

CHECK OUT THE BEST THEATRE BOOK OF THE MONTH FOR OCTOBER 2021

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MICHAEL GILTZ | OCTOBER 25, 2021

Every month, Broadway Direct spotlights the best theater book of the month, just for you.

Smile: The Story of a Face

By Sarah Ruhl

\$27, Simon & Schuster

Sarah Ruhl can be labeled in many ways other than playwright: essayist, teacher, mother, wife, humorist, historian, genius (officially), award winner, and now memoirist. In her new book, *Smile*, Ruhl details how pregnancy led to her developing Bell's palsy, a little-understood condition and no one knows what causes it.

Wikipedia says risk factors include diabetes, a recent upper respiratory tract infection (which immediately has one humming a song from *Guys & Dolls*), and pregnancy. Wikipedia will also inform you about Ruhl's remarkable career in many areas, especially theater, where she started out by adapting Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, made it to Broadway with the Tony-nominated *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)*, and most dearly to this fan of J.M. Barrie's masterpiece, *For Peter Pan on her 70th Birthday*.

So Bell's palsy. Not good, but it's temporary. Usually. Ruhl developed it and took comfort from the fact her mother had it too and then got over it. So would Ruhl, surely. Eventually. And days turned to weeks and then into months and then years. Being a writer, Ruhl thought about it and investigated it and mulled over it and wrote about it. Being Ruhl, she wrote about it very well.

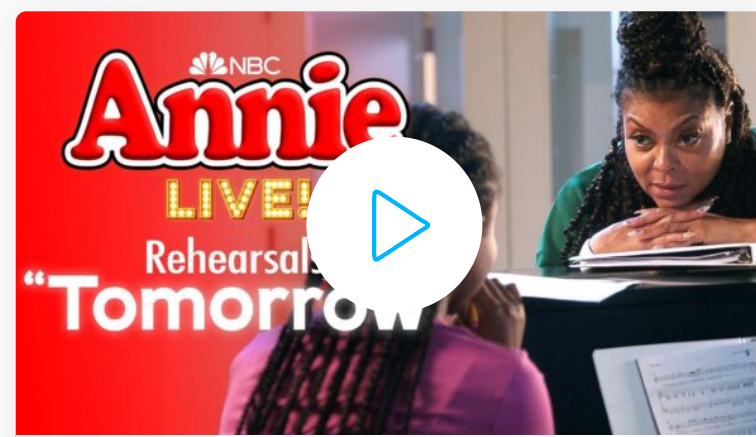
The result is a book far richer than your typical medical memoir. It encompasses Bell's palsy, but also how it feels to have your body betray you and what it's like to hear a man say "Hey, lady, why don't you smile?" when that's the hardest thing in the world to do. And it describes a very loving marriage, and the challenges of communication when your facial expressions don't or can't match your emotions or intentions, and what all this is like on every level and in every way. Sometimes you read a book and think, "Gee, I can't wait to see the movie. Maybe this is meant to be just what it is." But Ruhl being Ruhl, you can't help thinking, "Gee, I wonder how she'll adapt this into a play." You know it would be unexpected and challenging. Just like life.

Michael Giltz is the cohost of the weekly entertainment podcast Showbiz Sandbox. He covers all areas of entertainment as a journalist, critic, feature writer, and analyst, contributing to numerous outlets including New York Daily News, New York Post, New York magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Entertainment Weekly, Los Angeles Times, Indiewire, Parade, Book and Film Globe, and many others. When Michael's not attending the theater, he's reading about it.

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