

- SCRIPT ANALYSIS AND DIRECTORIAL APPROACH -

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# THE CLEAN HOUSE

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# PLOT SYNOPSIS PART I

The play begins with Mathilde telling a joke in Portuguese to the audience. We then get three excerpts from Lane, Virginia, and Mathilde introducing the conflict of the play and revealing some given circumstances for each of them. Lane is a doctor and has hired Mathilde to clean her house while she is working. Mathilde has recently stopped cleaning because she feels depressed. Virginia, Lane's older sister, enjoys cleaning. She finds peace in bringing order to things. She does not have a job or any children but she is highly educated. Mathilde, Lane's housekeeper, tells the story of her parents who were both the funniest people in Brazil. Her father was so funny that he once told the perfect joke that made her mother laugh so hard that she died, and then her father shot himself because he did not want to live without her. The first scene of the play shows the dynamic of Lane and Mathilde. Lane does not like confrontation, and feels uncomfortable asking Mathilde to do her job. More of Mathilde's past is revealed, and Lane works up the strength to assert herself. Mathilde imagines her parents dancing together, we see them onstage. Virginia arrives at the door to talk to Mathilde. Lane has informed her of Mathilde's depression so Virginia proposes a plan in which Virginia cleans for Mathilde without Lane's knowledge. Virginia wants a purpose because she has no children or job and finishes cleaning her house early, and Mathilde hates cleaning so it works for both of them. Mathilde throws out the medication Lane gave her and continues her quest to find the perfect joke. The next day, Virginia and Mathilde bond as Virginia does her sister and Charles' laundry. They discuss theories of comedy and become friends. They find a pair of underwear in Charles' laundry that is definitely NOT Lane's, but do not want to assume. Lane and Virginia have coffee and have an almost confrontational moment about Virginia's lack of a job, but it passes and Lane invites Virginia over for dinner at some point soon. Mathilde is still searching for the perfect joke. Lane is slightly suspicious of her husband, but convinces herself that everything is fine.

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## PLOT SYNOPSIS PART II

The next day, Virginia is over again to clean and has another comedy chat with Mathilde. Mathilde informs her that she is close to figuring out a really good joke. They find another pair of underwear that is most certainly not Lane's, and theorize that Charles could just be into wearing women's underwear, but most likely he is cheating. Lane enters, distraught. She has found out about Ana and Charles' affair. She threatens to self harm and accidentally(?) cuts herself with a can opener. Lane announces to Virginia and Mathilde that Charles ran off with a 67-year-old breast cancer patient. She looks around her living space and realizes that the way everything is organized is exactly how Virginia organizes things. She puts two and two together and realizes that Virginia has been doing Mathilde's job for her behind her back. She picks a fight with Virginia, who defends herself by saying that she was doing it out of kindness and because she wanted a project/purpose to occupy herself with. Lane, still reeling from discovering the affair, fires Mathilde. Lane reflects on Charles' affair and imagines him and Ana together. Mathilde sees what Lane is imagining and attempts to cheer her up by telling her a joke in Portugese. Lane does not understand the joke and begins crying. Charles and Ana arrive at the door.

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# PLOT SYNOPSIS PART III

At the top of Act 2, we see Charles perform surgery on Ana. There is some sort of song and dance number at the discretion of each production. We officially meet Ana for the first time. She is exceedingly charismatic and tells the audience how she met and fell in love with Charles. We also meet Charles, who, unsurprisingly, is unable to finish a joke. He explains his love for Ana and justifies his unfaithfulness to his wife. We see their first interaction and how quickly they fell for each other when he diagnosed her with breast cancer. Flash forward to Charles and Ana arriving at Lane's door. Pleasantries are exchanged and Mathilde and Ana speak in Portugese/Spanish. Ana immediately pronounces her name correctly. Ana and Charles use a Jewish moral clause that says when you find your "bashert" you are legally obligated to break off relations with your partner. Lane is PISSED. Mathilde attempts to break the tension by offering to tell a joke. Ana laughs and offers to bring Mathilde to live with her and Charles in their new place overlooking the beach. Unwilling to let Charles take everything from her, even after firing Mathilde, Lane negotiates her way into Matilde splitting her time between households. Ana and Charles prepare to leave to go apple picking, and invite the other three women. Mathilde and Virginia initially agree, but Lane is still in shock and refuses to go. Virginia decides to stay back with her sister, and the other three depart. Post-apple picking, Ana and Mathilde sit on Ana's balcony and bond over the apples and Mathilde's dreams of becoming a comedian. Charles enters and we see his and Ana's passionate love for one another. She is the opposite of Lane.

Two weeks later Virginia is still cleaning Lane's house. Mathilde plays cards with Lane and Charles and Ana slow dance on the balcony above them. Mathilde tells Lane and Virginia that Ana's cancer has worsened which is causing Charles and Ana to fight. Charles wants to keep his love alive at any cost, but Ana has accepted her fate and refuses to go to the hospital. Ana and Charles sit on the balcony and try to telepathically communicate, to no avail. They pick up their debate about whether or not Ana will get further treatment for her cancer. Ana leaves to go swim in the ocean, Charles, despite not knowing how to swim, follows her. Mathilde sits, serenely watching the water. Out of nowhere, she comes up with the perfect joke.

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## PLOT SYNOPSIS PART IV

Lane finally moves past the stage of shock into anger. She yells at Virginia to stop cleaning because she never wants her house to be clean again. Lane and Virginia finally have the confrontation that has been brewing for years, maybe decades. Virginia admits that she has in some ways enjoyed watching Lane crumble because she has been so perfectly composed and judged others for “showing weakness”. She accuses Lane of having “no compassion”. Mathilde arrives and Lane departs to take a breather. In Lane’s absence, Virginia begins to make a mess in the living room. Mathilde tells the sisters that Ana is nearing death and Charles is traveling across the country to retrieve a “Yew” tree that will supposedly cure her. Since Ana refuses to go to the hospital, Mathilde and Virginia convince Lane to make a “house call” to help Ana. Lane begrudgingly agrees and goes to Ana’s home. She and Ana converse on the balcony as Lane assesses her physical state. Lane begins to cry and admits that she is in many ways just jealous of Ana’s light and charisma and freedom. It is a cathartic moment for her to confess this weakness. Lane invites Ana to stay with her so she is not alone in her final moments. Virginia lies to Lane and says that she got a job working as a cashier, but Lane sees through it and recruits her sister’s help. The four women receive a telegram from Charles that states he is troubleshooting how to get a tree onto a plane. The women chuckle and eat ice cream together. They all know the end is near for Ana. After Lane and Virginia leave, Ana requests that Mathilde kill her with a joke, like Mathilde’s father killed her mother. Mathilde agrees to do it.

The next day, Ana says goodbye to everyone and tells Lane to take care of Charles after she is gone. Virginia cries, and the sisters leave the room. Mathilde tells a joke, and Ana laughs so hard that she dies. Lane and Virginia return and make her comfortable. Charles arrives at the door carrying a huge tree to save his beloved, but it is too late. He weeps beside her dead body. The final vignette is of Mathilde speaking to the audience of how she was born laughing. Charles and Ana appear again as her parents dancing, and singing a lullaby. Mathilde delivers the final line of the play: “I think maybe heaven is a sea of untranslatable jokes. Only everyone is laughing.”

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# PLOT ANALYSIS PART I

- A. Stasis and Intrusion: The stasis is Lane and Charles's life as doctors with Mathilde cleaning their house, Virginia occasionally stopping by, and Charles seeing Ana on the side without his wife's knowledge. The intrusion is when Mathilde decides to stop cleaning (the one year anniversary of Mathilde's parents' death). This breaks Lane's norm of not having to worry about menial tasks and is why Virginia takes on a larger role in the household.
- B. Inciting Incident: The death of Mathilde's parents is what caused her to leave home and begin cleaning Lane's house. She has been working for Lane and Charles for almost a year, and it is the one year anniversary of their death that incites Mathilde into a sadness that renders her unwilling and unable to do her job cleaning the house.
- C. Beginning Exposition: Before the action of the play begins, we get a moment of Mathilde alone onstage telling a joke in Portuguese to the audience. This not only introduces Mathilde as the vehicle for change in the play, but also shows that although we are about to see some dark stuff, that humor remains a throughline to keep everyone above the surface.

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## PLOT ANALYSIS PART II

- A. Complications: Virginia and Mathilde finding Ana's underwear in Charles' laundry complicates the plot because it leads Lane to discover the truth of her marriage. Ana's cancer is another obstacle because she and Charles consider each other "soulmates" and her impending death creates conflict both between her and Charles, as well as Lane's moral crisis of helping someone who has hurt her.
- B. Crisis: The crisis is Lane finding out about her husband's affair with a breast cancer patient and that it has been Virginia, not Mathilde, cleaning her house.
- C. Climax: Mathilde tells Ana the perfect joke and she dies laughing. Ana complicated Lane, Virginia, and Charles's life, and her death signifies the end of a chapter for each character, including Mathilde.
- D. Reversal: Charles returns with the "magical" tree after Ana has passed, and sobs. Lane, Virginia, and Mathilde have a moment of closure together.
- E. Resolution: We see Charles and Ana become Mathilde's parents laughing and singing a lullaby in Portugese.



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# THOUGHT: Philosophical Brainstorming

## ▲ Kant and Recognition

Humor/Joke-telling is a form of recognition. As Mathilde says, it's not worth it if there's no one to hear the joke.

## ▲ Schelling

Virginia's love for cleaning— If we get too much order, we want freedom so we can form it again. We want the "sublime" because it is an exciting fear.

## ▲ Hegel's Master/Slave Dialectic

How does Lane treat her sister and her housekeeper and how do those dynamics relate to Hegel's dialectic?

## ▲ Sartre and the Desire to be God

We see Charles attempt to be God when he travels to retrieve a whole tree to save Ana. He believes that his love and his will is enough to transcend reality.

# LANGUAGE

- A. In an interview with Washington Square, Ruhl said “For me, it’s really about finding a character’s voice, and listening to a character’s voice. I think rhythm is part of that. I don’t think rhythm is completely deterministic; I don’t think rhythm will give you everything you need to know about a character. But I certainly believe that once you can hear the way a character talks, you can sort of follow the character, and the character gets born, and the character has, hopefully, desires and intentions that are almost opaque to you as the writer.”  
<https://www.washingtonsquarereview.com/an-interview-with-sarah-ruhl>
- B. The pronunciation of Mathilde’s name throughout the play indicates a certain level of respect for others. We see Virginia’s growth as she slowly adapts to the correct pronunciation, and Ana’s immediate recognition of her cultural heritage.
- C. Mathilde also speaks and tells jokes in Portugese throughout the show. No one is able to understand her except for Ana.

# DIRECTORIAL APPROACH

In the rehearsal process, I would utilize collaborative movement to music exercises to find the world of the play. Below is a playlist I created for those exercises. I selected songs with complex instrumental elements to inspire creative movement and included primarily Portuguese Jazz.

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2wT8r3xQKXXHcuHIOocgzU?si=dydryjCWT4mGbTGWmhokQA>

I would discuss with designers my vision of create a space that can fluidly transform from order to chaos, focusing on blue and orange as complementary colors to show this dichotomy (see visual inspiration drawn from Portugese art on the next slide).





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# THANKS!

Please reach out with any questions!

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