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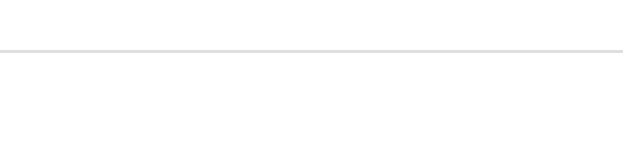
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THEATER REVIEW

Polyamory with friends

Redtwist's *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage* is an engaging take on Sarah Ruhl's story of middle-aged transformations.

by Kerry Reid
August 21, 2025



The ensemble of *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage* at Redtwist Theatre
Credit: Tom McGrath/TCMcG Photography

Sarah Ruhl's 2017 play, *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage*, opens with a silent prologue of a goat puppet. Without giving too much away, I'd say don't get too attached to the goat. It's a MacGuffin. (A MacGoatin?)

But it did, at least for me, serve the purpose of reminding me of Edward Albee's 2002 play *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*, in which a highly successful (and married) middle-aged architect falls in love with a domestic goat. Ruhl's play, now receiving a solid and engaging production at Redtwist under Elizabeth Swanson's direction, is also about middle-aged married folks finding themselves drawn into unusual attachments. Don't worry—bestiality doesn't play into it, though, as in her past work, Ruhl does dance with absurdism and magic realism (one character may or may not be able to transform into a bird).

How to Transcend a Happy Marriage

Through 9/21: Thu–Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3:30 PM; understudy performances Sun 8/31 and Thu 9/11; Redtwist Theatre, 1044 W. Bryn Mawr, 773-728-7529, redtwisttheatre.org, \$45 (\$35 seniors/military, \$10 students with ID)

Instead, Ruhl focuses on a quartet of friends who would fit right in with Albee's world of couples facing existential and marital crises, as in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or *A Delicate Balance*. They also reminded me of the two married couples in Donald Margulies's 1998 play, *Dinner With Friends*, in which infidelity and divorce in one of the marriages lead to doubt and self-examination in the other.



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In fact, after that goat prologue, the play moves into the comfortable living room of Michael (Joe Zarrow) and Jane (Monique Marshaun), who are entertaining Paul (Carlos Treviño) and George (Tatiana Pavela) at a dinner party. Jane is regaling them with stories of a young woman, Pip, who is temping at her office and who is in a polyamorous relationship with two men. (Pip also only eats meat from animals she personally slaughters.)

Part of the humor in Ruhl's play (and the first act, especially, is often very funny) comes from the way she manages to send up seemingly sophisticated folks who still find themselves tempted to snigger over unconventional relationships. But it's to the credit of her writing, Swanson's direction, and the skillful Redtwist ensemble that the middle-aged foursome never descends into uptight stereotypes. Instead, there is genuine curiosity amid the jokes—curiosity which leads to a New Year's Eve invitation to Pip (Shaina Toledo) and her two male lovers, David (Joshua Servantez) and Freddie (William Delforge). They show up with pot brownies and millennial moralizing. (David and Freddie come the closest to stereotypes in their tendency to talk in sociopolitical bullet points from time to time.)

What happens that night upends the lives of all the characters, but not in the way that we might expect. Ruhl's plays are often about women transformed—literally, as in the case of her 1998 adaptation of *Orlando* (clearly, she's not afraid of Virginia Woolf), and in her 2001 piece, *Melancholy Play*, in which a woman turns into an almond. Our guide through the transformations here is George, who also serves as a (rather unnecessary) narrator and whose attraction to Pip—or at least what she thinks Pip represents—provides the fulcrum on which the rest of the relationships balance.

Pavela is excellent in the role, revealing layers of longing and doubt, and the palpable desire as a middle-aged mother to still be seen as a sexual being. (If any character in the play comes off as puritanical, it's Jane and Michael's daughter, Jenna, played by Lonie Quick, who finds her parents and friends en flagrante and is apparently as disgusted by their middle-aged bodies as their adultery.)

She's well supported by the rest of the cast, including Zarrow's Michael, a sanguine former rocker turned jingles writer, and Treviño's Paul, a Latin scholar who seems eager to learn new ways. (Interestingly enough, Amy Crider's recent play, *Buddha's Birthday*, starring Ruhl's mother, Kathleen, also featured a Latin professor and a recitation of the conjugations “amo, amas, amat.”) Kudos also to movement and intimacy director Sarah Scanlon for making the encounters among the characters in the tiny Redtwist space feel honest and revealing without being exploitative.



Ruhl also resists any tidy-bow resolutions here, and, arguably, she introduces elements that don't quite gel (despite Toledo's sometimes endearing performance, Pip feels like a plot device more than a fully rounded character). But it's refreshing to see a play that doesn't treat monogamy as the gold standard for relationships, or posits that only young people know how to transcend the strictures of society in order to find new aspects of themselves. **A**

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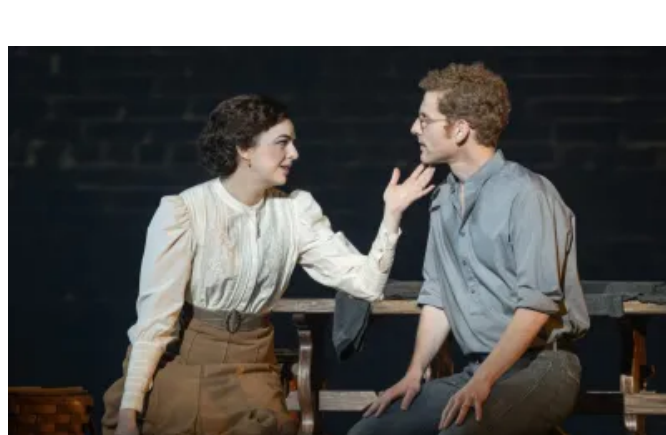
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Reader Recommended Redtwist Theatre Sarah Ruhl

KERRY REID

Kerry Reid (she/her) has been the theater and dance editor at the Chicago Reader since 2019.

Graduating from Columbia College in 1987, she worked with several off-Loop theater companies before beginning her arts journalism career by writing pro bono for Streetwise.

She spent most of the 90s in San Francisco, writing about theater for Backstage West and the East Bay Express, among other publications, and returned to Chicago in 2000.

Reid was a freelance critic for the Chicago Tribune for 17 years, and has also contributed to several other publications, including Windy City Times, Chicago Magazine, Playbill, American Theatre, and the Village Voice.

She taught reviewing and arts journalism at Columbia and is currently adjunct faculty at the Theatre School at DePaul University.

In a past life, Reid also wrote about ten plays or performance pieces. She is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association and the recipient of two 2020 Lisagor Awards.

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