



# BECOMING DR. RUTH

BY MARK ST. GERMAIN



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Sydell and Lee Blatt, and Rosita Sarnoff and Beth Saper for commissioning this play. The author wants to acknowledge the hard and dedicated work of Barrington Stage Company's staff, crew, and interns. Julianne Boyd (Artistic Director) and Deborah Jo Rupp (Associate Artist) are the most talented and committed partners a writer could wish for.

Thanks as well to Dr. Ruth K. Westheimer's children, Miriam and Joel, and Minister of Communications Pierre Lehu for their cooperation and support.

The play is dedicated to Dr. Ruth, whose life inspires and whose friendship is cherished. *A sheynem dank.*

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

In the premiere production of BECOMING DR. RUTH, original sound design and image projection design were provided by Jessica Paz and Daniel Brodie, respectively. To acquire the original design materials, please contact their respective representation.

### **For Jessica Paz:**

Summit Entertainment Group. 10 Potter Hill Drive, Guilford, CT 06437. Attn: Jeff Eisenberg.

### **For Daniel Brodie:**

The Gersh Agency. 41 Madison Avenue, 33rd Floor, New York, NY 10010. Attn: Kate Navin.

## **PRODUCTION NOTE**

The original production elements have been included in this script. But the production design of BECOMING DR. RUTH can be very simple as well. For example, slides need not be used. For instance, when showing her family, Dr. Ruth might hold up the framed picture without a large projection of that picture behind her.

BECOMING DR. RUTH, then called DR. RUTH ALL THE WAY, premiered at Barrington Stage Company (Julianne Boyd, Artistic Director; Tristan Wilson, Managing Director) on June 19, 2012. It was directed by Julianne Boyd; the set design was by Brian Prather; the costume design was by Jennifer Moeller; the lighting design was by Scott Pinkney; and the sound design was by Jessica Paz. The production featured Debra Jo Rupp as Dr. Ruth K. Westheimer.

After playing at TheaterWorks in Hartford, BECOMING DR. RUTH was presented at the Westside Theatre in New York City, opening on October 29, 2013, with the same creative team, with the addition of Daniel Brodie as a projection designer.

BECOMING DR. RUTH is the first commission of Barrington Stage's New Works Initiative. This commission is courtesy of Sydelle and Lee Blatt & Rosita Sarnoff and Beth Sapery.

## **CHARACTERS**

Dr. Ruth K. Westheimer at 69 years old.

## **PLACE**

Washington Heights, New York.

Apartment of Ruth and Fred Westheimer, overflowing with memorabilia of their lives. Pictures crowd the walls; papers and books rise up from every tabletop.

## **TIME**

June 9, 1997.

# BECOMING DR. RUTH

*Lights slowly up to reveal the Washington Heights apartment of Fred and Dr. Ruth K. Westheimer.*

*The apartment is overwhelmed with memorabilia covering every surface, books filling shelves floor to ceiling, papers stacked on tables and pictures hugging every inch of wall.*

*There are several open-front dollhouses.*

*All is in transition, ready to be packed away. To make matters worse, moving boxes and materials compete for space.*

*Upstage are large windows that look out at the Hudson River. Stage right, a glimpse of a table can be seen that leads to a kitchen. Stage left is cabinets and a five-foot stack of cardboard boxes.*

*The curtain is pulled across, revealing Dr. Ruth's apartment. She stands with her back to the audience looking at the massive packing job behind her.*

DR. RUTH. *(On phone.)* Pierre? What time are the movers coming? I am a little behind ... No. These are things I must pack myself so they are safe. *(Dr. Ruth moves through the boxes, her back still to the audience. She is looking for her glasses.)* I can't find my glasses ... *(Jump to see shelf.)* Pierre, what did I tell you? No more television, no lectures. Not now! Who is Nate Berkus? An interior decorator? Tell Nate Berkus if he wants me to talk about interior decorating he should seek professional help ... No, Pierre! I will move tomorrow. When have you ever seen me change my mind? ... Have you been talking with my children? Then I will tell you what I told them: subject

closed! Pierre, wait. *(She finds her glasses, sees the audience. Thrilled.)* Pierre, hold on. I have company! *(Addressing the audience.)* This is Pierre Lehu, I call him my “Minister of Communications.” He keeps my life in order. When my children can’t find me they call Pierre. Be right back! *(On phone.)* Pierre, hug Joanne for me. Bye-bye. *(She hangs up the phone; to audience.)* I’m so glad you’re here! This is much better than talking to myself. All my life I have loved to go to the theater. Tonight the theater comes to me. The audience, the lights coming up. *(Lights in the room and the window go brighter.)* Terrific! Now turn off your cell phones. I am very serious. We can visit while I pack. My mind is going in all directions. Fred and I have lived in this apartment for thirty-six years. Fred is the love of my life. And Husband Number Three. Later, we’ll talk. *(Goes to windows.)* Here, look at this view. *(Clears boxes away from the view.)* How could you not love it? The Hudson River, the Palisades of New Jersey. Look to your left and there is the George Washington Bridge. To the right is the Tappan Zee. At night the bridges light up like strings of stars. *(Bridge lights up.)* But moving is the right thing, change is good. There is something restless inside me. *(Goes to wrap picture but stops, looking at it.)* Fred and I raised our two beautiful children here, Miriam and Joel. When they were little they loved Fred’s jokes. “Where do you find a dog with no legs.” “I don’t know.” “Wherever you left him.” *(She shrugs.)* I don’t get the jokes. I understand funny things, but not jokes. *(Takes a picture from the shelf and comes downstage.)* Can you see them? No? *(Projection: photos appear, one of Miriam, one of Joel, both in graduation robes. Confiding.)* Stage magic. They are beautiful, was I exaggerating? Family first. *(Wraps picture in newspaper and put it in a box; looks around.)* I am a pack-rat, yes. Fred says finding anything in this apartment would take an archeological dig. If we covered these piles with blankets we could ski down them. Freddie and I met on the ski slopes. Skiers are good lovers because they don’t sit on the couch, they take a risk and wiggle their behinds. Good skiing is like good sex: it is all about instincts and movement and taking risks. Water skiing? That is even better. Water skiing is like a good orgasm. *(Phone rings, she looks at her caller I.D.)* The mover; I should take it. *(On phone.)* Hello? Yes, did Pierre call you? ... 3:00. Grrreat. What is your name? Mike? Mike, I am sure I’m in good hands ... Yes, you can ask me anything ... Now? Ah, you don’t want your mover friends to hear. Fine ... Congratulations! When is the wedding? ... Are



you and Jillian using contraception? Good! What can I help you with? ... Stop rrrright there. Mike, there is no size for a "normal penis." Why do you think your penis is small? Did your fiancée tell you? ... I'm glad to hear that. What guys? ... You should stop staring at each other in the gym and do more exercise ... Mike, when you look down at it, your penis looks smaller. It's called foreshortening ... Listen to me, when you are aroused, stand in front of a long mirror and look at yourself, you will see what she sees. Love your penis! Tell Jillian to love her vagina! Will you bring bubble wrap tomorrow? Thank you! Bye-bye. (*She hangs up, looks around her. To audience.*) Where to start? "God give me patience and give it now." (*Moves a stack of books, finds a music box.*) This is very special. It's from Paris. Dan gave it to me, Husband Number Two. (*Waves it off.*) Later, we'll talk. (*Opens box, we hear a faint mechanical version of "Do You Know How Many Stars are Shining in the Sky?" Lyrics by J. Wilhemhey, 1837, a German melody.*) Music is very important to me. It is the thread that connects my memories. But no music during sex; you should concentrate on each other. (*Recites lyric.*) "Weisst du, wieviel sternlein stehen ... " Don't you worry, I won't sing to you. It is not my German/French/Israeli/American accent, it is my voice. People leave the room, and quickly. When he was seven my son Joel asked me not to sing him "Happy Birthday." But this is what this song says:

DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY CHILDREN  
GO TO BED WITHOUT A SORROW  
WAKE AGAIN WITH MORNING LIGHT  
TO BE HAPPY THROUGH THE MORROW  
ONLY GOD ALONE CAN TELL  
GOD IN HEAVEN LOVES YOU WELL

(*Ruth closes the box; the music becomes faint but can still be heard.*) My parents sang me to sleep with this lullaby. Then I was not "Dr. Ruth." I was Karola Siegel when I was born on the 4th of June, 1928. I was an only child. We lived in a four-room apartment in Frankfurt, Germany, on the Brahmsstrasse. All streets in our neighborhood were named after composers.

My parents were short, but from the day I was born they worried I was too small. They brought me to doctors, fed me as much as I'd eat and made me swallow two teaspoons of fish oil a day. Nothing worked, you see that. My mother would put me in the laundry basket for safekeeping. (*Dr. Ruth goes to the shelf and takes down a*

*picture of her mother that now appears larger on her wall for the audience to see.*) This is my mother, Irma Hanauer. (*Projection of mother.*) She is smiling here but I don't remember her smiling often. I think this was one reason: (*Projection: photo of Selma Siegel.*) My grandmother Selma Siegel, on my father's side. My mother had come from a village farm to work as a household helper at my grandparents' apartment in Frankfurt. That is where she met my father, Julius. Julius was not part of her job description. (*Projection: photo of Julius Siegel.*) When my mother got pregnant they had to marry, that was that. Grandmother Siegel was not happy; she looked down on my mother; her parents were farmers and had no higher education. She thought her son married beneath himself.

One thing made Grandmother Siegel happy: Me. Since my mother was busy helping my father with his work, it was my grandmother who read to me and played all day. She told me, "Always smile and be cheerful, you are loved."

My father had the greatest influence on me. From him I learned the importance of education; no one should ever stop learning. He inherited his father's business, wholesaling all kinds of notions, handkerchiefs, buttons, everything you could think of. He would tie boxes on his bicycle and go from store to store. Our apartment was filled with all he collected. (*Gestures around her.*) I blame it on him. We were Orthodox Jews, very religious. Jews cannot touch money after sunset on the Sabbath, so when we walked to synagogue on Friday evenings my father made sure he had coins in his vest pocket to buy me ice cream before the sun went down. (*Projection: photo of synagogue.*)

I would sit with him and the other men. They lived to love God and to love God you loved learning. They would talk and argue and then we'd sing. (*Music: an acoustic version of "Eshet Chayil" ["Woman Of Valor"].*)

We sang even more when we gathered with mother and grandmother for the Shabbos dinner. My father would rise up from his chair and sing to my mother, "Who can find a woman of valor? There are many good women out there who do good things, but you are the best of them all." I think these are the most sexually arousing words a man could ever say to a woman.

And on Shabbos it is a double mitzvah, a double blessing, for a husband and wife to make love. It is a day for rest, eating, family, and terrific sex.

Sex! When I was nearly ten I first learned about sex. (*Goes to bookcase, tries to make her way through boxes and climb to get a book above her head.*) There is a book up there, a copy of the book I learned from. (*Looks around.*) Did I bury the stool? No. (*Finds it and carefully climbs.*) My parents kept a book on the top shelf of their closet that I saw my mother hide away. So then I had to see it. I piled books on a chair to reach; I risked my neck to learn the facts of life.

(*Gets the book, climbs down and reads the title.*) “*The Ideal Marriage, Its Physiology and Technique.*” (*Projection: from The Ideal Marriage, in color: A man and woman make love. She looks at the book as if just as excited as when she saw them for the first time.*) What are that man and woman doing? Ohhhh. That’s why my parents close the door at night! They wrestle *with no clothes on!* (*Projection: baby in birth canal.*) There’s a baby hiding in a bag! (*Turns pages. Projection: baby being pulled from womb with forceps.*) Oh no, now they found him! They’re pulling him out by his head! No wonder he’s crying! (*Closes the book.*) Someone opened the front door; I threw the book back into the closet. My father and mother never noticed I had found it. They had too much else to think about. (*Projection: Hitler smiling, posing with children.*) By the time of the 1932 elections the Nazis were the largest party in the Reichstag. In 1933 Adolph Hitler was named Chancellor. He called the Jew the greatest enemy of all, the incarnation of evil. Jews were forced out of government service and universities. Jews could not marry persons of German blood.

In 1938, 7,000 Polish Jews were driven back across the border into Poland and the Poles drove them back. Then came *Kristallnacht*, Night of Broken Glass. (*Projection: photo of Frankfurt synagogue in flames. It fades out, leaving only a light on Dr. Ruth. Low sound of flames.*) Jews were murdered, our synagogue and many others were burned down. (*Projection: photo of vandalized shops on the street.*) One week later, on November 15th, 1938, I was walking down the street holding my father’s hand. I looked at all our shops, windows broken, swastikas painted everywhere. Our neighbor, Mr. Kovner, stopped us; he said, “Julius, we must get out, terrible things are about to happen.” My father said, “No, nothing’s going to happen tomorrow. It’s a Catholic holiday.”

The next morning the S.S. came to our apartment. Big men with shiny boots. My mother cried. My grandmother took money from the seam of her skirt and put it in one of the men’s hands and said, “Please take good care of my son.”

# BECOMING DR. RUTH

by Mark St. Germain

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Everyone knows Dr. Ruth Westheimer from her career as a pioneering radio and television sex therapist. Few, however, know the incredible journey that preceded it. From fleeing the Nazis in the *Kindertransport* and joining the *Haganah* in Jerusalem as a sniper, to her struggle to succeed as a single mother newly-arrived in America, Mark St. Germain deftly illuminates this remarkable woman's untold story. BECOMING DR. RUTH is filled with the humor, honesty, and life-affirming spirit of Karola Ruth Siegel, the girl who became "Dr. Ruth," America's most famous sex therapist.

*"[Dr. Ruth's] story is certainly a stirring one ... [and this is] an illuminating portrait."*  
—**The New York Times**

*"It's a simple premise ... but it works for Westheimer's story, which is fascinating (and heartbreaking) all on its own. [St. Germain] convincingly and humorously conveys Westheimer's surprising dignity, courage, and resilience."*  
—**The New Yorker**

*"Anyone who is interested in Dr. Westheimer ... or in true-life adventure tales of Holocaust survivors ... should find BECOMING DR. RUTH an enjoyable way to spend ninety minutes."*  
—**HuffingtonPost.com**

*"Mark St. Germain's heartfelt bioplay dutifully chronicles Dr. Ruth Westheimer's inspirational life story ..."*  
—**Time Out (New York)**

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BEST OF ENEMIES

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OUT OF GAS ON LOVERS LEAP

and others

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