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by Gary Black

A world of technology, plugged into a dead man's cell phone

That incessant ringing of the cell phone in a public space — ring ... ring ... ring ... ring ... ring ... ring ... riiiiiiiiing!

It's enough to drive you crazy, and after a while it does, so you answer it, a stranger's phone, and suddenly, you're thrust into a world of relatives, funerals and secrets while trying to figure it all out.

That's what happens to actor Emily Ross when she answers the "Dead Man's Cell Phone," the spring mainstage production produced by Theatre UAF and directed by Carrie Baker, opening Friday in Salisbury Theatre at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Alaska.

"Dead Man's Cell Phone" is a play by Sarah Ruhl that premiered the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. in June 2007 before opening off-Broadway in March 2008 at Playwrights Horizons. It's an oddball comedy zeroing in on the thin line between life and death and the technology that puts us in the middle of it.

"It's a really weird play," Ross said, laughing. "It's so surreal. It's a cool world to be in. It has a magical realism vibe."

Ross plays Jean, the young woman who answers the ringing cell phone owned by Gordon (Heath Robertson), who as it turns out, isn't answering because he's dead. That one action — picking up Gordon's phone and hitting "answer" — sets in motion a multi-layered tale of technology and how it impacts our lives. It also puts Ross in touch with Gordon's brother, Dwight (Jared Olin), his mother, Mrs. Gottlieb (Siri Tuttle) and several mysterious if not somewhat nefarious individuals (portrayed by Mary Conlin).

"It's a super intriguing story line with so many twists and turns, and I'd never expect it to go where it goes," said Ross, a 22-year-old graduating senior from Chistochina studying film and performing arts at UAF. "It's been pretty challenging. The first act is reality, and the second act is kind of a fever dream."

By answering Gordon's phone, Jean is suddenly thrust into his life, and it's her relationship with his world that the play explores. Baker, the director, called author Sarah Ruhl's work lyrical and quirky, adding



From left, "Dead Man's Cell Phone" features Emily Ross as Jean, Heath Robertson as Gordon, Siri Tuttle as Mrs. Gottlieb, Mary Conlin as Hermia, and Jared Olin as Dwight. It opens Friday at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Kade Mendelowitz Photo

that Ruhl is one of contemporary America's big playwrights right now, saying she has been a consistent presence on stages both big and small.

"It's a quirky, off-center comedy, and it certainly has moments of drama and romance," Baker said. "It's that complexity in the script that makes it challenging."

Ultimately, "Dead Man's Cell Phone" is an examination of technology and how it simultaneously brings humanity together while dividing us at the same time. That's the good and bad of the modern era that Ruhl takes on here.

"It's a bit of a critique of technology and kind of a realistic look at technology," Baker said. "It's a quirky, eccentric, dark comedy."

CAST

Jean — Emily Ross

Gordon — Heath Robertson

Dwight — Jared Olin

Mrs. Gottlieb — Siri Tuttle

Hermia/Stranger/Carlotta — Mary Conlin

Ensemble: Sam Thompson, Keara Anderson, Keziah Anderson, Eric Barragan

CREW

Director — Carrie Baker

Set — Lara Lotze

Costume designer — Amanda Casterline

Lighting designer and projections —

Kade Mendelowitz

Sound designer — Andrew Cassel

Stage manager — Colby Freel

IF YOU GO

What: "Dead Man's Cell Phone," written by Sarah Ruhl, directed by Carrie Baker, produced by Theatre UAF
When: 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through April 7. Tonight is a special pay-what-you-can preview.

Where: UAF Salisbury Theatre in the fine arts complex

Tickets: If purchased ahead of time at www.uaf.edu/theatrefilm, \$10 students; \$15 seniors, military and UAF faculty and staff; \$20 adults. Add \$2 more if purchased at the door before showtime.

FYI: This production should be considered rated PG-13 for strong language and mild adult themes.