

e-Luminations: Dead Man's Cell Phone
The Hopper Influence

The American painter Edward Hopper is mentioned numerous times in Sarah Ruhl's script for *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. The first time occurs on a page of quotes that precedes the beginning of the play:

"In Hopper's paintings, there is a lot of waiting going on.... They are like characters whose parts have deserted them and now, trapped in the space of their waiting, must keep themselves company."

—Mark Strand, author of *Hopper*

Another mention occurs in Ruhl's stage directions during a scene between Dwight and Jean: "*Jean sits alone. She looks small and tired. An Edward Hopper painting for five seconds. Dwight re-enters with caramel popcorn.*"

And again in Act Two: "*Jean, alone in the afterlife, an Edward Hopper painting.*"

In her notes to the director and designers, Ruhl says "As for the Edward Hopper moments, I think they are about finding one simple gesture: *Jean looks toward a window, and suspends, and the lights imperceptibly shift.* They are about the solitary figure inside the landscape or architecture. They are about being alone inside of or in relation to the modern."

Ruhl summons Hopper, "not just as a visual shorthand for the play but also an emotional shorthand," says director Christopher Liam Moore.

"In his paintings from the 1930s onward, there is a sense not necessarily of loneliness, but of solitary expectation or waiting. Obviously *Nighthawks* is a painting that immediately comes to mind when you think about this play's first scene, in the café, some solitary souls occupying the space. But I am also very fond of the 1939 painting, *New York Movie*, where a solitary woman stands off to the side in a theatre. Did she come alone? Is she being joined? And to me, this painting is very evocative of Jean—right there is our main character."

Moore adds: "While the scenic elements of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* will not be a specific re-creation of a Hopper painting, the Hopper palette may certainly figure in some lighting choices. And the emotional evocation of Hopper's paintings will be present as well."

—Eddie Wallace

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