director Kate Whoriskey



### **HOW DID YOU GET YOUR START IN THEATER?**

I began when I was in elementary school. A pivotal moment for me was when I directed a devised piece about Vietnam in high school. We had taken letters which we found written by soldiers on the front. We also visited soldiers at the VA (veterans) hospital who had been traumatized by their experiences. Some members of the high school faculty as well as students created an evening from the letters and from our VA conversations. What made the event memorable is the conversation between our audience of parents – some of whom were hippies who had spat on soldiers and some who had fought. It was an incredible kind of healing for both groups when they spoke and forgave the other.

### **YOU’VE PREVIOUSLY DIRECTED A FEW OF SARAH’S PLAYS, INCLUDING *THE CLEAN HOUSE* AND *DEAR ELIZABETH*. WHAT INITIALLY DREW YOU TO SARAH’S WORK, AND WHAT HAS IT BEEN LIKE DEVELOPING *LETTERS FROM MAX, A RITUAL* TOGETHER?**

Sarah has an incredible ear for language. I was drawn to the poetry and distillation in her work. *Letters from Max, a ritual* is unique in that it is very personal for her. I appreciate her courage in sharing her friendship with Max, as well as her grieving and healing process.

### **IN THE FIRST REHEARSAL, SARAH DISCUSSED WANTING THIS PLAY TO FEEL LIKE A 3D POEM. AS A DIRECTOR, HOW ARE YOU WORKING WITH SARAH, THE CAST, AND THE DESIGNERS TO REALIZE THIS VISION?**

We are looking to distill each moment and have one moment flow into the other. We are moving away from naturalism and working to embrace the language and poetry of the play.

### **WERE THERE CERTAIN ARTISTIC INSPIRATIONS THAT YOU LEANED ON WHILE CREATING THE LANDSCAPE OF *LETTERS FROM MAX, A RITUAL*?**

Yes, we were inspired by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (particularly his COVID Memorial), Eadweard Muybridge for zoetrope ideas, Richard Serra for architecture, and Bill Viola and William Kentridge for video ideas.



*Jessica Hecht, Ben Edelman, and Zane Pais, photo by Joan Marcus*

**WE'RE LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE TWO ACTORS PORTRAYING MAX. WHAT EXCITES YOU ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF DUAL CASTING?**

I love that both actors are talented actors and musicians. We get to see them both play Max, and, as a tattoo artist, play an instrument. On a larger level, I think there is something extraordinary about each of them creating their own performances while also supporting the other.

**WHEN STARTING OUT, MOST YOUNG DIRECTORS CUT THEIR TEETH ON EXISTING PLAYS BEFORE DELVING INTO NEW WORK. AS SOMEONE WHO FREQUENTLY WORKS ON WORLD PREMIERES, WHAT'S YOUR APPROACH TO WORKING ON A NEW PLAY, AND IS THERE ANYTHING YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE WITH ASPIRING DIRECTORS?**

I once got the advice that you should spend half your time on new plays and half your time on classics. The dialogue between the two worlds makes you a better director. That was a piece of advice I followed for many years and went out of my way to construct.

**DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE TO SHARE WITH YOUNG FOLKS INTERESTED IN A CAREER AS A THEATER-MAKER?**

Direct the stories that are important to you. Only do work that you believe in.

# REFUGE

By Max Ritvo

*For Sarah*

Rain falls on the house.  
My mother dries dishes  
in the dark house in the rain.

“I’m your little dish,”  
I tell her, even though I ought to be a man.

“You’re a big dish,”

“You mean I’m very wet.”

I haven’t seen much,  
and I don’t see much:  
The jungle of my short life is one row of white straight naked  
trees.  
The vines are white and fall apart in my hands,  
as if dissolved under the tongue.  
Every living thing is screaming dust.

To imagine a heaven is to admit  
there are things in this  
world you think you could never bring yourself to love,  
even given an unlimited number of attempts.

“Learn to love everything—the world becomes heaven.”

“That sounds hard: I have a better idea, pass the soap.”

I tell you now,  
unhappily knitted to bravery,  
that all you must do  
is hate yourself  
round and round  
hand in hand, foaming mouth open,  
rainbow bubbles dashing open.

Hate yourself more  
than any other thing:  
you have made heaven.

Heaven’s Proverb:  
*When your milk Finally spills,  
may it feed the toxic white slug  
impaled by the heel  
of the tyrant’s loose sandal*

*\*This poem is still in draft form*

# GIVING HER 100%

By Max Ritvo

*for my best friend, my protector, my mom*

There is a world where  
all of a son's battles  
are fought by his mother  
and in this world  
I am one of the great Heroes.

In immaculate black boots  
and a war-girdle of linen  
she stakes herself in the front lines.

She wields a sorcery stick that calls  
bladed chariots, supply caravans, and tornadoes  
from over the horizon,  
and she's had just about enough of your nonsense.

Don't give her that lip.  
My mother only accepts commands  
from battle itself—  
and her allies, dazzled by the purity,  
the sincerity, the adoration  
with which she gazes into Danger's eyes,  
accept her hand to kiss.

And remember: before you try to tell her  
that she's overvaluing me,  
wasting her time on this enterprise,  
and wouldn't she be better off  
cutting her losses, finding a new, healthier champion?  
My mother signs my name  
in the blood of my enemies  
and refers to this as her only contract.

Unfortunately, in another world,  
Mothers don't fight the battles  
of their sons,  
they have their cancers.

In this world, Mother does not fight,  
but counts alone.

I see you over there,  
dark bead threaded on a string of fire,

I see you, running a black abacus  
 as water drips on your head  
 from the ceiling on a dry day,  
 a large pool forming at your feet.

When you held me up  
 from the waters—  
 a flexing, thrashing 100%,  
 glowing white in your palms,

how strong I must've looked  
 as the waters receded,  
 like I could've lived just as easy  
 on air, or water, or blood—(and in fact,  
 had lived on all three of yours.)

And how sad to have watched  
 97%,

73%, and then  
 the blinking and flashing,

that unhealthy spot near my tail—  
 the decimal—44.2%

And more decimals making me code  
 that runs a program for a receipt-generating machine,

and an infinite ribbon of paper  
 making you scribble out your sadness  
 to confirm your receipt of child

and in the blinking, colorless increase,  
 impossible to attend to  
 a crying boy  
 you put in a basket of reeds

to secure him through this  
 white river's growth:

I will weather this storm—I promise  
 I can feel you up there counting,

and I know that if I am too weak—  
 you'll prop me up on your hands  
 like when I was a baby,  
 and you'll let me count,  
 but I'll be counting on you.



Max Ritvo dedicated “Refuge” to his teacher, Sarah Ruhl, and “Giving Her 100%” to his mother.

**WRITE A POEM DEDICATED TO SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT.**



*Zane Pais, photo by Joan Marcus*

## **AN INTERVIEW** with Costume Designer Anita Yavich



### **WHAT FIRST INTERESTED YOU IN THE WORLD OF THEATER, AND HOW DID YOU FIND YOUR WAY TO COSTUME DESIGN?**

I wanted to be a painter when I got into college. I didn't really see eye to eye with the fine arts professor, but when I went over to the theater department I met my mentor, Dunya Ramicova, and she really opened my eyes to costume design. She gave me the opportunity to design for a dance piece and work with a choreographer right after I expressed interest in becoming a theater major. She told me that I need to sort out whether I want to work by myself as a studio artist or collaborate with a director and a design team. I loved the experience so much I never looked back.

### **WHAT DREW YOU TO WORKING ON *LETTERS FROM MAX, A RITUAL*? CAN YOU GIVE US A WINDOW INTO EARLY DESIGN CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN YOU, SARAH, AND OUR DIRECTOR, KATE?**

It is a huge honor to work on this personal play by and about Sarah and Max! I think the first conversation was about how we don't want to copy Sarah and Max's image and clothing; we are not doing a documentary here. That is not what the play is about.

### **WHAT ELEMENTS WERE THE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU WHEN CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF SARAH AND MAX?**

The most important element is about making space for the actors to enter the role, so that they are not imitating Sarah and Max's behavior, but rather able to bring something of their own self into each character.

### **WERE THERE CERTAIN MOMENTS OR EXCHANGES BETWEEN SARAH AND MAX IN THE SCRIPT THAT SERVED AS ANCHORS IN YOUR DESIGN VISION FOR THE SHOW?**

Definitely the poems, the situations, and synergy they create throughout the play.

### **OUR PRODUCTION HAS TWO ACTORS SHARING THE ROLES OF MAX AND TATTOO ARTIST – WAITER – ANGEL. WHAT HAS YOUR PROCESS BEEN DESIGNING FOR TWO ACTORS WHO WILL BE ALTERNATING THE SAME ROLES?**

You will see! It comes out of lots of conversations and really listening to what the actors respond to.

## WERE THERE CERTAIN ARTISTIC INSPIRATIONS THAT INFLUENCED YOUR DESIGN APPROACH ON *LETTERS FROM MAX, A RITUAL*?

The first image I saw in my head was a bird in flight, a combination of William Lincoln's zoetrope (zoe-life, and tropos-turning) and Eadweard Muybridge's use of stop-motion photography to capture motion.

The [design] process is very organic; the ideas came out of the words of the play and my instinctual response. For me, design is about being able to make a path for the play to happen rather than putting any stamps of my designs all over the place and disrupting the action.

I am not the kind of designer who keeps looking for options. I try to find/look for the inevitable choices in the design. Very often these choices are not dictated by me, but something else larger out there. Most of the time, when I need to look for fabric, the fabric ends up finding me! The best I could do is to allow that to happen. We need to open ourselves up for inspiration to come into our lives.

## IN *LETTERS FROM MAX, A RITUAL*, SARAH SHOWS US HOW THE TEACHER CAN BECOME THE STUDENT. AS A TEACHER YOURSELF, WHAT HELPFUL LESSONS HAVE YOU RECEIVED FROM YOUR STUDENTS, AND WHAT LESSONS DO YOU HOPE TO IMPART?

I don't think I can really teach my students to design in a particular way or be any specific kind of artist. Maybe they are still developing, but they are/will be very much artists in their own right. The best I could do for them is to help them find the way into their own center, where their work needs to come out of. And in that process, when I am able to let go of myself, I might be so lucky to be able to learn from them.



*Anita Yavich at first rehearsal. Photo by Jonathan George*

# PLUSH BUNNY

By Max Ritvo

My poor little future,  
you could practically fit in a shoebox  
like the one I kept 'pecial bunny in  
when I decided I was too old to sleep with her.  
I'd put a lid on the box every night.  
I knew she couldn't breathe—she was stuffed,  
but I thought she'd like the dark, the quiet.  
She had eyes, I could see them.  
They were two stitches. My future has eyes,  
for a while. Then my future has stitches,  
like 'pecial's. Then cool cotton, like her guts.  
Of course there is another world. But it is not elsewhere.  
The eye traps it so where heaven should be,  
you see shadows. You start to reek.  
That's you moving on.

From *Four Reincarnations* by Max Ritvo (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2016).  
Copyright © 2016 by Max Ritvo. Used with permission from  
Milkweed Editions. [milkweed.org](http://milkweed.org)

## FIND AN OBJECT THAT INTRIGUES YOU...

*Does it have an interesting shape or texture?*

*A meaningful or fun associated memory?*

**Set a timer for 20 minutes and draft a poem, an ode,  
or a scene with that object in mind.**



The page is decorated with several pieces of torn paper or cardstock in various shades of light brown and beige, scattered around the text. Some pieces are folded into simple shapes, while others are just loose scraps.

# SARAH'S BLESSING TO MAX AND VICTORIA ON THEIR WEDDING DAY

I wish you the blessing of imagination.

Imagine that you are a book,  
and your beloved is a book.  
How can a book read another book,  
if a book can't read itself? Love.

Imagine that you are a book so patient and wise  
that it learned to read itself,  
so that it could read its favorite book.  
Imagine this favorite book sleeps beside you every night  
and reads you, while you sleep.

I also wish you two bowls of soup  
that refill automatically.  
And a fountain that refills every time you meet.



*Jessica Hecht, photo by Joan Marcus*

## **WRITE A BRIEF BLESSING FOR SOMEONE**

*No more than 15 lines. Try to use five references unique and specific to the person you are blessing.*

## AN INTERVIEW with Actor Jessica Hecht



### HOW DID YOU GET YOUR START IN THEATER?

I was going to college as a freshman with no real sense of what I wanted to do. I always liked theater in the abstract when I was in high school; I loved going to plays. It was very meaningful, that community, and how smart people were about literature and ideas.

I went to Connecticut College for just a year and a half, and I met an incredible professor named Morris Carnovsky, who was a founding member of the Group Theatre. He taught a Shakespeare class. I loved the way he spoke about language. His understanding of plays, and using words to paint a picture, was so meaningful. He was a great, kind storyteller. The class inspired me. After I took his class, I felt very lost. I asked him for his advice, and he said, “Go to New York. Get out of here and go study with Stella Adler.” My parents wouldn’t let me just do that, so I auditioned for NYU, and I transferred to the program.

### ARE THERE ANY THEMES THAT YOU’RE FINDING YOURSELF RETURNING TO THROUGHOUT THIS PROCESS OF WORKING ON *LETTERS FROM MAX, A RITUAL*?

The play is about friendship, and it’s about being thoughtful in the way we engage with people. It’s very hard to actually help anyone. I think at my stage in life, after I’ve had a lot of friendships and tried to figure out how to be in relation to people, you’re sort of like, “Well, what has been successful? Do I feel like I really can be there for someone and be authentic in that relationship?” That’s the theme that keeps coming back to me.

### YOU’VE BEEN INVOLVED IN MANY SARAH RUHL WORKS, INCLUDING *THE CLEAN HOUSE* AND *STAGE KISS*. WHAT’S IT LIKE TO COLLABORATE WITH THE SAME WRITER ON MULTIPLE PLAYS?

I think the most mind-blowing thing is that you learn more and more about the artistry of that person; you think you know what themes they’re interested in, but with Sarah particularly, what she’s doing is extremely complex. She’s weaving a lot of different stories – stories she’s looked at before in different ways, and themes that she’s interested in.

We all weave. We circulate around a certain number of stories that fascinate us or we wouldn’t have an aesthetic, but Sarah’s artistry in relation to those stories is incredibly complex. I often don’t even know that it’s at work, and then I think, “Oh, that’s what she’s doing. Wow.” It sometimes takes many repetitions of the same speech before I can recognize that; but I get more and more information about how to explore these themes from her, and that’s remarkable.



Jessica Hecht and Ben Edelman, photo by Joan Marcus

**IN LETTERS FROM MAX, A RITUAL YOU'RE ACTUALLY PLAYING A VERSION OF SARAH. HOW HAVE YOU APPROACHED PREPARING FOR A ROLE BASED ON A REAL PERSON (AND A PERSON YOU KNOW SO WELL)?**

Well, my biggest thing was not to imitate her. I did want to start from a place where there are a couple of qualities that Sarah has. She's very gentle, and it even says in the text that she's soft spoken; and she's thoughtful. She really is a great listener. All those things that are tricky to hold for a whole performance without becoming limited in what tools you have as an actor, but Sarah has so many modes.

As we've been playing around in this process, we've done warmups and danced together, laughed and talked about different things. As with anybody, you think that they're one thing and then they throw a curveball and it's so delicious. So, I started with a certain part of playing Sarah that I was trying to inhabit. Then as we've gone on, and especially in this last week [of rehearsal], I tried to let that go. I think that Sarah and Kate could see me trying to let it go and really encouraged that. Even Sarah one day said, "Use that part of yourself. I love that. I don't have that, but that's something I want you to do." So, we figured that out together,

which was fantastic. I didn't go through this experience [of losing Max], but I went through many other deaths of friends. We all don't respond the same way. That's the important thing for this play. It's not a play where we're mourning Max before the time is right.

**THIS IS A NEW PLAY, WHICH MEANS SARAH IS MAKING CHANGES TO THE SCRIPT THROUGHOUT THE REHEARSAL PROCESS. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR APPROACH TO WORKING ON A NEW PLAY? HAVE THERE BEEN MOMENTS SPECIFIC TO THIS PROCESS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?**

I think it's very important not to insist on a kind of storytelling that you think you need as an actor. You don't know what you need to create a beginning, a middle, and an end. I feel like sometimes in a process we are editing as we're working, and thinking about what the audience is experiencing, or what we hope the audience experiences. We really can't hear ourselves as performers in the way we think we can. It's very important to try to let go and allow yourself to have trust in the director and writer to follow the storytelling. You have to allow yourself to be the free child, and they somehow shepherd you through. That's my experience of working, and that's certainly my experience of trusting Sarah and Kate. I can tell them if something doesn't feel right, but I shouldn't be looking at it all the time from the outside.

The older I get, if I work on a script before we start, my mind creates a structure to remember the play. This play has had a tremendous number of rewrites. Your brain is complex. You're also dealing with your own inadequacies as a machine.



There's a part of you when you're working on a new play that is beating yourself up for not being able to digest and learn the new stuff quickly enough. That's a very big part of working on a new play. You almost have to train your brain to let go and jump on the new thing. That's a specific actor thing that that we all have to grapple with, but the main thing I do feel is essential is that you're not precious with things you think you need.

### **YOU'RE PLAYING OPPOSITE TWO ACTORS – BEN EDELMAN AND ZANE PAIS – WHO ARE ALTERNATING THE ROLE OF MAX. WHAT HAS IT BEEN LIKE TO DEVELOP YOUR ROLE ALONGSIDE BEN AND ZANE?**

That's been a really fascinating experience. I find both of them give me so much support. They're sensitive and grateful to be in the process. I feel the same way. There's been a kindness in how we all work. It's a great lesson that we all bring something very human to the process. I wish more actors would recognize you're not going to stamp something with the same emotional toolkit that another actor is, and there is no reason for you to believe that your toolkit is the only appropriate toolkit for a certain piece of material. We all have our innate personalities and intuition.

I think this experience has been an egoless one for Zane and Ben, saying, "I am going to be there as this person with as much dignity, intelligence, compassion, and life as I possibly can." I think that's what Sarah was interested in when she cast the two of them to look at this person who was singular. How would you find another person who had that singularity? So, casting two people is perfectly appropriate.

### **SARAH IS A TEACHER WHO BECOMES A STUDENT. SOMETIMES WE FORGET THAT OUR STUDENT YEARS AREN'T BEHIND US ONCE WE'VE FINISHED SCHOOL. HAVE THERE BEEN MOMENTS IN THE PROCESS WHERE YOU'VE FELT LIKE A STUDENT AGAIN?**

Oh, without a doubt. The writers, literature, and some of the philosophical ideas that Sarah traffics in are tangentially known to me, but I certainly don't have a scholarly understanding of literature, writers, and philosophical concepts the way she does. As a person, I'm very interested in hearing people talk about spirituality. I love speaking of faith, and I love engaging in rituals and ceremonies from all different religions. I'm really into spirituality, but I don't have a scholarly understanding of the difference between religions the way [Sarah] does. She certainly has a very solid understanding of literary heroes of hers; the differences in their writing styles and philosophical concepts. I had to look those up. The thing about Sarah is she's wildly unpretentious. I'm a student of her mind, I guess I would say.

### **DO YOU HAVE ANY WORDS TO SHARE WITH STUDENTS COMING TO SEE THE SHOW WHO MAY BE INTERESTED IN PURSUING A CAREER IN THE ARTS?**

I think that Max had a tremendously genuine and honest old-school respect for the arts. And I unfortunately feel that, in this time where we can make things so quickly, we've lost some of the reverence for art forms. Theater is an art form, and film. and literature. The kind of devotion [Max had] to getting better at his craft, and not having enough time to get as good as he wanted to get, is painful to think about. But he had tremendous respect for this art form. I always want students to understand that they're looking at somebody who had a set of values that never flagged. One of his big values was love and respect. Obviously, his great talent was also why Sarah fell in love with him, but he was of a different era in terms of his sensitivity, and that I think we should all bow to.

# SOME OLD-FASHIONED RHYMES FOR MAX

By Sarah Ruhl

1.

Max don't die.  
We still have to argue  
you and I  
about John Berryman  
whom you like  
and of whom I'd wish  
more wisdom  
and less intelligence.

2.

How are you feeling,  
I ask on the phone.  
Terminal, you say.

Laughter makes  
us less alone.

3.

We take a walk around the block  
to open up your lungs  
and talk.

We pass Yew Three Antique Store  
then two puppets and what's more  
the puppets are skeletons and are  
playing banjos, four.

4.

It hurts when you sneeze  
and on your torso there is a scar,  
which you show me—  
oh bright star.

## WRITE A LETTER

*Think about who in your life might need a letter from you. And write a letter to them: expressions of gratitude, a joke, a story, a sentiment, a poem.*

# AFTERNOON

By Max Ritvo

When I was about to die  
my body lit up  
like when I leave my house  
without my wallet.

What am I missing? I ask,  
patting my chest  
pocket.

And I am missing everything living  
that won't come with me  
into this sunny afternoon

—my body lights up for life  
like all the wishes being granted in a fountain  
at the same instant—  
all the coins burning the fountain dry—

and I give my breath  
to a small bird-shaped pipe.

In the distance, behind several voices  
haggling, I hear a sound like heads  
clicking together. Like a game of pool  
played with people by machines.

From *Four Reincarnations* by Max Ritvo (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2016).  
Copyright © 2016 by Max Ritvo. Used with permission from Milkweed Editions. [milkweed.org](http://milkweed.org)



Jessica Hecht and Zane Pais, photo by Joan Marcus

While working on his play in Sarah's class, Max insists that he is

**“ADAMANT THAT SOMETHING  
EXTRAVAGANT AND SILENT”** happen.

**Set a timer for 30 minutes and write a short scene where  
something extravagant and silent happens.**



## Sarah

### Read

[With ‘Letters from Max’ Onstage, Sara Ruhl Again Mourns a Poet’s Death](#) – *The New York Times*

[The Porous Fabric Between Life and Death](#) - *BOMB*

### Watch

[Sarah Ruhl Interview at the National Theatre Conference](#) (30-minute watch)

[Sarah Ruhl Reading and Discussion of Letters from Max the book at The Strand](#) (One-hour watch)

### Listen

[This is Just to Say: Sarah Ruhl on Max Ritvo](#) (30-minute listen)

## Max

### Read

[Death is Actually Very Funny: A Last Conversation with Max Ritvo](#) - *Literary Hub*

[Sarah Ruhl and Max Ritvo Interview](#) – *The New Republic*

[An Interview with Max Ritvo](#) – *Dive Dapper*

### Watch

MAX RITVO POETRY READINGS: A PLAYLIST

[Poem to My Litter](#)

[Afternoon](#)

[The End](#)

[The Big Loser](#)

[Poem About You Being Perfect and Me Being Afraid](#)

[Dawn of Man](#)

[Monday](#)

## Works by Sarah Ruhl

PLAYS:

[Becky Nurse of Salem](#)

[For Peter Pan on her 70th Birthday\\*](#)

[How to Transcend a Happy Marriage](#)

*Scenes from Court Life, or The Whipping Boy and His Prince*

[The Oldest Boy\\*](#)

[Stage Kiss\\*](#)

[Dear Elizabeth\\*](#)

[Three Sisters\\*](#)

[In the Next Room \(or the Vibrator Play\)\\*](#)

[Dead Man's Cell Phone\\*](#)

*Demeter in the City*

[The Clean House\\*](#)

[Late: A Cowboy Song\\*](#)

[Eurydice\\*](#)

[Passion Play\\*](#)

[Orlando\\*](#)

[Melancholy Play\\*](#)

OTHER WORKS:

[Letters from Max: A Poet, a Teacher, a Friendship\\*](#)

[Love Poems in Quarantine\\*](#)

[Smile: The Story of a Face\\*](#)

[44 Poems for You\\*](#)

[100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write: On Umbrellas and Sword Fights, Parades and Dogs, Fire Alarms, Children and Theater\\*](#)

## Works by Max Ritvo

[The Final Voicemails\\*](#)

[Four Reincarnations\\*](#)

[Aeons](#)

[Alexander and the Moon: A Storybook](#)

**\*Available at the New York Public Library**

CREDITS: Max Ritvo Poetry From Four Reincarnations (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2016) and The Final Voicemails (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015) by Max Ritvo. Copyright © 2016 and © 2018 by Max Ritvo.

# ABOUT SIGNATURE

A HOME FOR STORYTELLERS. A SPACE FOR ALL.



The Pershing Square Signature Center. Photo © David Sundberg / Esto

## Our Mission

Signature Theatre is an artistic home for storytellers. By producing several plays from each Resident Writer, we offer a deep dive into their bodies of work.

## What We Do

Signature Theatre is a space for artists and audiences to call home. Signature creates opportunities through the spaces and support it offers the theater community. For playwrights, Signature's unique playwright-in-residence model offers the stability and support of home. For audiences, Signature offers access to all, offering a welcoming creative community and affordable ticketing programs. Only Signature Theatre offers an immersive journey through a playwright's body of work to theatergoers seeking intimate human connection and extraordinary cultural experiences.

## Our History

Signature Theatre was founded in 1991 by James Houghton and its resident playwrights include: Edward Albee, Annie Baker, Lee Blessing, Martha Clarke, Will Eno, Horton Foote, María Irene Fornés, Athol Fugard, John Guare, Stephen Adly Guirgis, A.R. Gurney, Katori Hall, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Samuel D. Hunter, David Henry Hwang, Bill Irwin, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Adrienne Kennedy, Tony Kushner, Romulus Linney, Kenneth Lonergan, Dave Malloy, Charles Mee, Arthur Miller, Dominique Morisseau, Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks, Sarah Ruhl, Sam Shepard, Anna Deavere Smith, Regina Taylor, Paula Vogel, Naomi Wallace, August Wilson, Lanford Wilson, Lauren Yee, The Mad Ones, and members of the historic Negro Ensemble Company: Charles Fuller, Leslie Lee, and Samm-Art Williams.

*A very special thank you to the New York City Department of Education*

*Free Student Matinees are generously supported, in part, by Nina Matis, Jeffrey Neuman, and Drs. Edward & Elaine Altman.*

Homepage



Student Membership



**Connect  
with us**

[Signaturetheatre.org](https://signaturetheatre.org) | [@signatureinnyc](https://twitter.com/signatureinnyc) | [/signaturetheatrecompany](https://www.facebook.com/signaturetheatrecompany)