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**Title**

A forum on theatre and tragedy in the wake of September 11, 2001

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**Journal**

THEATRE JOURNAL, 54(1)

**ISSN**

0192-2882

**Author**

Arrizon, A

**Publication Date**

2002

Peer reviewed



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Source: *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Tragedy (Mar., 2002), pp. 95-138

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](http://www.jhu.edu/~press/)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25069023>

Accessed: 25/04/2013 19:52

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# A Forum on Theatre and Tragedy In the Wake of September 11, 2001

*In the immediate aftermath of September 11th, I invited a number of theatre and performance scholars to respond to the concept of tragedy in the context of these world-changing events. The following forum showcases the generosity of a wide range of scholars who signed on to this project with enthusiasm and conviction. More than ever, I believe that our intellectual labor can make a difference. The forum demonstrates much more than the vitality of our field; it positions us as an intellectual community joining together to do our part to address the tragic realities we must now confront.*

David Román



When I saw the north tower in flames—about five minutes after the first plane hit—I thought, “God, it’s going to take a lot of time and money to fix that.” A small community of watchers gathered in the street. Two women recounted that they had heard the low-flying plane speed by, then saw it crash. Others joined us. “Were there people trapped inside?” it finally occurred to us to ask. Traffic stopped. Then the second plane. Another explosion. More people. Even then we didn’t start speculating about deliberate terrorist attacks. That happened only after word of the Pentagon filtered onto the street. We stood transfixed, watching, witnesses without a narrative, part of a tragic chorus that stumbled onto the wrong set. The city stopped. The phones went dead, cars vanished, stores closed, the towers folded. Stunned, people wandered around the streets looking for loved ones. Yet everything was quiet except for the sirens of ambulances, fire-trucks, police cars. A few newly-heroic protagonists, like Giuliani, emerged from the rubble to cordon off the catastrophe, trying to limit it to ground zero. Yet it spread. Some hours later I heard that the attack we had witnessed was now being called “war,” albeit a “different kind of war.” The world was suddenly being re-shuffled into those who stood by “us” and those who turned against “us.”

Tragedy, as an aesthetic category, turns around the challenge of containment. Can Oedipus curb the tide of devastation that has wrecked Thebes? Hamlet’s inability to act decisively leads to generalized death and the loss of the kingdom. Yet, tragedy is not just about containment; it functions as a structure of containment. Tragedy cuts catastrophe down to size. It orders events into comprehensible scenarios. Aristotle specifies that tragic events are of a certain magnitude, carry serious implications, and have an air of inevitability about them; protagonists have a “defined moral character”; and the plot leads to recognition in the spectator. The massive potential for destruction depicted in tragedy is contained by the form itself—for tragedy delivers the devastation in a miniaturized and complete package, neatly organized with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Ultimately, tragedy assures us, the crisis will be resolved and balance restored. The fear and pity we, as spectators, feel will be purified by the action.

*Theatre Journal* 54 (2002) 95–138 © 2002 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

The events of September 11th, however, make me think that we're not only looking at a different kind of war but also a different kind of tragedy. When people refer to the "September 11th tragedy," they usually refer to that awesome spectacle of pity and fear so brilliantly executed by the suicide pilots and so efficiently delivered nationally and globally by the US media. They refer to the hijacked planes and the thousands of victims, whose smiling faces and life-stories appear on Xeroxed sheets taped to phone booths, mailboxes, and hospital walls. Bush, hastily re-cast as a leader with a definable moral character, gears up to set time right. All of these events are certainly tragic in the vernacular sense, and the term offers us a language to talk about them. Yet, I think that using tragedy in its aesthetic connotation not only structures the events but also blinds us to other ways of thinking about them.

Take tragedy's organizational timetable: beginning, middle, and end. Did the tragic action really start on September 11th? Some might argue that we were hijacked long before September 11th, maybe starting last fall when the elections were pulled off course. Important items on the national agenda, such as improving education and health-care, for example, went up in smoke. The victims from that catastrophe remain uncounted, although they are certainly identified. New victims are created daily as anti-terrorist legislation, anti-immigrant sentiment, and corporate welfare packages wind their way through the Congress. Others might point out that we have been on a seemingly inevitable collision course with Islamic, oil-producing nations for decades. Should the civilian losses they have sustained figure in among the victims? As for the ending, nothing seems certain except that it won't be speedy, make sense, or bring purification and release. So perhaps Arabic, rather than tragedy, might be the language we need to understand the issues and the stakes.

Finally, none of the tragic events seem destined to occasion recognition or insight in the spectators. On the contrary—September 11th created a revealing paradox. This was an event that, because of the time-lag between the first hit and the fall of the last tower, produced a huge number of eye witnesses. Moreover, they responded as citizens, who wanted to help their fellows by giving blood or volunteering. It soon became clear that their protagonism was not needed. Bush and Giuliani asked people to respond as consumers by visiting malls and attending Broadway plays. When witnesses visited ground zero to commemorate the loss, the Mayor accused them of "gawking." We should, it seems, know these events only through the media. In other words, this is an event that has banished and blinded the witnesses, even as it created them. Will purification and release come from participating in polls asking whether we support war efforts?

Talk of "tragedy," like talk of "war," in relation to the September 11th attacks gives the events a sense of directionality, containability, and moral purpose that they do not have. I only wish they did.

**DIANA TAYLOR**  
*New York University*



I've noticed that conversations in New York since September 11 often include a sort of "aesthetic confession," usually brief and parenthetical: "To tell you the truth, I never liked those buildings much; I thought they were really ugly." Or: "I loved them; they were so simple, so elegant!" Or, more fancifully: "They looked like quotation marks at one end of the Manhattan skyline!" Invariably, a hollow silence follows, in which the consciousness of death rushes back in, routing concerns of taste and beauty. We recognize, of course, that it was not the aesthetics of the Towers that got them destroyed, but rather their symbolism. They proved semiotically irresistible as icons of America's economic privilege, just as the Pentagon did as emblem of the US's militarized political power. (Surely the Statue of Liberty would have been a target had the attackers really "hated freedom," as our leaders assert.)

But the monumentality of the towers—which makes their destruction resonate as a loss of tragic proportions—was not limited to their economic signification. The tragedy they will now always stand for is also a tragedy of place. The Twin Towers were not only symbols of the West's exemplary metropolis; they were also the place from which that metropolis was offered for view to millions of people. The observatory on top of the World Trade Center provided one of the most dramatic and expansive stationary city views in the world. It was an extreme accomplishment of that rationalization and naturalization of urban life that Roland Barthes attributed to (and analyzed in terms of) the Eiffel Tower. The man-made urban lookout belongs to a group of modern technological developments, such as commercial aviation and satellite imaging, that have reordered the human relationship to place, introducing a power-knowledge nexus based on visibility. The "view from above," especially when it is commodified and touristic, transforms travel, our mode of encounter, with unfamiliar places. Once a matter of embodiment, sensation, disorientation (to travel, says Barthes, was "to be thrust into the midst of sensation, to perceive only a kind of tidal wave of things"), the aerial view turns it into an experience of abstract orientation, an opportunity "to transcend sensation and see things in their structure." The Twin Towers include in their tragedy the arrogant illusion of abstract, distant, visual mastery. In their violent absencing we may discern the twin principles of classical tragedy: *hubris*; and *de casibus*, the fall of great ones.

Foucault, de Certeau, and others have taught us to distrust the panoptic view from above, and the new orthodoxy in contemporary theatre theory is based on the conviction that, as Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks write in *Theatre/Archeology*, "we may all want to go up the Eiffel Tower, to see the city from above, to be god-like, to gain optical knowledge, to achieve a total(izing) view. But in fact our elementary experience of the city is as walkers." In both critical and artistic practice, a differential discourse, modeled on walking, has displaced a previous synoptic discourse of seeing, displacing along with it one of the major subjects of a previous generation of drama theory: tragedy. I recall, as an undergraduate, answering that endlessly popular examination topic: "Is tragedy possible in the modern world?" with the formula that while classical tragedy offered a "God's-eye view" of human suffering, modern tragedy offers instead a "bird's eye view," contingent, unstable, flighty.

On the morning of September 11, I was reading *Slapstick Tragedy*, Tennessee Williams's little-known horror-cartoon take on human extremity. (The second of the

work's two plays—*The Gnadiges Fraulein*—comes closer than any play I know to exemplifying the concept I am currently working on, the “Ecological Grotesque.”) The play opens with the sound of “ a loud swoosh above . . .” after which a character says: “Was that two cocaloony birds that flew over or was it just one cocaloony bird that made a U-turn and flew back over again. OOPS! Birdwatchers, watch those birds! They're very dangerous birds if agitated and they sure do seem agitated today!”

September 11th thrust us back into that Cold War imagination, which gave Williams his central image. As the terror that swoops down from the sky, Williams's cocaloonyes—like Hitchcock's contemporaneous birds—enacted the latter twentieth century's nuclear threat to bodies and minds, blinding the former and maddening the latter. The deadly “birds” of September 11th have plunged us into a “new war,” of as-yet indeterminate temperature, but it shares with its predecessor the challenge to our habitual ways of seeing and being seen, of understanding our place in the world, and hence to our notions of the tragic.

In both Williams and Hitchcock, the birds' attack on the organs of human sight, in particular, bespeaks the nature of human vulnerability in the face of violence that is swift and unseen, as the technologized violence of modern warfare always is. To lose our sight is to lose our orientation to the world and our ability to defend ourselves, to safeguard those in our care, to judge our enemies, to understand our situation, and to survive our tragedies. Williams's blinded Fraulein, like that other archetype of the nuclear imagination, Beckett's blind Hamm, are figures of a new kind of tragedy—Williams's term, “slapstick tragedy,” strikes me as an apt one—in which both the distance and the distinction needed for catharsis are absent. Lacking a synoptic view—God's, bird's, tower's, or any other—the protagonists of slapstick tragedy are buffeted about by the winds of suspicion and surmise.

Desperate, they (we) turn for re-orientation to that reverse panopticon, the mass media, where, instead of the one surveying the many, the many are mesmerized by the one. This, of course, is the bird's eye view in its most powerful form, an institutionalized and discursive machine for producing the perfect illusion of perfect knowledge. (The normative positioning of news anchors locates them above a city, with the cityscape spreading out behind, like a map confirming the veracity of their reports). This particular bird's-eye view, tragically, remains impervious to self-criticism, much less genuine re-modeling.

Artaud believed that the function of theatre was to teach us that “the sky can still fall on our heads.” We've known for some time that this vision of theatre is impossible, Utopian, possibly even hysterical (Artaud as Chicken Little). But the Slapstick Tragedy that opened on September 11th was also a Theatre of Cruelty and might warrant some utopian explorations. The sky has fallen on our heads, and what we are seeing—from above or below, but mainly from in front of our screens—threatens to do more than blind us. At a time when every cultural practice is reassessing itself and its role, perhaps we will re-entertain Artaud's mad vision of theatre as a place to encounter the unknown and the unimaginable, a place that teaches the necessary humility of not knowing. The powerful and poetic understanding that comes from not knowing is the special gift of the Artaudian imagination. That imagination was everywhere on September 11th. A *New York Times* editorial quoted a child who saw the burning bodies of victims jumping out of the buildings: “Look teacher!” she screamed, “The birds are

on fire!" It was a vision worthy of Artaud, and a truth we might all do well to contemplate.

UNA CHAUDHURI  
New York University



On September 11, I was planning to teach a class I usually look forward to teaching, on Aristotle and *Oedipus the King*. That day, though, the tragedy of New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania seemed simply to overwhelm the claims of theory, to render the appetite for fiction irrelevant, banal. Far away in California, we still couldn't get enough distance. We didn't talk about tragic drama that afternoon, but as we talked about the catastrophe on television, I was haunted by the violent logic of tragedy and Aristotle's effort to tame it.

A secret group of men planned the mass murder of a random group of unknown and unknowing people: nothing could be farther from Aristotle's preferred constellation of accident and intention, or his sense of a whole, complete, comprehensible "action." The few students who tried to link this tragedy back to Sophocles' play seemed somehow to miss the mark, too, connecting the apparent arbitrariness of the killings to the chilling apathia of fate. Yet fate plays little part in *Oedipus the King*. Oedipus isn't fated to discover his parricide and incest, only to commit them. The genius of Sophocles' play arises from the wracking reversals of self-discovery, Oedipus's scalding desire to get at the truth, and what it means, on this day, in this way, to do it, see it.

It will take some time for the meanings of this tragedy, what is increasingly being called *our* tragedy, to unravel themselves. It's always possible that there's nothing to learn about ourselves here, no recognition; the thousands in New York and Washington, the hundreds on the four airliners were simply sacrificed in a sickening and repellent act of murder. But to the extent that we identify those victims with our own larger values and interests, our better natures (as the government and media are urging us to do), perhaps we do enlarge the significance of the events in ways that Aristotle might recognize, as a kind of grim civic parable in which our terror and sympathy toward the suffering of some impel a kind of clarification of who we take ourselves to be. This cannot be the meaning of the event for the bereaved friends and families of the lost, or perhaps even for the thousands of New Yorkers who watched the World Trade Center burn and fall; yet many people have lived and worked in New York, and many more have watched the shocking images of the collapse and its aftermath. To dignify our more distant, spectatorial involvement as tragedy, if it is to be anything other than trivial, means that we have to be willing to enter the space that Aristotle tried to map, the space from which there is no innocent repair from the events, the action. This is, I take it, the lesson of learning to witness Oedipus's terrible drive to know, or Medea's terrible justice, or Agaue's terrible awakening to the world of law and reason.

Entering that space, earning our place in that tragic spectacle, isn't easy. Aristotle recognizes that there are several kinds of catastrophe—the good individual who is simply destroyed, the bad individual who prospers—which are just repulsive. Yet,

Aristotle seems to have admired plays in which the good and the bad could not be easily sorted out, and while he preferred Sophocles' *Oedipus*, he also found Euripides, even with his penchant for railing women and the *deus ex machina*, the most tragic of playwrights. Our events may be just horrific, nothing like tragedy; yet to try to understand them in dialogue with tragedy would remind us that tragic drama appears to insist on the difficulty of understanding, to produce forms of doing, seeing, and knowing which we struggle to engage, to grasp. Information is not knowledge, and knowing "the truth" is not understanding: both *Oedipus* and his audience "know" Teiresias's information early in the play, but it is the process of the play that transforms that information into knowledge, through *anagnorisis*, which might be better understood as "acknowledgment" than mere "recognition." Some truths may seem like lies (as Teiresias's do to *Oedipus*); our appetite for closure may well make other appealing lies seem like truth, too. This seems to me to explain the initial focus on Osama bin Laden as the singular, melodramatic "cause" of the events (he is responsible, but his wide influence also speaks of other causes, a deep and pervasive discontent with the "new world order"), and the reciprocal currency of Dario Fo's vacuous arithmetic of slaughter: "The great speculators wallow in an economy that every year kills tens of millions of people with poverty—so what is 20,000 dead in New York?" (*New York Times*, 23 September 2001, section B).

Sloganeering ("it's the gods," "it's the tragic flaw") is outside the dialectics of tragic acknowledgment, which must involve—if we are to claim to participate—an interrogation of our place, even our agency in the action. Fo's contemptible comments, like the repugnant remarks of Jerry Falwell, or indeed the lurid headlines of the network newscasts prevent this kind of question, the question of tragedy. To see September 11, 2001 in the dialectics of tragedy means working to acknowledge the challenging, asymmetrical implication of agent and event, and of the acts and our witnessing of the action. We are already learning a lot about ourselves in the obscene reflection of that day: "middle eastern" men, women, and children have been struck and spat upon, hustled off airlines, murdered; schools have been closed; and Islamic places of worship defiled. We have also seen acts of personal heroism and sacrifice, donated rivers of blood, comforted the bereaved, and sought the guilty. Some left their homes and families to search the dark voids of the wreckage in New York and others for missions that, we are told, may remain shrouded in a different obscurity. The depression felt by people far from New York and Washington says something, too; it isn't facile or merely decorous, but speaks, I think, of an inability, yet, to comprehend the events, witness them, acknowledge them. (Like everyone else, I keep using the phrase *the events*—the only other word that seems to work is *tragedy*.) By the time this essay is published, many of these concerns will no doubt look quite different; today those events still seem terrific and terrifying in their opaque, unrelenting purpose. The events of September 11 were probably not much like Aristotelian tragedy, but thinking about them as tragedy forces us to ask what our role in this spectacle and its resolution might be, how we may be transformed by the action, and what that acknowledgment might cost us, as individuals and as a nation, even as citizens of a postmodern, globalized, *polis*. No consolation, just catharsis—the recognitions of tragedy will take some time.

**W. B. WORTHEN**

*University of California, Berkeley*





Today's catastrophes do not progress in a straight line but in cyclical crises. . . . Even to dramatize a simple newspaper report one needs something much more than the dramatic technique of a Hebbel or an Ibsen. This is no boast but a sad statement of fact. It is impossible to explain a present-day character by features or a present-day action by motives that would have been adequate in our father's time.

—Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*

I use the above epigraph from Brecht because, as fate would have it, Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* was the first play that my partner and I saw when we returned home to Chicago after having seen the surreal, cathedralesque wreckage of the World Trade Center in New York. We had stood at ground zero after having participated in a gathering of feminists who met to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the *Pleasure and Danger* Conference at Barnard, and later that same day we sat in a darkened Chicago theatre and saw Steppenwolf's latest production of *Mother Courage*. On this same sunless Sunday we were present at and presented with two dramatically different tragedies that remain deeply affecting. At the theatre, we were the minority of the audience who returned after the interval and remained to see the rest of the play. The majority of our fellow theatregoers left at the break, perhaps unable to bear the drama's critique of war, religion, and their combined effect on women. Unlike the audience in the theatre for whom the proximity of war and theatre was disturbing, the silent audience of a few individuals who stood with us in New York that morning bore witness to what felt like an inexorable event. The ashed air wafted over all of us, and a slow smoke circled, cyclically, above what appeared to be the remains of a cyclone. At the site, I met two rescue workers who told of the structure's instability while simultaneously talking about quotidian pleasures—sleep, sandwiches, and a subway ride home. At first, I was encouraged by the workers longing for such comforts, but later that night, thinking about *Mother Courage* I had only a lingering sense of tragedy's relentlessness—its daily pressure throughout the globe. Tragedy is a hard word: its consummate consonants are hard on the tongue, harsh to the ear. Its harshness contrasts with the hushed quality I felt in New York and the absent shapes I strained to see there amidst the jagged edges of the ruins that so cannily resembled Antoni Gaudi's *The Cathedral of the Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona. I thought too of my long-standing interest in representations of war such as Picasso's *Guernica*—a cartoon nightmare I believe to be both more frightening and more affecting for its abstract reality. Ironically, my real-life experience of the damage done in New York did not provide me with the "ocular proof" of death's after-life that I had wished to see. There was no end in sight. Only art and architecture provide me with a pretext, a grounding for understanding that tragedy remains.

It is a tragedy that current discourse seems only to have recourse to narratives produced in someone's father's time (George Bush Senior, the day of infamy during WWII). In my mother's time, the segregated south of the 1930's, black schoolchildren subverted the sacred United States pledge of allegiance by doing something with the words of the last line; rather than recite "with liberty and justice for all," they retorted: "with liberty and justice for some." I remember the story of these performative utterances as a preferred accompaniment to the American flags that flutter in front of buildings and are flattened in backseat windows of so many SUV's. At present, I am staring at the red, white, and blue newsprint flag on the back page of my Sunday *New*

*York Times*. The paper symbol contains the following “instructions for use”: “Remove from newspaper. Place in window. Embrace Freedom.” Here is my present-day amendment. “Remove prejudice. Place in trash. Embrace difference.” I want this ink to incorporate the corpses that should already serve as a warning against war even though I know from watching *Mother Courage* that tragedy, like war, is the perpetual motion which comedy, like peace, breaks only for a moment.

**JENNIFER DeVERE BRODY**  
Northwestern University



In his now forgotten article, “Tragedy and the Common Man” (1949), Arthur Miller criticizes the simplistic and pervasive view of tragedy as unhappy and pessimistic. And yet, many have classified the events of September 11, 2001 as a tragedy, because of their terrible, unhappy endings, because they represent the loss of so many innocent lives in circumstances beyond their control, outside their purview of power, the loss as well of America’s innocence to a new world reality that “it could happen here.” This “tragedy” was epic in its proportion, in its suddenness, in its lasting implications. Over four thousand people buried underground, crumpled beneath what for many were twin symbols of American capitalism and Western globalization. Like the deaths and murders in ancient Greek tragedy and that of Willie Loman in Miller’s more contemporary tragic imagination, these deaths occurred offstage, no bodies seen and few even now uncovered, even as millions watched the twin towers tumble. The visible invisibility of this communal entombment captured our collective sensibilities. In their difference and disparateness, anonymity and sameness, the dead were “common” just like us.

Miller’s essay more importantly implies that the grief and suffering, the fear and terror of tragedy, the terrible, unhappy ending is somehow a beginning, that tragic acts benefit the gathered community of spectators, as tragedy reflects on the indomitability of the human spirit. “I almost hesitate to claim that in truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlookers’ brightest opinions of the human animal.” In this postmodern age, Miller’s call to collective, ontological humanism, his invocation of the “common *man*” may strike as outmoded or conservative. The desire within his treatise like Aristotle’s centuries before him—and like ours now, as we stare into the grand hole in the whole of our history that is ground zero—however, is to find meaning within the horror of it all and thereby articulate a politics of tragedy that moves beyond pessimism to action.

Descriptions of the events of September 11, 2001 commonly conjoin other words such as “American” or “National” with that of “tragedy,” nomenclature that suggests both an identity and a politics. And what has enfolded are not simply acts of good will and grieving but also conspicuous outpourings of nationalism. In symbolic displays of support and patriotism, flags drape virtually every business; they adorn houses and cars, and every congressperson, news anchor, and politician now wears a Stars and Stripes lapel pin. Perhaps such efforts and iconography suggest that the optimism that Miller argues is critical to the tragic experience. And yet, such nationalistic politics

equally risk producing an atmosphere of American absolutism, for they paint in broad strokes of black and white that leave no room for gray. The space for dissension so vital to this country has dissipated in this wake, and civil liberties now are threatened in the name of national security. Arab Americans or those who simply appear Middle Eastern fear for their lives and suffer from racist violence. Sounding and seeming too much like the overturned policies of apartheid South Africa, America now boasts a homeland security act and considers the possibility of national identification cards. The meanings and implications of tragedy, however, are always so much more complex. We need an equally nuanced politics of tragedy, for if as Miller suggests, tragedy reinforces "the onlookers' brightest opinions of the human animal," then it need not result in the kind of patriotic gore now so popularly enacted.

Unfortunately, complexities have become overly simplified as "America strikes back." The actualities of this current conflict, however, hearken back to Jacobean tragedy and a representational economy in which honor, morality, vengeance, and seemingly inviolate assumptions about life became disrupted. Within Jacobean tragedy issues of human and divine retribution, revenge and rebellion all were held up to interrogation. Even though we bomb Afghanistan, in a campaign at first entitled "Infinite Justice" in order symbolically to restore America's lost potency, every new bomb drop courts the loss of world opinion, especially when the bombs repeatedly hit Red Cross buildings in Afghanistan. The putative goal, of course, is to capture Osama bin Laden "dead or alive." Osama bin Laden and his agents are accused of actions that phenomenologically repeat and revise those of an exceedingly evil tragic figure, Shakespeare's Iago. Just as Iago used the object that Othello gives to Desdemona, her own handkerchief, to incite doubt and disharmony, bin Laden and his agents allegedly used American planes, American buildings, even flight lessons within American schools to spread fear, terror, and distrust within this open society. While Americans may attempt to narrate a certain concept of tragedy for nationalistic ends, tragedy as evidenced by Shakespeare's *Othello* or the Jacobean is much messier; it has the power to undermine rather than simply reinforce national pieties.

Perhaps what is most significant about September 11, 2001 as tragedy is its blurring of genres, the disturbing but inherent interplay of representation, performance, and reality. That morning as the towers fell on live television before the eyes of millions, the footage seemed to many to replicate images previously viewed in so many disaster films. As Prior exclaims when the angel crashes through his bedroom ceiling in *Angels in America*, the sight of the plane crashing into the second tower and its subsequent collapse was "very Steven Spielberg!" In fact, within two weeks of the "tragedy," in a video shop in Wenzhou China, shelved next to bootlegged copies of recent Hollywood films, videodisks, and DVDs with titles such as *Surprise Attack on America*, *America's Disaster: The Pearl Harbor of the 21st Century*, and *The Century's Great Catastrophe* appeared, one even with video images set to the soundtrack of Spielberg's blockbuster *Jaws*. The constant iterations of planes crashing and buildings tumbling, whether with accompanying soundtrack in Wenzhou or shown on commercial-free US television news in the aftermath, trouble the relationship of the real to the representational. For it is through such representations, through the compulsive retelling of the story that we discover its facticity, that we aspire to understand the "real" event and its meanings. The representations of the events on September 11, 2001 disrupted and constructed a new reality. Yet, in this new construction, these tragic acts in their

representation should not be used to lay claim to a morality that silences as antipatriotic the voices of difference. Tragedy, in its dynamic historical variations from classic, to bourgeois, to liberal, to non-western, to Miller, resists such constraints of morality but rather seeks to test the limits of human spirit and energy.

America's history, as well as tragedy's history, can teach us that it must be possible both to experience profoundly the events of September 11 and to act without succumbing to popular notions of the tragic or capitulating to nationalistic rhetoric. As tragic spectators, as scholars and as citizens, we need to look within the tragic not only to see ourselves in the fear and loss but, as Miller suggests, to see within the terror the power of the human spirit to transcend, to seek the energy of compassion. From the "questioning of what has previously been unquestioned" Miller reminds us "we learn." No doubt, we have been touched and changed. But can we be better? This is the question now emerging from this tragic rubble.

HARRY J. ELAM, Jr.  
Stanford University



I just happened to have on my itinerary for this fall's reading some work of both Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin. After September 11 I bound myself even more strongly within the latter's conviction that at least one of the gates to justice is, indeed, study. After September 11, too, I found myself urgently embracing the necessity upon which the former insists, in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, to think politics anew. A mighty task they have set for us, and one I am thankful to undertake in the nurturing company of my students and other intellectuals world-wide rising in the wind, as I write this, thick with human dust and cinders.

It should not be surprising that Agamben finds a close ally in Benjamin as he seeks to discover the originary political element at the heart of sacred, or "bare," life. Both men are fundamentally concerned with the relationship between law and life, with the state of exception (which becomes the rule) that governs the very intelligibility of life and death, such that they become thresholds of interdetermination, zones of indistinction, between biology and politics. If Benjamin fell ultimately into the darkness cast by fascism's shadow, Agamben emerges on the other side to remind us that it has never lifted; he proposes, in fact, that we consider the camp (*campos de concentraciones* or concentration camps, detention sites, or extermination camps) to be the "fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West," insofar as it provides the model of the materialization of the state of exception. In the camp, as Hannah Arendt observed, "everything is possible." For Agamben, the question is therefore not, "how could crimes of such atrocity be committed against human beings?" It is, instead, "more useful to investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime."

The power to kill and the power to make live—in Afghanistan, incendiary bombs and scant emergency meals fall daily from American planes. In the immediate and certain context of biopolitics, where life itself is what is at stake in politics and

therefore at stake in conflict, are we witnessing tragedy? Or, alternatively, calamity? Sorrow? The dreadful? A young Benjamin sought to restrict the term "tragedy" to its formal link not just with the heroic or monumental, but with cherished dialogue between human beings:

The tragic is situated in the laws governing the spoken word between human beings. There is no such thing as a tragic pantomime. Nor do we have tragic poems, tragic novels, or tragic events.

In tragedy and in tragedy only appears the law of inescapable order, the ruling force, played out in the "individually fulfilled time" of the tragic hero. That particular fulfilled time unfolds with the consequences of fate, the irony in the tragic structure in which the hero dies of his own immortality. Benjamin's concern is not, however, with form for form's sake, as if he or we might pinpoint a dramaturgy of the moment, the formal characteristics of a certain destruction's *mise-en-scène*. Instead, Benjamin's concern with the formal unity of tragedy discloses his preoccupation also with enigmatic forms of history, forms of thought, and forms of language within which genres, and we, move.

If there are no tragic events, that lack is due to the fact that empirical events bear no necessary relation to the historical time of their occurrence. Historical time, as Benjamin explains it in a dense and energetic paragraph that anticipates his book-length study, is infinite and unfulfilled. So too historical time cannot be clutched or condensed in an empirical process or event; a process in historical time is an abstraction, an idea. An idea of fulfilled time, an idea of fulfilled historical time, comes to us, to take but an example, in the Bible, in the idea of messianic time. The disjunction between an individually fulfilled time such as that of the fateful time of the tragic hero and the impossibility of lived and fulfilled historical time is the location of the impossibility of the tragic event taking place.

We are witnessing right now a struggle over the definition of time and action. Messianic time, fulfilled historical time, insists on the absolute isomorphism between individually fulfilled time and historical time in abstraction: the *jihad* will have as its principal players, not tragic heroes but martyrs and prophets. In the state of exception, it is incumbent upon us nonetheless as a form of resistance to forge a conception of action that is something other than tragedy and also other than the production of bare life, that which can be killed without the punishment accompanying homicide. We require sorrow. A politics beginning with *homo sacer* is not, as I understand it, simply the repetition of resistances that worked in the past; Manichean repetitions have become the currency of the moral, and they must be challenged with new bonds between life itself and forms of life. In the world upon which we must now insist, as I see it, there can be neither evil men nor tragic events. Instead, we might measure time for action that is accompanied by responsibility.

Such hopes, however, are hollow without ideas of action, thought, feeling, history, and performance that rise to the moment, hitch a ride on the wing of historical time fleeing before us as an elusive abstraction. Agamben and Benjamin deserve reading, and the sadness that we feel in the face of firefighters' deaths (I felt them palpably, dreadfully, horribly when passing by the memorials at station houses in New York City this past weekend) requires a form of mourning and passage. Improvise, renew,

invent—let us fall not upon the event (that which is to come) but the dramatic action directed toward the renewal of life.

**AMY VILLAREJO**  
Cornell University



Science fiction writer Octavia Butler's novels *Parable of the Talents* and *Parable of the Sower* describe a heroine who is a "sharer," someone who feels the pain of others so keenly she is in danger of losing her own life by witnessing someone else lose theirs. Her empathy is so great that she has to avert her eyes from anything that might cause her more pain than she can bear to go on living.

In the month since September 11th, I've felt like a sharer. All the images of destruction impressed themselves on me so viscerally that my empathy became nearly embodied. As I watched television, listened to radio, or read news reports, I felt myself a passenger on those planes, knowing that my life would soon be over or that I'd decided to thwart the plane's course. I felt myself in the World Trade Center, walking down 80 flights of stairs, even though I know my own real-life vertigo would make such a journey excruciating. I felt myself an office worker, turning on my computer, hearing a thunderous noise behind me and looking up one last time to see the nose of a plane inexplicably crash through the wall. I felt myself standing in a burning office, knowing that to move one way means a fiery, horrible death, and the other, through the broken windows, a death no less certain, but one in which my last memory will be of flight, of freedom, of air rushing past my face as neurological chemicals release in my brain and shut off my consciousness before my body breaks on the ground. I felt myself the woman leaping from one of the towers with, unfathomably, her purse clutched to her chest.

Of course, I wasn't any of these tragic figures. Although both cities remain my psychological site of attachment and return, places I once lived, and now the homes of people I love, I wasn't in New York or D.C. on September 11th. But I empathized so deeply with these human positions, described so graphically, that after the first several days of obsessive viewing, listening, and reading, I weaned myself away, immersed myself in the remains of the rest of my life, just so that I, like the sharer, could protect myself for a future I now question exists.

Has performance trained me for such painful empathy? Here, I found the world stage the place that drew my subjectivity, that unsettled my presumptive security by putting me in the souls of the dying, imagining their choices, their resolve, their final moments. Is this how the tools of performance let us understand a horror as profound as those planes flying inexorably into our lives? Through an empathy so embodied, we hurt from what we feel, even if we don't really live through it?

If our imaginations can lead us to profound, performative empathy, I believe ever more strongly that the space of performance must be harnessed to imagine love instead of hatred, to create hopeful fictions of meaningful lives instead of senseless deaths. I need to believe that theorizing and documenting, witnessing and creating performance will continue to grace our lives with meaning, generosity, understanding,

and memory, however provisional and fleeting. I know that performance couldn't stop the woman with the purse from jumping, but I hope it can memorialize and make sense of her actions.

On Yom Kippur, which arrived shortly after the September 11th tragedy, we recite a prayer called "Hineini," which translates as "Here I Am." Much of the prayer describes one's presence in front of god, returning to him, purified through our atonement. While I don't believe in god, observing a day of ritualized atonement this year felt urgent. An explication of the prayer explains, "Hineini . . . is a word of help. It comes not from one who is arrogant, but one who is humble. It is a word beseeching to know the way. . . . It is also the word of one who is lost. . . . It is a word fitting at all phases of return." This, perhaps, is what performance lets us say: Here I am, humble, looking for the way to return to a world I understand, to fill the craters of absence left in the geography of New York and now of Afghanistan, to mend the ragged holes left in the hearts of all of us who empathize, who identify, who see the real in this representation, and continue to believe that we can reimagine and really revise its causes and its effects to remake a necessarily better world. This is no longer simulation, no longer only mediated representation. But as the towers' remains continue to smolder, and as bombs fall not so smartly through the Afghani night, I continue to believe in a different kind of "real." And I'll continue trying to imagine it at the theatre.

**JILL DOLAN**

*University of Texas, Austin*



In the days following the events of September 11, 2001, I wished for some contemporary form of tragedy that could help structure my shock, pity, and outrage as I watched the images broadcast from Manhattan. When David Román suggested a response, I remembered that the text designated as possibly the first tragedy records the defeat of the Persians by the Greeks. There, at the initial staging of the form, resides the violence produced by the confrontation between a culture that would later be adopted as the beginnings of democracy and the Western cultural tradition and the Persian "other." The brilliant concept of staging the slaughtered, vanquished Persians rather than the victorious Greeks spoke to the need to open up state violence to moral scrutiny. It structured a way to respond to the horrifying events of war. I wished for the comfort and guidance the form of tragedy might offer.

However, at this time, I am trying to formulate some response to the US bombing of Afghanistan. These events have inspired an entirely different response to the functions of the origins of tragedy. Tragedy seems yoked to the Greek state as its cultural apparatus. *The Persians* offered the conjunction of morality, emotion, and rationality that lent meaning to the victory at the battle of Salamis. Tragedy thus helped to compose the rationale for the Greek sense of sovereignty—a sovereignty based not so much on military right as moral right. The origins of Western culture, indeed. Currently, as the media stages our bombing and today, ground invasion of Afghanistan, the invention of the Greeks still serves to create, in this instance, a supra-national sovereignty for the United States that can supercede national boundaries and the practice of operating through national treaties.

For, as the media still marks for us, the most significant strategy in the creation of the form of tragedy was the invention of the audience. While much of our study of tragedies focuses on the staging, tragedy invented the audience as a collective unity that, from somewhere outside of the action, could witness and judge, say, the fall of the Persians. The audience was imbued with a position of authority through its emotional and moral perspective on events. The narrative and ritual elements were offered up to an ethical scope that was greater than the events and characters the theatre staged. As Aristotle registered, the audience could consider the after-effect of the events. Thus, the Persians could come under the scrutiny of a "moral majority" who observed, from a distance, the war. This was the victory that was Greek.

The Bush administration and the major media have rushed to make a similar use of their depictions of the war against "terrorism." Their challenge is to construct a unified virtual audience who, through a moral lens, can ratify a supranational position for the US—a moral empire, whose sovereignty rests upon the power of an audience to judge events from a collectively unitary perspective of pity, horror, and moral approbation.

But terrorism, like the later tragedies, is about individuals. Their focus on the construction of individual characters represented what Foucault would term an activation of the "biopolitical" realm. For internal surveillance structures to be erected, the apparatus need scrutinize local, personal structures of values in terms of what later would be termed "the greater good." Gender animates the biopolitical sign. A bloody Clytemnestra, served up on the *ekkyklema* affirms Solon's laws for the confinement of women. After the staging of *The Persians*, and with this more sophisticated sense of the individual as a biopolitical unit of state, one could see how effective the myth and staging of Medea could work in the Greek culture and how today, the images of women under the rule of Taliban could be mobilized in our current context. Medea is the foreign woman who is both the victim of imperialism (Jason) and the perpetrator of terrorist acts. As the panic around Anthrax sweeps the nation, we remember Medea's secret recipes for poison, and how her *pharmakon* destroyed state sanctioned kinship and conjugal relations. With such a woman around, some no longer feel safe in their homes. I emphasize that some people are now afraid because people of color, women, immigrants, and homosexuals are long accustomed to feeling fear and anxiety in the streets and in their homes. If anything, this new panic emphasizes the privilege of those who never felt terror before.

The media broadcasts images of the Medeas of Afghanistan, Jason's victims, who have been oppressed by both a colonialist past and a Taliban present. These images are deployed to solicit our feelings of pity as an ally to invasion. Yet the email messages from RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, which once sought support for their resistance to the Taliban proscriptions against women's access to employment, education, and medical treatment, now register an angry call to the US to stop supporting terrorism in the region—the historical cause of the current conflict. These women are mobilizing against the war in Pakistan. We pity them for wearing the burka, and we are terrified at what it might conceal.

Much has been written about Plato's *pharmakon*, but what about Medea's? Tragedy offers up the individual terrorist to the judgment of the unified chorus and audience, who restrain her within sovereign moral prescriptions. Yet, as a terrorist, something has unmoored her from her position within the unified collective. Moreover, she



would be unseen rather than submit to the stage. If we were to lay down our weapons of moral right and forego our empire of moral sovereignty, what would become of this terrorist? What would be the form of her theatre? What performance strategies might we invent to account for her condition?

**SUE-ELLEN CASE**

*University of California, Los Angeles*



What might we wish for our theatre in these new times?

The impromptu memorials for the missing and lost of September 11 that sprang up at Union Square, fire houses, and public sites throughout New York City are, it seems, the vital theatre that our times immediately required—reclaiming public space for social solidarity in the face of radical loss and new fears. As the police started to clear away the candles from Union Square, Reverend Billy—the performance artist and ironic leader of the “Church of Stop Shopping”—urged his flock to continue to use and claim Union Square as a theatre of memory and condolence, a theatre against corporate mediation of grief and ensuing questions of social justice. Against the imperative to return to “normal” life by going shopping and buying stocks, against the rising tide of surveillance looming across our civil liberties, the anticonsumerist Reverend urged New Yorkers to continue to make meaningful public theatre in the streets of their wounded city.

Here, in Columbus, Ohio, no such theatre has emerged. Instead, another kind of performed grief—later, indignant anger—dressed in the normative fashions of proper patriotism, has set the tone. The sea of flags unfurled, and local news stations competed to be the first to announce their total, unwavering support of our President in a time of war.

As it happened, the opening of the Wexner Center for the Arts exhibit on the late Brazilian conceptual artist, Hélio Oiticica, opened on September 20, 2001, the same evening and hour as George Bush’s “Address on Terrorism,” which aired in the theatre adjacent to the gallery. Oiticica’s *Cosmococas*—installations that cross photography, film, and participatory theatre—were first imagined in Manhattan in 1973—just as the World Trade Towers were being constructed, in the aftermath of another American war. Not staged until now, Oiticica’s *Cosmococas* suggest a role for theatre in these new times.

George Bush’s “Address on Terrorism” was organized around a series of questions that, he imagines, Americans are asking. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha reminds us that such narrations of nation work pedagogically to instruct us on the norms of citizenship, even as they performatively set limits on who Americans are. Here the President marks the norms of “American” questions in a time of fear and war: “Americans are asking ‘Why do they hate us?’”; “Americans are asking, ‘How will we fight and win this war?’”; “Americans are asking, ‘What is expected of us?’” But as I entered Hélio Oiticica’s *Cosmococas*, these were not the questions I was asking. Indeed, the *Cosmococas* provided a crucial context for receiving, and questioning, such interpellative calls.

Like Reverend Billy, Oiticica's *Cosmococas* asks us to engage directly in art, unlearning our usual habits of passive consumption and creating new behaviors. Oiticica once defined "behavior" as "having pride in being supple/light/free," and it is just such a behavior that *Cosmococa* #5, "*Hendrix—War*," frames and evokes. In this piece, a web of hammocks criss-cross an enclosed gallery room; projected on the walls are altered images from the cover of Jimi Hendrix's album *War Heroes*, while the sound of Hendrix's music shakes the room. The images show Hendrix's face carefully disfigured, or embellished, by lines of cocaine (the "coca" in "cosmococa"). While the cocaine evokes the drug experimentation of its era, exhibit curator Carlos Basualdo suggests that the cocaine acts primarily as the ultimate sign of consumption and addiction, a key signifier in all the *Cosmococas* of the dangerous addiction of consumer-culture itself. Indebted to both Mondrian and Jack Smith, the *Cosmococas* seeks to "suspend regulated time, its efficacy, and calculation of the future," in Celso Favaretto's apt phrase, quoted in *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom*. Literally suspending the viewer, interrupting the usual behaviors of art reception, "*Hendrix—War*" asks us for a different kind of leisure. In the process, it frames another practice of engaged citizenship: we enter an experimental time of accumulated social images of first world consumption and its devastating costs.

In the hammock, to Hendrix, in the semi-dark of flashing images, I find that I am asking: if we imagined non-capitalized leisure as a vital part of freedom, what vast social change would be required to honor and protect that as a "human liberty" (in Bush's words), on a global scale?

Down the hall, George Bush says emphatically, "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists." Oiticica too felt art could participate in a moment of global critical reflection. But, as though in answer to the President's stark binary scheme of "us" and "them," Oiticica qualified: "critical position implies inevitable ambivalences," since absolute values will "castrate" the very liberties that underwrite such reflection. Oiticica insists: "To shoulder ambivalences doesn't mean to accept [. . .] this entire state of affairs; on the contrary, [it] aspires to throw it into question. That is the question." Thus, Oiticica helps frame what Americans could be asking and sets an agenda for theatre in our new times.

**JILL LANE**  
*Ohio State University*



I lean against the wall to steady myself before the huge mural-like canvas. The legendary painting is there, breathtaking and startling despite its familiarity: last century's first attempt to capture the horror of war and genocide. I see six humans and three animals writhing under a naked light bulb, as if a 1930-model camera's flashlight had been ignited to capture the chaos in a single freeze-frame. I see the silent scream of a mother who holds a dead child, her face raised to meet the massive head of a bull that appears shocked as it happens upon the scene. Toward the middle of the canvas, a mortally pierced horse wavers between life and death as it tramples over the broken body of a fallen warrior. To the far right, I see another screaming woman, hopelessly

trying to reach a tiny window out of which light shines, although it is not clear if it comes from the sun or from explosions outside.

Pablo Picasso finished painting this arresting scene in June of 1937 as a response to the savage bombing of the Basque town of Guernica in northern Spain two months earlier. The Spanish Civil War was in its initial stages, and Franco invited the Third Reich's air force to destroy the town and its civil population as an ominous message to Republican rebels. How to depict such an atrocity? Picasso opted for a *mise en abyme* that owes much to radical surrealism, cubism, and expressionism. What was at stake was the need to render catastrophic tragedy in such a way as to make it shocking yet viewable. The challenge was to evoke pity and terror without the balm of catharsis. To this end, Picasso achieved what amounts to a pictorial version of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, for the scene takes place, as critic Juan A. Ramírez has noted, in what could be read as a theatre stage where the inside and the outside, the diurnal and nocturnal collapse into each other. The anti-illusionary distancing effect is further enhanced by the artist's palate: black, gray, and white, the colors cinema used at the time, and thus of the newsreel images that reported Guernica's destruction.

I saw Picasso's masterwork just over a month after September 11 in Madrid's Reina Sofía Museum, and its message seemed to resonate with newfound urgency. How are today's artists, playwrights, and performers going to respond to the twenty-first century's first mass tragedy? How to address the horror of planes that are shockingly transformed into bombs, or of planes that bomb innocent civilians in the desert? For some, the answer is black humor as seen in clever digital montages circulating in the internet. But it might be time to reconsider the power of radical surrealism as did Picasso and another of his country fellows: Federico García Lorca.

Lorca was Western theatre's last great tragedian who himself met a tragic death at the hands of Franco's police a year before Guernica. His unfinished piece—*El público*—was early declared "unrepresentable," that is, impossible to stage due to its oneiric, surrealist structure. But for Lorca most probably that was not an issue, as what he wanted was basically to deconstruct theatre. And he did just that by means of playfully rendering the romantic tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* into a genre and gender-bending extravaganza. *El público* concludes with a great rebellion where the play's audience assaults the stage after it "discovers" that Romeo and Juliet are actually two men who by some accounts *can*, and by others *cannot*, love each other. The enraged audience is bent on destroying the theatrical illusion, a violence that is subjected to debate by a group of students and, in the last act, by the play's director and a magician. The director argues that all the time he aimed at destroying theatre and digging a tunnel towards an underground realm where a *theatre under the arena* might be created as opposed to the *open air theatre*. The magician critiques the director's plans, maintaining it is impossible to break open the drama's doors lest a host of "dogs, lunatics, monstrous leaves and gutter rats" invade all. To that, the director responds:

Es rompiendo todas las puertas el único modo que tiene el drama de justificarse, viendo, por sus propios ojos que la ley es un muro que se disuelve en la más pequeña gota de sangre.

[The only way drama has of justifying itself is by breaking all the doors, seeing with its own eyes that law is a wall that dissolves itself in the smallest drop of blood.]

Radical surrealism found ways of breaking open the doors that expose how Law is vulnerable to a drop of blood. Lorca and Picasso suffered under the law of fascism. Today, much blood is being spilled under the Judeo-Christian and Muslim law of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." Will a little drop of blood finally defeat the monsters unleashed? We might not live to learn the answer, but meanwhile, among the ruins of representation, we may still find ways of breaking open the doors of tragedy.

**ANTONIO PRIETO**

*El Colegio de Michoacán, Mexico*



... a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them.

Walter Benjamin

There is a constant dialectical interaction between the events that are gradually crystallizing in our collective consciousness as "history" and the representations of such events in various artistic media, regardless of whether they are perceived as "melodrama," "docudrama," or "tragedy." These artistic representations aim at assigning meaning or coherence to events, which at least since the second World War, if not even before then, are recognized as a failure of human values. It is artistic confrontations with what we perceive as the repeated failure of such basic human values that on different levels contain the seeds for tragedy in our time. This of course does not diminish the tragic impact of the events around us today as well as the grim prospects for the future these events hold. But I believe the notion of tragedy should be protected as an aesthetic category that enables us to examine how works of art in different ways "perform" history, reviving and recreating aspects of the past on the screen, on the stage, or through any other means of representation. This, I think, is the reason why Aristotle argued that tragedy is "something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history."

There are of course no set rules according to which this dialectical interaction can be exhaustively formulated, theoretically or in works of art. Reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for example, I feel that there are a series of historical events surrounding or framing this play, which we usually perceive as the actual tragedy. Claudius mentions the wars initiated by Fortinbras already in the second scene, and they are certainly a potential threat to the stability of the kingdom. But they serve as a backdrop to the tragedy of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, rather than the tragedy itself. Except at the very end of the last scene, when Fortinbras appears, these historical events do not even cross the threshold of the stage, invading the core of the play. When Horatio asks to "speak to the yet unknowing world/ How these things [i.e. the heap of corpses on the stage] came about," Fortinbras nonchalantly responds: "Let us haste to hear it." But he certainly does not have the time to go into the details and to reflect, and immediately after he orders that the bodies be taken up, because this sight "Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss." He orders someone "Go bid the soldiers shoot." This is clearly not the time, at least not according to Fortinbras, to philosophize about what we have seen.

When the angel of history is unable to close its wings because of the terrible storm, which Walter Benjamin tongue-in-cheek calls “progress,” when the smoke and the rubble from the catastrophe have not yet been cleared, it is probably not possible to reflect. Horatio, on the other hand, is able to evoke the flight of angels that will sing Hamlet to his rest immediately after he has pronounced his last words, that “the rest is silence.” Horatio heroically attempts to mediate between tragedy and history, but there is apparently hardly any time to listen to him.

Living in Jerusalem I constantly feel the tension between the wreckage that is piling up, producing its lethal poison of hatred and distrust, and the potentials for creating the tragedy that we are not yet able to realize on the stage or on the screen, through art. One possibility, which I feel often lures as a comfortable option, is to become pathetic. But what good does it do? So far it has been possible to react and even to act. At the present moment there is not even much to say and the possibilities for action are constantly reduced. However, silence is certainly not a solution.

Jerusalem in November 2001.

**FREDDIE ROKEM**

*Tel Aviv University, Israel*



“There are no words.” I think it was Jeff Greenfield’s voice, but I’m not sure. I was channel-surfing, searching for—what?—I still don’t know. “There are no words,” a man was saying, as he watched—and as I too watched from my living room some nine miles north of the WTC—the live televised images of the second tower collapsing into debris and dust and ashen remains. As if the eruption of the Real had temporarily forestalled speech.

The respite was brief. As news commentators, politicians, “ordinary” Americans searched for a language to describe and make sense of what they/we had endlessly witnessed, we were peppered with analogies and given to words, words, and more words. It was like Pearl Harbor and that “day of infamy” all over again. Or/and: if (when) we strike back against our “enemy,” we risk another Vietnam. It was like watching a film, because it did not seem real. Or/and: it was reality TV with a vengeance, because all too real.

What are the burdens of these analogies to other American historical traumas and to visual culture? At base, analogies represent an attempt to make sense of the unfamiliar through reference and comparison to the already known. We need to question this presumption of known-ness, which can as easily impede understanding as inform it. In a forthcoming essay in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, Janet R. Jakobsen cautions that the “logic of equivalence” that mobilizes—and is mobilized by—analogy does not just look for likeness; it produces it, potentially overwriting differences along the way. In other words (there are no other words?), the very analogical thinking that strives to make sense of “the new” may make it impossible to see anything but “the old” (an old we think we know).

This difficulty goes both ways; the process of analogy also reads back upon and potentially transforms its ground. For example, when we make December 7, 1941 the

patriotic ground of coming to know September 11, 2001, we may forget more than we know, making it impossible to recognize differences between now and then. Moreover, once the past is put into the service of justifying action in the present (most prominently, military action), we also make it impossible to see the past except in the light of contemporary needs and demands. We risk naturalizing war or otherwise making war appear inevitable.

Nevertheless, we have to risk analogy; likeness and difference are the very stuff of language and communicability. To wish for language without metaphor is to wish the world away with language. German avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen learned this the hard way. On September 17, 2001, on a German radio program, he described the attack on the World Trade Center as “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos,” going on to bemoan the slowness of any artistic endeavor he or his peers might accomplish: “You have people who are so concentrated on one performance, and then 5,000 people are dispatched into eternity, in a single moment. In comparison with that, we’re nothing as composers.” Stockhausen’s comments, published in the *New York Times* (September 30, 2001), were uniformly condemned, in Germany and elsewhere; scheduled performances of his music were canceled.

Stockhausen’s analogy between the attack on the World Trade Center and the work of art, specifically, live performance, is shocking. So too are the awe and the envy that lace his comparison: “We couldn’t even dream of [achieving] in music” what they have done “in one act.” And yet, there is something in his analogy—as it resonates with awe and envy and, yes, shock—that works for me, on me, in a way that comparisons to historical events, film, and reality TV do not. I think this has something to do with my academic location in performance studies. It also has much to do with my physical location in New York City, where I sit writing this essay in October 2001 and where I alternated between viewing the events of September 11th on television and watching, and smelling, the events of that day and after at street level. I was moving between two ways of experiencing the live. One was mediated by technology; the other was not. One was repeatable; the other was not or, at least, was not exactly repeatable. For I still smell that smell—a pungent commingling of all that remains uncounted, unaccounted for. The odor’s intensity varies with wind direction, velocity, and my own wanderings around the city.

In performance studies there have been animated discussions about the burden and possibilities of “the live” and about the capacity of performances, live and otherwise, to intervene in and perhaps reimagine the social. Arguably, an individual performance’s power to break into, interrupt, the fabric of the everyday derives in part from its affective reach, its capacity to move us, for better and for worse, in ways we could not anticipate. Although performance studies has lately tended to valorize performance and its rich world-making capacities, we do well also to pause to consider, maybe even with a Stockhausen, performance’s power to rupture the social and inspire a range of affective responses—not just joy and delight and insight, but also (sometimes alongside them, sometimes not) terror and rage and horror. The events of September 11th were staged events, excruciatingly calibrated to maximize the spectacle and its horror as America watched, watches, live. For all the debate within performance studies about performance as (is it?) always on the verge of loss, September 11th was

performance of and on the verge: performance unto death. There was nothing metaphorical about the disappearances and deaths that day.

In the face of this grand and grandly nihilistic performance event, what is to be said or done? How are we to think the live anew, with so many dead beneath us? These are not just rhetorical questions, but I have no pat answers to supply. Still, I grasp for words and take comfort and hope (an affect too) in the words of longing and love and memorialization emblazoned on the posters that quickly dotted New York City. (David Eng writes beautifully of these posters and their mournful work in this issue.) Details of a missing loved one—identifying features such as eye color, tattoos, what he or she wore to work that fateful day—were variously typed and hand-written on 8 ½ x 11-inch paper, with most of the posters also including a photograph. In the face of disappearance, these posters of the missing were last flashes of hope and first of mourning, word and image rising up at once to rage and grieve and cherish and, just perhaps, speak the world afresh.

**ANN PELLEGRINI**

*University of California, Irvine*



The sublime and terror are two notions with venerable links to tragedy. The idea of terror lies adjacent to Aristotelian reception aesthetics: the *phobos* and *eleos* of the *Poetics*. The sublime, as it was elaborated in eighteenth century aesthetics by Burke and Kant, delineates a field of experience beyond words: the moment transcending rational response which may be evoked by the experience of the tragic. The spectator confronted with an experience of fear and terror transcending the everyday on stage recognizes his/her own limitations in face of it. That this moment also induces aesthetic pleasure goes without saying.

The world-famous German composer, pioneer of electronic music and “father of techno,” Karlheinz Stockhausen may well have had Aristotle and Kant in mind when he made his infamous comments on the attack of September 11 in a press conference. Stockhausen was on tour with the most recent section of his monumental music-theatrical composition *LIGHT*. Stockhausen said: “What happened there is, of course—and now you are going to have to readjust your brains—the greatest work of art that there has ever been. That minds [Geister] should carry out something like that in an act that we in music could never dream of doing: that people could rehearse like crazy for ten years, totally fanatically, for a concert and then die. Just try and imagine what happened there. Those are people who are so concentrated on the one performance and then 5000 people are blown to resurrection in one moment. I couldn’t do that. In comparison to that we composers are nothing.” A lot more was said besides, which shall remain uncited here. The response was predictable: the concerts were cancelled; the sponsors withdrew their support; Stockhausen hastened to relativize his comments. The composer was both chastised and explained by the media and fellow composers. The apologists pointed to Stockhausen’s “private mythology,” his unworldliness and monomaniacal tendencies; in a sense he was rendered not strictly accountable for what he said.

Yet, he said and no doubt meant what he said at the time. His comparison of the terrorist attack with a theatrical performance is unmistakable in its use of metaphors: rehearsals, performance, concert, work of art, most notably, his admiration of the total dedication of the performer-perpetrators and the audience response: their being “blown to resurrection” as a final epiphany, the ultimate form of spectator response. Before we dismiss Stockhausen’s comments as the senile remarks of septuagenarian, we should ask ourselves if his response, an aesthetic and certainly not an ideological one, is possible or indeed discussible in the face of such an event. Whatever we may make of his remarks, Stockhausen was not drawing a facile comparison. On being asked, he made quite clear in the press conference that there is a clear distinction to be made between a work of art and an act of crime: “Of course it is a crime for the reason that the people were not in agreement. They did not go to the concert and no one announced beforehand that they might die. It is not as bad as that in art. But what happened there mentally, the leap into uncertainty and out of the quotidian, that happens in art too sometimes *poco a poco* or else it is nothing.” The admiration for the act remains, the radical action that transcends the bounds of the everyday: on the level of both extreme action and extreme response Stockhausen sees art and the terrorist act converge to the point that he intimates that only terrorist acts of this dimension can attain to what art in modernist terms set itself as a task.

Perhaps the closest approximation to September 11 in terms of theatricalizing a situation of mass destruction is a much quoted diary entry by the German surrealist writer and World War I war hero, Ernst Jünger. Standing on the roof of his Paris hotel in 1944, Jünger, a staff officer with German occupation forces, observed several Allied bombing raids on the city: “On the second attack at sundown I held in my hand a glass of burgundy with strawberries swimming in it. The city with its red towers and cupolas lay spread out in powerful beauty, much like a calyx that is being flown over for deadly pollination. Everything was spectacle, was pure power affirmed and elevated by pain.” While Jünger was a genuine spectator—he chose to observe the bombing—from a box seat, Stockhausen’s remarks, I would argue, are motivated primarily by the shock of the unforeseen (hence the parallels here with the sublime) and its almost immediate aestheticization in the media. At one point in the reporting by CNN on the day of the attack all interviews and announcements were visually counterpointed by interminable repetitions of the second plane burning its way through the WTC tower—from different angles and at different speeds. I was immediately reminded of Sam Peckinpah’s death scenes in *The Wild Bunch*. The infinite looping and repetition of material have, of course, a fine modernist pedigree as an aesthetic device and were perfected by Stockhausen in his compositions.

And even Stockhausen, one of the last modernists, a self-obsessed priest of art, presumably garnered his information from the visual news media and saw something that could only evoke his admiration. The determination of purpose and immensity of effect seem to have reminded him of what true art should strive to achieve (and which it has presumably forfeited). It is absolute, brooks no compromise, and demands from its recipients complete and utter devotion. If only the 5000 had agreed to their “resurrection,” then we might have been able to observe the attack like Jünger on the rooftop of his hotel—with detachment and admiration for the sublimity of terror.

**CHRISTOPHER B. BALME**  
*Universität Mainz, Germany*





Like most, I have been deeply affected by the image of terror and tragedy of September 11 as well as the countless narratives related to its dead and missing victims. For many Americans, September 11 was their brutal initiation to terrorism, which sadly has been a constant reality to other citizens of the world. From the border-crossers in the Arizona desert or Rio Grande to the boat people from Laos, Vietnam, or Haiti, it is terrorism—economic, environmental, military, and political—that has driven people all over the world to the United States of America for refuge. The irony of this tragedy is that the myth of the American Dream may have led many of them to be among the missing bodies, to become partial remains of the World Trade Center. I wonder about the unknown men and women who worked as cooks and bus boys in the “Window of the World Restaurant” or as janitors and window cleaners of the towers. Perhaps some of them did not even leave a trace of their disenfranchised existence as immigrants, Third World New Yorkers, or undocumented workers to merit a missing-person’s poster or a burning candle. A new form of tragedy in the twenty-first century has emerged.

In the days after September 11, the scenario was set: America prepared to combat global terrorism through “Operation Enduring Freedom,” while domestic terrorism increased, affecting anyone who “looked” like a “terrorist.” Even Latinos, mistaken as Arabs, had been targets of racial profiling and violence in California. As in the Greek tragedy, some men are celebrated as war heroes, while others are transformed into “Satyrs.” The sense of terror has produced a sense of tragedy. It quickly became clear that “enduring freedom” was not meant for all. In some instances, people of color tried to cloak their differences with the flag. Patriotism has silenced the voice of dissent. The sense of tragedy could only diminish if we as a nation also combat prejudice, racism and oppression at home. Freedom has to be inclusive of all Americans. In order to do that America has to combat its own indifference and insensitivity to others. For instance, when the US boycotted The UN World Conference Against Racism in South Africa, it demonstrated to the rest of the world its indifference to the possibility of change and dialogue.

I do not know if we will ever have a real sense of how much was lost on September 11, but I know for sure that the sense of tragedy manifests itself in different forms. I know that for some, the sense of tragedy is real, concrete, and tangible. It represents the smell of the dead while working at ground zero. It becomes the uncertainty of a missing loved one. It becomes the sudden death of a Mexican, Colombian, or Salvadorian immigrant working on the upper floors of one of the towers. The sense of tragedy will go along with those who lost or may lose their civil liberties. The sense of tragedy is equally detrimental for those civilians who may lose their lives in the battlefields. But while terror will forever define the morning of September 11, the call for unification in the name of patriotism and war will intensify the sense of tragedy.

**ALICIA ARRIZÓN**

*University of California, Riverside*



When I heard on NPR what was happening in NYC and D.C., my mind could concentrate on little else—were my friends safe, were my two mothers (the mother who raised me and the step-mother who picked up where she left off) in D.C. okay? Would we make it back to Chicago, and if we did, what would we come home to? My partner and I were in Minocqua, Wisconsin for a much-needed vacation and had been in a cabin by the lake since Saturday afternoon. After watching television and listening to the radio for an unprecedented and uninterrupted 12 hours on Tuesday, we were craving human contact; so, we left our isolated cabin and ventured into town.

We walked into the local micro-brewery and restaurant, and a waitress seated us in the corner of the non-smoking area away from everyone else. When we wanted to move because we couldn't see the TV (I had yet to hear from my step mother in D.C.), she said over her shoulder, "Sit anywhere you like." Her hostility was palpable. We were also getting furtive looks from the restaurant staff—gazes that said "I'm sorry" and something else I could not read. My partner held her menu close and whispered: "Do you think we should leave?" I glibly said "No" and returned to my menu, my nonchalance absorbed by a variety of fatty items on the list. We were greeted by another waiter who took our order: an appetizer so that we could leave soon and a 10 oz. beer. The food came. We watched the news, we ate, and we left.

When we got back to the cabin, I realized that I chose to stay because I didn't want to enhance the clientele's already growing suspicions about us—as obvious "outsiders" who looked "different"—by leaving abruptly. I imagined being chased into the parking lot and then into the street by an angry group of citizens bent on avenging a terrible loss and what was rapidly becoming a national tragedy—the cry for blood (the blood of our "enemies" and blood for the Red Cross) was already overwhelming. Two days later we gave up on the idea of our vacation and headed back to Chicago. I was glad to see the skyline and relieved to see the Sears tower. For three days I actually believed it wouldn't be there when I got back to this place I now call home.

The kind of relief I felt in returning reminded me of the feeling I always have when I leave "the city." It was the same kind of feeling I had in the restaurant as I kept running through a litany of names in my head—like a mantra: Shepard, Bird, Diallo, King, Teena. I realize now that this catastrophic event does not in any way make my fate parallel with theirs—it is just a reminder of the simple fact that this possibility shapes my present, and therefore, has to be part of what I call a "future." Psychologists say that events like suicide—which has graced my life twice and close to home—rupture our idea of the present, so that time dances in and around that signal event—a before and an after that create a play of opposites by the simple fact of their proximity to catastrophe and loss.

As I drove back to this city I love and the friends whose touch I crave because distance has made them more necessary, I was reminded of the Faulkner that I've been teaching—a cosmos where *was is*. It is certainly the world I live in—the place where the mantra is not for special days or "events," but a litany, to echo Lorde, for everyday survival. I am not the only one who sees bin Laden, so much a part of our past (we cannot forget the CIA's support and training of bin Laden's rebels when they were fighting the Soviets) and now so present in our desperate search for meaning in a "future" we so ardently seek. *Was* certainly *is*.

Perhaps it was foolish to walk into a small town watering hole and not expect “trouble” on September 11th. But to remain at home on Tuesday would have meant that the ordinary rhythm of my life—the coming and the going—would heretofore be circumscribed by *what if*. Instead, if I allow *was is* to contour my days, I can remember a way of being in the world that makes the quotidian look like less of a battlefield and more of an opportunity. Now I understand what my grandmother meant when she said that getting up and going out everyday, if you are able, is always an act of defiance.

**SHARON P. HOLLAND**  
*University of Illinois, Chicago*



On 11 September 2001, notions of tragedy and the tragic became unhinged. Catharsis seeped into Artaudian fear as the perpetrators were themselves sacrificed within their own performance, and their successors, silent, invisible, and thus lurking and menacing, threatened to strike again. The possibility of mediatized live witness to such tragic events demands that the truly tragic is magnified to ever-greater dimensions to satisfy our expanding parameters of experience. The unimaginable and the inexplicable had become reality; terror and fear, replacing catharsis, defied rational thinking as the seemingly irrational tragedy became a reality. The new gods are the terrorists. Like Prometheus, we have been chained to a rock.

On that day of the performance of terror, we moved on to a world of seemingly neo-classical tragedy with a twist, that is the fear of it, the reporting of it in vivid detail, and then the repercussions of its effects. But in the twenty-first century there are no ‘*bienséances*.’ All effects, no matter how horrific, are included. Now we have the real live thing in front of us with insights into the thoughts and minds of the victims as they confront the inevitable. But is such tragedy surpassable? Can we go beyond? Will it take an even greater act of terror to reconceptualize our notion of tragedy on our scale of the tragic? Feared future attacks of germ or chemical warfare including the ongoing Anthrax scares, though just as appalling and devastating, may not have the same effect on the mediatized consciousness of the world since the TV networks cannot guarantee dramatic coverage. The war in Afghanistan had already been forgotten by the Western media, ever hungry for improving and bettering the news. The US-British bombardment of Afghanistan is not as tragic as September 11th as it is not perceived to be so, because the media has little presence there to capture the theatre of war. The even more pernicious weapon of mass destruction (HIV/AIDS) rampages through Africa unchecked through lack of political will and the profit motives of corporatism. Is it not “tragic” that the valiant AIDS-awareness efforts of South African Theatre-in-Education activists battle on against what need not be inevitable?

And how do we now perform theatre’s canon of the tragic in a world where tragic heroes are no longer unique and sometimes misguided individuals who in different circumstances might not have succumbed to fate? Have we gone back now to an era when the god-terrorists are imperceptible and are able to strike at will, locking us in perpetual torment? Or are we languishing in a plague-like situation of ignorance in which societies shore up their borders and their legislation, alienating some with its

unjust consequences? Are the fated aircraft of 11 September the new versions of the ship, *Le Grand Saint-Antoine* of Artaud's *Theatre and Its Double*, bringing the plague of terror and destruction to civilization? Perhaps the order to shoot down hijacked aircraft is like Artaud's reported Viceroy of Sardinia's command to seal his ports to prevent the plague-ridden ship from docking and wiping out the populace.

In Ireland the tragic canon needs unpacking in the same way as contemporary drama reeled in the aftershock of NY. The newly released film, *H3*, featuring the ultimate sacrifice of terrorist hunger strikers in a Northern Ireland prison in 1981 in a concerted and tragic act of shaming the British, floundered. Once national heroes for their suicide—rather than the terror and murder they inflicted prior to incarceration—were now troubling reminders of the country's famed neutrality, economic instability, and vacillating ambivalence to terrorism in a pre-ceasefire world. In 2001 Ireland stands at the forefront of the tiger economies of first-world capitalism, tying its futures to US markets, while trying to shed its old image of insurrection. Its rightful new place in Wall Street made it victim, too, to the act of terror: an Irish nineteenth-century Famine-era house being reconstructed near Wall Street was caked in the debris of the twin towers, one mass act of destruction layering the index of another, an ironic double-tragedy. No place now for funding Irish terrorism across the Atlantic; verifiable disarmament became the political weapon of choice. And that archetypal Irish nationalist dramatic call to arms of the Old Woman in Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, drawing, like a rat-catcher, the young men of Ireland to their death through armed struggle, must stay silent for the time being until we find a way of representing theatrically aspirations for self-determination which are separate from the fundamentalism of nationalist ideologies. Maybe it is Synge's "purer" tragic figure Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*, whose anger and stoicism provide templates for mapping our contemporary experience: "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied." But that "acceptance" comes only after the unbearable scream at the inexorable and inevitable. I can't go on. I must go on. I'll go on.

**BRIAN SINGLETON**  
*Trinity College, Dublin*



On September 11, 2001, at 11:00 AM CST, I stood in front of 350 students attending the Introduction to Theatre class. I was scheduled to lecture on two chapters from *The Creative Spirit: An Introduction to Theatre*, "The Impulse to Perform" and "Theatre and Society." In themselves, these are rich topics for a discussion; at 11:00 AM, these topics were suddenly given a new currency. Some of the students were unaware of the events unfolding on the East Coast, those who were aware did not know how to respond. When I stood in front of this group, it was obvious to me that—as always and no matter what—it was my ethical responsibility to teach these students and provide them with a critical vocabulary that would help them intersect with the material presence of what was quickly becoming a surface TV event, a depository of ideologies and political rationalizations. Many thoughts were rushing through my mind—"It is barbaric to. . . . But suffering does not tolerate forgetting" (Theodor Adorno); "No one bears witness for the witness" (Paul Celan); "Words faded from my memory" (Charlotte Delbo)—as I considered an opening statement. Before classes at the University of Minnesota were

cancelled at noon, I gave a lecture on the consequences of using representational practices to define the limits of what is thinkable and perceivable in our culture. I decided to talk about “injurious” representational practices, those that aim to erase the individuals who are fully lost in the barrage of words, and the need to preserve and protect these individuals from becoming material for consolation and pleasure. “Don’t write yourself / in between worlds, / rise up against / multiple meanings, / trust the trail of tears / and learn to live” (Celan, once again).

Listening and watching the fragments broadcast in the media, I have been continuously thinking about the impulse to perform. If I were a complete cynic, I would use one of many theoretical paradigms—from Warhol’s “15-minute of fame” to Baudrillard’s “simulacrum”—to explain this phenomenon. My statement, however, would be nothing more than a repetition freezing the gesture of thinking. Listening and watching the fragments broadcast in the media, I kept wondering why there was no discussion about the ethics of posing questions to the people emerging from the collapsed WTC. It took some time before some of the intellectuals/journalists in this country—Susan Sontag, Maureen Dowd, and Andrew Sullivan, just to name a few—started to draw attention to the representational practices peddled by public figures, the strategies employed in constructing these images, and the different aspects of religious and secular fundamentalism.

Theatre and tragedy or theatre of tragedy. Tadeusz Kantor once said that theatre is an answer to, rather than representation of, reality; that theatre takes place when life is pushed to its final limits, where all categories and concepts lose their meaning and right to exist; that theatre is a catachrestic space, where both the body and the object are liberated from the pre-assigned meanings by a convention, culture, and ideology; that theatre enunciates the aporia of knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between observation and comprehension, between an event and a testimony, or between the materiality of the living and the immateriality of the Other. In moments like these, his words resonate strongly in me.

As the events of September 11, 2001 painfully make clear, the missing articulation between the living body and the Other is invariably accompanied by that which I can understand, that which needs to be forgotten, and that which bears witness to my incapacity to speak. This incapacity to speak is the reason why I speak, despite the fact that, as Samuel Beckett would have it, every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness. Faced with a ceaseless need to give birth to words that can name the unnamable, the living beings speaking is a eulogy for repetition that suspends life and death in a spectacular play of thought and no relief.

The murmurs and the contours of words break the silence of the staged/mediated reality. I am faced with the hollowed out fragments in the present and in the voided existence toward which and from which I speak:

Grace to breathe the void. . . . (Samuel Beckett)

**MICHAL KOBIALKA**  
*University of Minnesota, Twin Cities*



As I watched the towers collapse from my balcony, many of my students watched from their dorms. Some of those who lived in student housing a few blocks away from ground zero were displaced on the second week of school. When I eventually gathered my wits about the atrocity, my mind turned to them. I thought about the undergraduate lecture course on “Art and the World” I had just started teaching the week before which enrolled over one hundred and fifty students. When I planned this course I chose to develop a curriculum that would encourage critical thinking about various antagonisms within the social that young people encounter daily, specifically questions of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

In the wake of September 11th, the world had changed, and questions of art in relation to the world were realigned. My syllabus seemed a document of another time and place. I thought about redoing the syllabus so that it spoke to this new historical moment. But the simple fact was that I did not know that moment. I am not an expert in the various global contingencies that led to this tragedy. I can only teach what I know. As a pedagogue, however, I could not ignore what my students have been going through, or for that matter what I have been enduring during these bleak weeks. I stayed with the initial course plan I had designed before the tragedy.

Eight days after the catastrophe I lectured on the work of performance artist and philosopher Adrian Piper. I began the class by screening Piper’s *Cornered*, a minimalist video of the artist directly facing the camera while she delivers a monologue on race and racial classification. The piece expertly challenges and calls into question current US epistemologies of race. Piper undermines white privilege by suggesting that under the taxonomies of race currently in place in the United States most people are black. Whenever I teach this video it solicits strong reactions. This time was no different. Half of the students attempted to say something like, “Now, in this time of tragedy, race does not seem to matter at all.” I would summarize the opposing sentiment as, “Now, more than ever, race matters most.” While I certainly felt the latter was true, I worked to help both sides articulate their positions.

A subsequent lecture about humor read Freud’s “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious” alongside Richard Pryor’s famous *Long Beach Concert*. The question that resonated for students at this somber time was whether or not humor was appropriate or even possible in the wake of tragedy. This question of humor was also central when I invited performance artist Carmelita Tropicana to class on the day her play *Milk of Amnesia* was assigned. During her interactions with the students I saw her expand on themes of memory and loss that she introduced in her play. These thematics were now recontextualized to a tragedy quite different from the trauma of her exilic displacement from Cuba. It was enlightening to see such a skilled artist work with her audience and begin to develop a new piece about memory and loss in light of September 11th. The piece, now titled *911*, has been performed at several venues.

The work of another eminent Latino performance artist, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, was screened during a lecture on borders and postmodernity. I initially assigned the video for purposes of helping my students debunk the celebratory aura that surrounds globalization. But during this post-tragedy moment most of my pupils were very conscious of the dangers of this process. Gomez-Peña’s video documentation of *Border*

*Brujo* seemed to resonate alongside anxieties about borders that the nation was currently experiencing. One of the artist's enchantatory lines of dialogue argued for the way in which there are no longer any borders between the so-called third world and the first world. In an exaggerated Mexican accent, reminiscent of Tropicana's thick Cuban cadences, Gomez-Peña tells his audience that the third world is already in the first and those screening the video today could not help but be taken aback by this statement. I framed this text in relation to the anti-immigrant anxieties that abound throughout North American culture. I suggested that many of the 800 or so people of middle Eastern descent that were rounded-up by law enforcement in the wake of September 11 and the people who had recently experienced savage anti-Muslim violence were now all border brujos, ghosts haunting the public sphere.

I was thinking about adding one more text, but it was not practical. Ernst Bloch's three volume *The Principle of Hope* is not a text you teach first semester college students; it is a book you devote an entire graduate course to review. I have been thinking about the performance of utopia for quite some time, and Bloch has been something like a touchstone for this work. Now it seems, more than ever, that helping each other know that there is another way, another place and time, is crucial. Teaching itself can be thought of as the performance of utopia. Utopia for Bloch was chiefly a critique of the present and an analysis of the past that helped one imagine a future. That is what I am striving for in the classroom and the lecture hall. Once I may have been happy to teach my students to begin to think critically. Now it seems that we must give them more. Pedagogues must offer their students much needed critical tools, practices of thought that will allow them to face the present and embrace a better place and time, a future that is not structured by the violent asymmetries the led to the attack of September 11th and the devastation which followed.

**JOSÉ ESTEBAN MUÑOZ**  
New York University



I was in Tokyo on September 11. With my limited Japanese, it took me several minutes of listening to the rapid-fire account by the Japanese correspondent that the scene—frightened New Yorkers running toward the camera before an advancing plume of smoke and ash—was really happening, not footage from some Armageddon-type movie. Glued to the internet for the remainder of my stay, I felt strangely unable to measure the scope of the event. The inevitable calls for retaliation and surge in anti-Arab hate crimes/speech were equally worrisome and difficult to gauge at a distance. When I returned to California, I realized that that difficulty was shared by many of my friends here, most acutely by the New Yorkers and Washingtonians among us. Many expressed an urgent desire to return to the sites, to join the grieving processes, to reconnect with friends and family, and—this was the response with which I felt most sympathy—to try to fathom the response(s) and formulate one's own. I'm struck by the fact that for all of us, proximity seemed to offer the promise of understanding: contact as clarity, touchstone as signpost.

But the new school year was approaching. Faced with the prospect of teaching a theatre/dance history course covering the years 1650 to 1900, I had to fight the

nagging thought that “none of this matters.” I imagine that most of us entered into this field of study because on some level, we believe(d) that there was some connection between art—or the study of it—and (some version of) humanist values; as idealistic and simplistic as it sounds, I suppose I saw this endeavor as worthwhile because I believed that in some attenuated, modest way, if only enough people could apprehend the connection (for better and worse) between representation and ideology, between the possible and the materially-present, critique its oppressive, reiterative functions but also appreciate its imaginative potential, we (and this “we” was never quite identified, I see now) might inch toward a more egalitarian formation. Closer to home, the scholarship so influential to me—anti-racist, post-nationalist (if not post-national), feminist and postcolonialist ideological critiques—implicitly seemed to offer the promise of something better/different. And yet decades, if not centuries, of such scholarship find us here.

As much to allay my worries over relevance as to achieve any pedagogical ends, I began the course with an introductory essay. “We’re here to study the history of theatre and dance from 1650–1900,” it began. “Do you think there’s any point to doing so, in light of what’s going on in the world? How does knowing the history of theatre and dance matter, or does it?” I asked my students to illustrate their responses with their own experiences in/of performance, and (if their answer was affirmative) to try to recall incidents that not only elicited intense emotions but actually changed the way they thought/felt/behaved about/toward anyone else afterward. I stressed that I was looking for honest answers—no one would be penalized for concluding that it didn’t/couldn’t have an effect. I would post our responses (anonymously, if requested) on the class website, and we would revisit our responses at the end of the course.

The essays were a revelation. Only one student—one of the few who wrote that theatre didn’t matter—referenced current events. Most of the students wrote that yes, performance mattered—not surprising, given the self-selected sample. Yet nearly all of these latter essays illustrated their responses with incidents of emotional escapism (my instructions notwithstanding), moments in the theatre when they were “transported,” “completely absorbed,” “swept away.” Few of them could recall (or wrote about) a perceptible connection between performance and their quotidian experience of the world/other people.

My point is not to delegitimize these responses; I am, however, reminded that it is our daunting but necessary task as performance educators to connect such experiences inside the performance space to the life-world beyond it. Brecht’s call for an antidote to the soporific effects of realism may have resulted in the mainstreaming of a certain kind of “alienation effect,” but its commodification as an aesthetic gimmick appears to have sapped its power to compel a situated political response. We need to understand how and why escapism—including the aestheticization and ideologically-inflected re-narrativization of tragic events—remains so compelling, and how that impulse is related to conditions in the world from which one escapes.

More urgently, I want to think back to that connection between proximity and understanding; for considered in a certain light, performance is the proximate medium par excellence. Proximity alone, of course, cannot guarantee understanding; and perhaps discursive ideological critique alone is no more effective. But while proximity—between performer and audience, amongst audience members, between



“performance” and “the real world”—may not equal understanding, a critical, self-conscious engagement with it is a (necessary?) pre-condition. I don’t know if any of my students will revise their essays when we revisit them at the end of the quarter. But I’m hopeful that some will at least wonder about it the next time they step into a performance space.

**KAREN SHIMAKAWA**

*University of California, Davis*



I was teaching *Oedipus, The America Play, and Angels in America* in my various classes during the week of the World Trade Center disaster. Along with many of our students, I saw the towers burn and crumble, and the ashen bodies of the living wander through our campus in a daze from lower Manhattan to the presumed safety of uptown. Amidst the stench, the ominous clouds of smoke, and the clay-colored human figures, the classical and postmodern worlds of tragedy engulfed us. Tragedy permeated the air.

Surely, for most New Yorkers, pity and fear measured our heartbeats. Catharsis, in the classical sense, however, was another story. My teenage students (majors in the Department of Drama), upon their return to class once the university reopened, wrote passionately about the “knowledge” they now had that they did not have prior to September 11, 2001. The vast majority had never lived in New York City before. Coming to college (and now in their second week of it), they were away from home, friends, and family for the first time in their lives. Yet, at this particular moment in time and space, they were within a half-mile of a terrorist attack that would alter the United States’ perception and actualization of itself—as an isolated fortress—forever. So, too, their own knowledge would be marked by the impact that only horrific, intense, immediate violence can evoke.

The students wrote and then spoke about their experiences of fear, insecurity, loss, loneliness, compassion, hatred, love, and mortality. Many addressed, with breath-taking awareness and gravity that they, too, would die someday. One student readily acknowledged her difficulty in understanding how such deliberate annihilation of human life could and did manifest itself. *Oedipus* echoed in our exchange. “I want to know,” Sophocles’ *Oedipus* demands, only to learn in the end what he must know—that without true knowledge of the fullness of existence, he is not whole.

A story about Thebes, her people, and one person’s quest for knowledge. A story about New York City—about the United States—her people, and a city’s/nation’s quest for knowledge. Narratives about heroes and common folks, individuals, and communities.

Yet, as Suzan-Lori Parks in *The America Play* eloquently reminds us about “home” (or nation) and the act of knowing, unless we locate the hole that resides at the heart of America, we cannot recognize the possibilities surrounding the new whole that can emerge—that can initiate necessary national as well as global change through knowledge and action. Writing in the *New York Times*, Frank Rich poignantly noted that “the more we know now [post-World Trade Center disaster], the better, because

knowledge is an antidote to the anxiety of change, and more change is the only certainty ahead" (9/29/01). For my students, a nexus between classical and postmodern worlds—a reversal and recognition conceived in the infant millennium—had created new knowledge: a profound, unavoidable awareness of previously unfathomable dimensions.

There is now a gaping hole in the bottom of Manhattan, the symbolic gateway to America. It will remain forever a massive gravesite, a location for national mourning and remembrance. And yet, we are not unaccustomed to (tragic) holes in the United States. The landscape of United States history is indelibly marked by such ruptures and the losses of thousands of our people, from our collective knowledge of the criminal inhumanity of slavery to the unforgivable, inadequate response to the AIDS crisis. These tragedies—bred through a failure, an inability, of (some) humans to understand and accept others' differences through the illuminating knowledge and profundity of their own otherness—challenge many to imagine the dimensionalities of times past, present, and future.

The theatre unambiguously places us—as artists and scholars—in front of holes and tragedies, audiences and students. Our work demands that we go to such places and circumstances in our imaginations. Likened to the role it occupied during the classical period, contemporary theatre can take a critical lead in this infant century to create stories, pictures, gestures, sounds, lights, and movement that will keep us active intellects, imaginative artists, and courageous citizens, as we provide for our communities locations, to come together for much needed contemplation and for action of the mind, body, and spirit.

It did not escape my students—young artists in training—that Tony Kushner created a dramatic world in *Angels in America* where Harper expressed her new knowledge that the earth's air is protected—and therefore we mortals are protected—by a netting of linked, floating souls of the dead. Here in Manhattan, nearly two months after the disaster, one cannot miss the penetration of the night sky by immensely powerful searchlights, as the excavation of ground zero continues. Amidst the ever-present billows of smoke that arise from the seemingly endless smoldering, the glaring light—reaching ever higher—is dusted with ashen flecks that dance in the wind. Harper's souls are rising. The great work begins.

**BOB VORLICKY**  
*New York University*



What are we?

The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, building off of an ancient rabbinic tale, recently gave this answer: we are "open closed open." Everything is open before we are born, and everything is open when we die. In between, while we are alive, everything is closed.

When a tragedy happens, when thousands of lives are erased under the weight of compressed steel, when planes explode into the side of symbols, when downtown air

smells of mass death—death invades life, openness interrupts closure. A hole is put in a wall. A beam of light streaks through a dark tunnel. Closed open. There is horror in tragedy, but there is also opening, the possibility of light, of new ideas, new visions, new possibilities.

The Talmud tells us to be silent in the presence of another's grief. After the Oklahoma City bombing, this is what playwright David Mamet advocated. He decried what he described in his essay "Make-Believe Town" as staged sympathy, a kind of mass media theatre of mourning that followed those bombings where strangers grieved for the dead they didn't know. This is certainly true of the 24 hour bereavement broadcasts that CNN and MSNBC have made part of the new air we breathe. But the question remains: what to do with this opening in the midst of life? What are we?

These are art's questions and it is to art where—against all flag-waving odds—we must continue to turn. And I'm not talking about the "Star Spangled Banner" reissues, "God Bless America" anthologies, and red, white, and blue DVD titles (*Independence Day*, *Saving Private Ryan*) that now occupy store front windows. This is not art. This is propaganda where purchase power patriotism is meant to breed cash register consensus and smother dissent.

John Adams's recent opera *El Niño* is art born from being "open closed open." How does re-birth happen? How do we recover from disaster not just with hope but with ethical vision? Originally staged in Paris on the brink of the new millennium, *El Niño* is at its core an elaborate re-staging of the Nativity story full of New Testament gospels and Mary-God-and-Gabriel annunciation dramas. But with the inclusion of poetry from Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos in the libretto, Adams works through religion to understand the secular experience of miracles in times of crisis. The niño of the title is both the boy and the storm, the niño born of el niño, the child born of disaster.

In this way, Adams gives us an opera rooted in the blessings of otherness. He juggles conflicts and opposing voices—the Bible and Mexican feminists, birth and death—to help us find a way out. He was wise to choose Castellanos for so much of the libretto. She believed that the only way change is born is when we engage "the other." She knew that the great challenge of transformative art is not just to identify the other, but to create a language that speaks to it. Without that language there can be no miracles after death, no birth after disasters, and we will all be like the chess players of her poem "Chess"—two people sitting in silence, trying to find a way to destroy each other.

A centerpiece of the libretto is "Memorandum on Tlatelolco," Castellanos's classic poetic response to another tragedy, the 1968 student massacre in the Mexico City plaza of Tlatelolco. Before we would know about patent leather office shoes caked in Manhattan ash or temp job pumps kicked from legs as they dropped from the 32nd floor, Castellanos saw hundreds of student shoes—shoes left behind by people who ran, shoes left behind by people who died when they were hit with bullets fired from government guns during an October night. By the time the sun came up, the plaza had been swept clean of violence, all evidence of murder erased. Castellanos instructed, "Don't search for what is not there: clues, corpses"; "Don't comb through the files because nothing has been entered on the books."

There were no government memoranda issued so Castellanos wrote her own, and she took the “memory” embedded in “memorandum” seriously. Facing a crime scene stripped of the proof of its deaths, Castellanos advocated memory as a weapon against conspiratorial amnesia. Remembering what others refuse to remember was her “way of helping dawn to break upon so many stained consciences.” After September 11, I also think of it as her way of finding a sense of justice in the emergencies of tragedy, her way of making sense of openings in the midst of closure.

Amichai ends that same poem with this: “I believe with perfect faith that at this very moment millions of human beings are standing at crossroads and intersections, in jungles and deserts, showing each other where to turn, what the right way is, which direction.” That moment is not this moment, but wouldn’t it be incredible if it was.

**JOSH KUN**

*University of California, Riverside*



In *Fires in the Mirror*, Anna Deavere Smith tells us as the character of author Letty Cottin Pogrebin, “. . . I’m beginning to worry that we’re trotting out our Holocaust stories too regularly and that we’re going to inure each other to the truth of them.” At first the repeated images of September 11 verified the unimaginable. I found myself unable to look away from the television screen; I needed each new and repeated angle of the same events to confirm what my mind and soul refused to comprehend fully.

A group of high school students I spoke with talked about their initial disbelief and horror followed by an ebbing attention to the images. These students are participants in *Project 2050*, a collaboration with youth, artists, activists, and scholars, which I lead as the artistic director of New WORLD Theater. The attack occurred during the early part of their day; school was not dismissed; instead teaching was immediately suspended to follow the crisis. One student told me, “After a while it was all kind of the same. They just had it on different channels each new period.” Another made a poignant, somewhat detached observation: “We went from class to class watching our teachers cry.”

As the media spoke of a national loss of innocence, I thought about these responses from young people of a generation that has already come of age in a time of previously unimagined danger. For my generation, sex was equated with discovery and personal freedom; for their post-AIDs generation, sex equals the threat of death. In my coming of age, travel evoked images of adventure and a world without boundaries; in theirs, travel now evokes the possibility of being sacrificed as a human guided missile. Tragedy has profoundly divided our generations. I come from a time of before *and* after; theirs has increasingly little mooring in an experience before tragedy.

And in an era of such vivid collective tragedy, I wonder, if it will be possible for us to move through the stories of trauma, so necessary to the process of grief and healing, to a space beyond the inertia of victimhood, which in itself is oddly celebratory, morbidly competitive, and ultimately closed. I have been grappling with this question for the last few years, ever since my 22 year old theatre, whose mission is to produce and present works by artists of color, decided to engage youth communities. Our

challenge has been to shape new theatre practices that acknowledge yet subvert the tragedy and victimhood omnipresent in the lives of youth.

*Project 2050* has been our effort to move from the individual to the communal, by creating a context around the individual's experience so that experience is understood within a larger, shared social frame. We have been asking young people to consider the year 2050, the date demographers project people of color will become a majority in the United States. Working with academics, community activists, and professional artists, we began by exploring the themes of social space, money, power, and lies in relationship to the 2050 projection.

In an early workshop, I asked a group of young people to create a time capsule of their lives in 1999 for the people of 2050. I asked, if they couldn't send material objects, what information they thought would be important for people in the future to know about their generation. From the discussion we created a survey which became the script we later set to choreographed movement and sound. Their text, drawn from their self-survey, included lines like, "Only one of us has never been followed in a store." "6 of us believe in the right to own handguns, 7 of us don't, the rest of us aren't sure how we feel." "Most of us love to read." "All of us have made fun of someone based on their looks." "All of us know someone who has been a victim of domestic violence." "All of us know someone with HIV or AIDS." The piece ended with the line "9 of us think we'll be alive in 2050, the rest of us hope so."

Clearly the piece teetered on the edge of victimhood as audience members absorbed the tragic generational statistics of a multi-ethnic sampling of 12–18 year olds and the degree to which violence and loss had trespassed on their lives. But to hear that the majority also projected themselves into the distant future and that all had the desire to do so powerfully transformed victimhood into the possibility of something beyond mere survival.

In the aftermath of September 11, it is this collaboration with young people that has guided me from the overwhelming paralysis of shock toward the near-impossible act of imagining a future. As the students described their numb witnessing, I recognized a posture of survival in the face of the relentless repetition of events lived in the media. The protective distance they created, however, does not necessarily have to imply a turning away or shutting down. In their, and our collective, stepping back, perhaps an opportunity can be seized in which a larger picture can emerge, more complex, less insular, and ultimately transformative of our victimhood.

**ROBERTA UNO**

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst*



Tragedy has been declared dead at least as often as the theatre has. Worse than dead, perhaps, it has been irrelevant to the concerns of modern and postmodern Western cultures, and the term itself devalued into a generic word for calamity. As a formal system derived from Aristotle, the genre imposed an order of ethical action defined primarily in terms of a correlation between responsibility and suffering. Kenneth Burke distinguished tragic form from "sheer victimization" in *A Grammar of Motives*

when he wrote: "It is deplorable but not tragic, simply to be a victim of circumstance, for there is an important distinction between destiny and sheer victimization . . . at the moment of tragic vision, the fatal accidents are felt to bear fully upon the act, while the act itself is felt to have summed up the character of the agent." What Burke omitted from his definition, however, was an even more problematic issue inherited from Aristotle: its affective capacity to elicit pity and fear. Perhaps throughout the long critical history of trying to identify and categorize particular works according to the genre, what was dying was less tragedy than the capacity of audiences to respond with "pity and fear."

It might once have been a question of whether the devastation at the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001 constitute a national tragedy. More currently, there would be questions of the disparities between real events and their categorization and representation, given the impossibility of representation to encompass the reality. Yet, in many of the immediate responses to the day, the desire to see an ethical logic at work appeared in widely divergent explanations in which "the character of the agent," the United States, precipitated the disaster. From one corner came the Reverend Jerry Falwell suggesting that the events were a sign of God's displeasure with an America corrupted by "abortionists, homosexuals" and "deviants" of all kinds. More politically astute, and widely echoed, was Susan Sontag's indictment of US imperialism and foreign policy in *The New Yorker* in the week following. Whatever the absurdity or correctness of the analysis, both kinds of explanation correlated the national suffering to the national responsibility. The act itself, furthermore, was pre-figured symbolically to invoke such response, as the destructive forces of global capitalism were reciprocated in the destruction of its symbolic centers: the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. If such explanations deployed the ethical dimension of a "tragic vision," however, none captured the emotional dimensions of the events.

Neither making America the victimized hero nor assigning its responsibility within global politics is commensurate with the real deaths and grief that arrived on September 11 or the real deaths in Afghanistan and elsewhere later. Left out of the tragic form is the reality of death and loss, and that reality, as well as its suddenness, was the source of so much trauma, shock, and grief. The symmetry of responsibility which is shaped by a "tragic vision"—the assertion and counter-assertion—is cracked open by the asymmetry of the suffering and the binding of individual victims to the geo-political agent, America. The gap between suffering and responsibility, between individual sorrow and the nation, is excluded from the purely formal aspect of the dialectic. Rather than a symmetry between action and consequence, the actual events showed an absolute asymmetry, an aporetic difference, between national acts, personal suffering, and the Real. Unformed, the Real was inescapable in the events of September 11, and what came from there was real pity and terror.

Out of such an experience comes an audience for whom tragedy is now a possibility, a community that has collectively known the affective trauma of aporia, the reality of death. This is not to say that all experiences have been the same, that everyone feels the same sorrow or thinks the same thing, that the media has not sentimentalized victims and heroes, that politicians have become wise, that the postmodern past is erased, that further mistakes, other atrocities, will not occur, that the flags that initially signaled the solidarity of mourning do not also signal virulent nationalism. It is not to

say that the reality was unmediated by television images or commodified by reportage. It is to say that in spite of all that, the shock of the Real overtook the unthinkable. Events on September 11 did not create a tragedy. Rather, they created a community for whom tragedy, as one of many possibilities, can be freshly understood. The consolations of tragedies of the past and those yet to be written can be felt in their emotional truth, without which the form is empty and useless, a relic of some other past, some other people. In other words, it has been not tragedy but audiences that have been "dead," historicized into needing other more historical or ironic forms to mediate the real.

For the ready audience, tragedy shapes the paradox of responsibility that cannot absorb the enormity of grief; tragedy includes both reason and grief. Tragedy is the distinguishable means by which suffering is not disavowed but incorporated in the community. It is a means of unconcealing the wound. But form cannot accomplish that alone, without a receptive community. This is, perhaps, what the young Nietzsche was getting at, when he tried to delineate the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of tragedy. As a work of art, that is, tragedy, in its Dionysian or performative dimension, enacts the unconcealing of the primacy of grief, the primacy of the feeling of absolute loss, destruction. Though the unconcealing is brief, lasting perhaps no longer than the duration of a performance, it elicits not the symmetrical justice of melodrama or the ironies of historiography but an awesome and insupportable asymmetry between suffering and responsibility, between political explanations and devastating grief. The work of Apollo inhabits the overwhelming emotional space of Dionysus; logos reasons with music. Without the real, emotional component of the threnody that opens the wounds of grief, wounds beyond the pale of words and explanation, tragedy has no real work to do. Without an audience susceptible to grief and willing to mourn, it has no place. History takes over to record the scars, repeat the horror. Tragedy resists a rendering of events in purely historical forms. The tragedy of the September 11 events may never be written or performed, but events have made us ripe.

**ALICE RAYNOR**  
*Stanford University*



Artaud reminded us in "No More Masterpieces" (1933), "We are not free. The sky can still fall on our heads. And the theatre has been created to teach us that first of all." So when exactly that happens, why are we surprised? And what is today's theatre going to do about it?

Tragedy can be understood at least two ways. As a theory of drama/theatre; as something occurring in "real life." As an aesthetic representation; as an experienced event. But this clarity is muddied both by how much Western drama and theatre pretend to be, or to imitate, "real life" and by the strong articulation in recent aesthetic life of "real life" itself as performance (what Allan Kaprow calls "lifelike art"). Finally, all this is trumped by the increasing tendency of daily life to be dominated by performative actions, events that "say" or "do" beyond what they "just are."

The exploding of planes into New York's Trade Towers and the Pentagon were not strikes at military targets conventionally speaking. Beyond successfully demolishing

their New York targets, the attacks scared people all over the USA (and beyond), revealed weaknesses in American security, forced the US into a shooting war that is bound to have negative consequences on the “image” of the US in the Islamic world and throughout the Third World, not to mention a severe erosion of civil liberties and freedom of movement in the USA itself. The economic fallout of the attacks is not clear, but it can’t be good. The bombings in New York especially were timed for maximum media exposure (the second plane coming in at a time when the planners knew everyone would be watching). Thus actions such as those of September 11th 2001 exist simultaneously as discrete events, as performatives, as consciousness changing actions, and as historical markers. But were the attacks and its aftermath “tragedies”?

In real life terms, “tragedy” means something horrendous happening that is out of proportion to what was deserved—something either expected and lived through (such as a painful terminal illness) or something sudden such as a natural or human-made catastrophe that takes life. Thus from the personal perspective of those in the Trade Towers and Pentagon, their families and communities, the attacks precipitated many tragedies. This chain of events continues in Afghanistan, and probably will be extended outward in a rippling effect. Even though “causes” can be found for these events, their overall and—can I say it, “metaphysical” significance—remains obscure at best. At most we will begin to grasp certain political, economic, and ideological reasons, but I am afraid the metaphysical and the tragic in the classical sense will elude us. Why? Because belief in a coherent, ethical world view is spotty at best.

Are we now embarked on a war of “ideologies,” of “religions,” of “realpolitik,” of “good versus evil” (though how finally to assign who belongs in what camp is not clear to me), or of some other context or binary? In Greek and Elizabethan theatre an existent or imagined social life is the background for tragedies which belong to individuals operating within relatively small units, families or courts. That kind of thing today is the domain of soaps and melodramas. In today’s situation we have plenty of “family tragedies” but no generally agreed on coherent, ethical social background-world view in which to context them. The events are unspeakably sad, the deaths of firefighters, Afghan children, and the rest. But they are not tragic in the classical sense. We have events of “global” dimensions and yet it would be absurd to write a tragic drama featuring George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden. Or maybe that’s the point: such an absurdist *Ubu*-type work needs to be composed.

As I write this, the US Capitol is closed because of anthrax; in the wings of consciousness, if not probability, are smallpox, atomic bombs, and horrors unspoken or as yet unspecified. It is not as if large populations have not, and are not still, experiencing daily dread from war, ethnic violence, and the like; and grinding deaths from poverty, disease, displacement and the rest of the long list of woes brought on people by people. The peculiar thing about the “American tragedy” at hand is that so many Americans think it outrageous, unheard of, and out of the ordinary. Which goes to show how privileged our lives have been and, for the most part, continue to be. But is this situation of not knowing from whence the next terror will come and what it will be a situation befitting of tragedy? Artaud thought so.

**RICHARD SCHECHNER**  
*New York University*





Predictably, and certainly not inappropriately, the term tragedy has been very widely invoked in our attempt to speak the unspeakable, to express the inexpressible in the wake of the emotionally and culturally shattering events of September 11. Rarely, however, has the term been invoked with much awareness of its theatrical heritage, since it has long since cast off its theatrical moorings to float freely through the semiotic field, applied to almost any event, of any magnitude, that involves human suffering, especially when that suffering is extreme, unexpected, and seemingly undeserved. Certainly in this sense the loss of life on that day, with its attendant train of trauma and mourning which for a long time to come will haunt the imaginations of all of us, fully merits this sometimes overused term more fully than any event in recent American experience.

Largely lacking, however, in the widespread invocation of this emotionally charged term, has been much sense of what its implications have been in the site of its original cultural articulation, the theatre. This is, perhaps not too surprising. In modern America we are not at all accustomed to regarding theatre as mode of exploring significant cultural, social, and philosophical questions, and tragedy, the theatrical form that engages these questions on the deepest level, has been particularly slighted in our cultural tradition. This is not, I think, simply because we do not think of theatre as a central cultural expression. Much more fundamental, I believe, is an American cultural imaginary that leaves very little room for the development of a concept of tragedy in the traditional European mode.

Fundamental to the founding myths of America was the idea of a fresh start, a Rousseauesque innocence and a boundless optimism. There was little room or tolerance for the burdens of the past and the wayward, even malicious, turns of fate so critical to the work of the great tragic writers of Europe. Pain and suffering were acknowledged, of course. Any work dealing with the human condition could hardly deny them. But the favored dramatic mode for dealing with such matters in America has not been tragedy, but melodrama. Pain and suffering were not the result of inexplicable forces in the universe, but of the machinations of evil characters, who were inevitably eventually thwarted and vanquished. This is the scenario that continues to ground much of our popular entertainment, most notably the popular disaster films of the past several decades, which for many us provided the most immediate and vivid point of reference as we attempted to fit the unimaginable attack into our personal and cultural imaginary.

I cannot count the number of times that I heard some variation of the phrase "It seemed like a film" from people attempting to articulate their reaction to images of the disaster. Indeed it did seem like a film, and an all-too-familiar one, the film in which an innocent and trusting America is suddenly without warning attacked by some alien force—revived prehistoric monsters, alien and hostile beings from outer space or the depths of the oceans. New York is a favored target of such attacks, marked by the destruction of the great recognizable icons of that city—the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the World Trade Center—while terrified citizens flee in panic through flames, billowing clouds of smoke, and falling debris. Suddenly these

identical scenes appeared on our television screens, in a horrifying Baudrillardian example of the real projected as a simulacrum of an already familiar imaginary.

With so convenient a narrative as the melodramatic disaster film readily at hand, we have now entered the next phase of that narrative. A shocked and deeply hurt, but mightily resilient America mobilizes its forces, seeks out and destroys the evil Other, and restores the world to its state of innocence. This is the scenario we are now pursuing, with Osama bin Laden as Darth Vader and George W. Bush as Luke Skywalker (conveniently ignoring the easy reversibility of such Manichean structures and thus unable to comprehend how so many in the world see the US as the powerful Darth Vader and bin Laden as a kind of defiant Luke Skywalker). What will happen to both sides when the clear-cut world of the melodramatic imagination encounters the complex, ambiguous, shifting, and dangerous world of contingent reality will inevitably occupy our attention for the foreseeable future.

What seems clear at present, nevertheless, is that however frequently the term tragedy may be heard today, there is at least so far very little evidence of tragic insight. Perhaps we as a culture now have some idea of what Artaud meant when he said, "We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theatre has been created to teach us that first of all." Even this, however, the knowledge of "the terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us" is still, I think, masked by our melodramatic construction of the events of September 11. Of course the act itself was a savage and heinous one, as clear an eruption of evil into everyday existence as most of us have ever seen. Yet tragedy, while recognizing the presence of evil, attempts to push us beyond that recognition, to consider such matters as the strength of the human spirit in adversity, the mystery Schopenhauer pursued of the apparent inevitable and tragic clash of wills, and, perhaps most difficult for a proud, prosperous, and apparently blessed people like ourselves, that uncomfortable and difficult tragic concept of hubris, according to whose inexplicable workings security and apparent blessing may contain the seeds of catastrophe. Like the proud, prosperous, and apparently blessed Oedipus, we were men most mighty, on whose fortunes what citizen of the world did not gaze with envy. But like him, into what a stormy sea of dreaded trouble we have come. Let us now pray that, as the Greek tragedians hoped, we can find the wisdom that comes through suffering.

**MARVIN CARLSON**  
*City University of New York*



September 11th recedes day by day into history. The freshness of the event and its shock is co-present with another temporality in which it is a memorial event. Tragedy belongs to the first order but gains redefinition and gravity within the second. Tragedy yokes the communal and the personal, linking the individual to the group, the tribe, the nation through the force of its monumental destructiveness. Incommensurability. Tragedy is the incommensurable disproportion between expectation and result, between before and after, and between just desserts and fierce retribution. In the wake of September 11th, I first thought of Aeschylus, who knew so well that all human knowledge comes through suffering in time. "And who, except the gods, can live time

through forever without any pain?" he writes in the *Oresteia*. Suffering in Aeschylus is embedded in time, and the wisdom it provokes might unfold in a moment or might take generations to make itself known.

As I write at the end of October 2001, however, I am reminded more sharply of Oedipus, of blindness, of human finitude, and its failures. Now the tragedy is the incommensurability between knowledge and action that has led to the October War. How is it that we are embarked on this present folly? This folly of a war without clear objectives or realizable outcomes does possess the certainty of the high cost of innocent lives. Knowing better, we have nevertheless followed the script of the avenging warrior. This tragedy is in present time, and it falls heavily on the poor innocents of another country and another culture, who will surely be the victims. Yet, tragedy is about hubris, blindness, finitude—these are the terms in which the tragedy now falls upon us.

In my stubborn and uncompromising youth I rejected tragedy—as a notion, a concept. After all, Brecht was right that tragedy is an ideological lie: the hopelessness, the fate of tragedy forecloses the material and concrete actions of “men” in its great anesthetizing catharsis. Tragedy was bourgeois ideology writ in the aesthetic modality. *Mother Courage* was not tragic! And unlike the tragic sense of life, the important presentiment was of the possibility of altering the present and creating a new, better future. Drama should always be about next time.

The other major influence on me during those years was Sartre. The Vietnam War brought me and my friends to the brink of the most intense ethical introspection I had yet experienced. In a philosophy seminar room in 1967, a group of twenty year-olds struggled with the questions of that time. One of my fellow students came from three generations of military men. He was trying to decide whether he should go serve his country, go to Canada, or go to jail. What was real love of country? Did it lead to service or resistance? Sartre's meditation on World War II and his own participation in the Resistance bring *Being and Nothingness* to its conclusion. In it, he insists on absolute freedom and concomitant responsibility. Human beings, condemned to be free, nevertheless choose in every second the life they lead and the responses to their situation that they make—“The peculiar character of human reality is that it is without excuse.”

This is another way of rejecting the fate of antique tragedy while affirming a tragedy of the human condition, or more precisely, recognizing that the human condition brings with it the conditions for tragedy—because of the ruthless reckoning it demands from those who act and suffer. For twenty year-olds soberly trying to understand their life in a time of an unjust war, Sartre was relentless but also empowering; to turn and face our fears, to decide for ourselves what our own paths would be, was easier in each other's company as we read and studied Sartre's great peroration.

I returned to my worn and tattered copy of *Being and Nothingness*, thinking about Sartre's own treatment of Orestes' tragedy, *The Flies*, in which Orestes emerges as Sartre's responsible hero who knows the impossibility and yet necessity of his acts and turns to face and embrace them. The play's old-fashioned individualism is surely irreconcilable with a postmodern understanding of decentered subjectivity. But

Sartre's moral challenge in "Being and Doing: Freedom" seems written for our time, for October 2001, for us. In this moment, I realize I do still believe in tragedy:

There are no accidents in a life; a community event which suddenly bursts forth and involves me in it does not come from the outside. If I am mobilized in a war, this war is my war: it is in my image and I deserve it. I deserve it first because I could always get out of it by suicide or by desertion; these ultimate possibles are those which must always be present for us when there is a question of envisaging a situation. For lack of getting out of it, I have chosen it. . . . If therefore I have preferred war to death or to dishonor, everything takes place as if I bore the entire responsibility for this war. Of course others have declared it, and one might be tempted, perhaps, to consider me as a simple accomplice. But this notion of complicity has only a juridical sense, and it does not hold here. For it depended on me that for me and by me this war should not exist, and I have decided that it does exist.

**JANELLE REINELT**  
*University of California, Irvine*



David Román invited me into a forum of discussion about tragedy, and I've repaid him by writing and destroying my contributions, until today.

I began to write after returning from the World Trade Center devastation, two weeks after the 11th. I had walked from the front door of my former flat on John Street a few steps down to police barricades on Broadway. I stood with a small crowd staring at the remains of 5 WTC in the near distance with the seven story-high wreckage of the towers just behind. Acrid smoke belched out from the giant spiking grillwork remains of the South Tower—the televisual graphic for September 11. The sight of this helped banish temporarily my media nausea but did nothing for my subject-object problem. The smoky mass wouldn't sit still. In front of the twisted girders whizzing up and down Broadway in cool jeeps were dozens of very young men in military camouflage, some looking stern, others ogling the women medical and service staff. Cops barked at us to move on; trucks rumbled by carrying girders from the ground zero site we couldn't see, from the invisible bodies I tried to feel but couldn't. At the barricades I got more and more distracted by this fast-moving chaotic scene. I realized my neck was jutting forward stiffly, my brow furrowed in a mute "Huh? Huh?" Suddenly, as though on cue, all the people in uniform stopped in their tracks and put on gas masks. A soldier came over to us. "See, *we're* putting on our *gas masks!*" In other words, it's dangerous here; you're making yourselves sick. Get out! But I stood there with the group, our eyes on the smoke beyond him, as though looking back, with Hecuba, on the wreckage of Troy. Except no closing majestic vision, not even the grandeur of cathartic participation. My nose was filled with chemical dust. I gawked like the proverbial bourgeois spectator too stupefied even to weep. What was I trying to see?

My thoughts are swept away and I go bewildered.  
Where shall I turn the brain's activity . . . when the house is falling?

Chorus, *Agamemnon*

Attic tragedy is meant to manage such chaos, to make sure we see the right things. It sweeps the dust of particulars (and particulates) into the larger design of destiny, or fate, or "necessity," not to make sense of it—that would suggest the Judeo-Christian

belief that God is just—but to face the brutality of lives annihilated in ways that are beyond logic. As George Steiner said long ago, the suffering Job gets back double the number of she-asses he lost in that parable of God's rigorous justice, but Oedipus does not get back his eyes or his kingdom. Tragedy is irrevocable loss. It mocks the causality enjoined by its fierce protagonists, since reason is never commensurate with the horror of events. Fate or "blind" necessity is bitter name for that gap between our knowledge of Clytemnestra's rational fury at the perverse sacrifice of Iphigeneia and the lethal circuitry of the House of Atreus, in which she is but one switch point. Old fraternal rivalries. Then a wife seduced. Children chopped up and fed to a father. Then, in the next generation, another wife seduced. An entire city leveled, women raped, children thrown off towers. Greek tragedy, which we will never understand, insinuates the possibility of mounting horror, then makes it implacable, inevitable. The howls of the Trojan women, of Oedipus, of Agave, even of Agamemnon give shape and focus to the duststorm of pity and terror that chokes the spectator. Catharsis is that howl breaking into the shuddering mind of the witness. And then? Purgation, purification, healing. Wrung out, but redeemed. Lost, but found. With our ability to feel reaffirmed, we are cleansed and renewed in our connection to the right order of things. Or something like that. No one knows the full extent of Aristotle's meaning in chapter 6 of the *Poetics*, or of the aggregate of meanings from which he drew his sense of catharsis. But it does seem that tragic catharsis takes us through a process so enormous that we cannot at the time wonder about its determinants or outcome; quite the reverse: in our sublime agitation we've tacitly accepted the premise of "necessity." Tragedy horrified Marx in a different sense. "Necessity is blind," he said dryly, "only insofar as it is not understood." What he meant (and Brecht after him) is that the "tragic" stories recycled again and again from September 11, no less than tragedy itself, dull our critical receptors and prevent historical complexity—and our complicity in it—from emerging.

For terror returns like sickness to lurk in the house.

Chorus, *Agamemnon*

One thread of that story is that the CIA joined forces with Pakistan's ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) to foment "holy war" against the Soviet Union after its 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. In the name of destabilizing our Cold War enemy, we supported Pakistan in its nurturance of future Taliban foot soldiers. And in putting an American face on corporate globalization we further exacerbated extremist rage and resentment in one of the poorest regions in the world. In simple terms, we've helped create the conditions of the terror that butchered over five thousand of us on September 11th. And now our military is laying waste to Afghanistan, though supposedly not to the Afghan people who (in numbers provided by Oxfam) are starving in the five millions. Fleeing our bombs they have run to borders that are closed. Will they be happier dying from a stray American bomb than from a Taliban bullet? In the name of defeating terrorism aren't we creating our version of the House of Atreus—more terror, more cycles of revenge? Any second-grader, not playing a video game, knows the answer.

There is no god of healing in this story.

Cassandra, *Agamemnon*

Yet, I'm not pretending that the ash of human bones and concrete has settled, or should settle. One need not join the flag patrol or be bushwhacked into either-you're-with-us-or-against-us-isms to reject the equation of American complicity in global misery with the gigantic sorrow of the 11th. They are not commensurate. To say the war in Afghanistan is murderous and insane is not to give ground on that sorrow. And so, though I have raised familiar objections to the ideological fallout of catharsis, I lean on tragedy to make my case. In tragedy one doesn't need to endorse the actions of those in agonistic positions. The suffering they create and endure is detachable from them and is never the same across plays. Remove *Agamemnon* from the *Oresteia's* ultimate endorsement of patriarchy, and you have a tragedy that barely controls the confusion and fear it stirs up. Clytemnestra is not confused. But her indomitable strength is channeled into a long-planned revenge plot wreaked on a king whose pathetic bluster makes him a dull victim. The voices of the worried Chorus of Argive elders and of the captive Cassandra perform other labor. The first, tormented by the past, the second by the future, together they disrupt for some brief moments the linearity of destiny and, in the process, learn, somehow, to listen to one another. Minor players, they make a place for us—we who choose not to live or die on the stage of blind necessity. In her final speech Cassandra stops seeing her bloody demise and instead sees the world she is losing. In Cassandra's stark clarity, I hear the progressive women of RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) who today call for an uprising of the Afghan people against all foreign invaders. They close their piece with a hopeful prediction that is also a performative: "The peace and justice-loving people of the world will be on the side of the Afghan people." In the last scene of *Agamemnon*, the Chorus, confronting the ruthless Aegisthus, show what something other than acquiescence to conformity might look like.

Let me attain no envied wealth,  
let me not plunder cities. . . .

Chorus, *Agamemnon*

These are the fragments lingering in the air, scattered in the wake of the tragedy *Agamemnon*. The domain of tragic suffering can, it seems, hold a motley mix of possibilities: resistance, connection, confusion, love, rage, questioning, pain, and, however tentative, critique. We can do better. We can become Cassandras and join with other Cassandras to see the world as it needs to become.

I will try to envision this better world, and I will attend to the fragments that do not fit into any world picture: the ordinary-person obituaries that the *NY Times* publishes daily of the dead and missing; the mournful words of Kathy Nguyen's friends who, with no family claiming her body, will bury her themselves—bury not the first person in New York to die of the inhaled form of Anthrax but rather their smiling and solitary companion; and finally the story of the artists who once lived just south of the South Tower, and who on sunny afternoons relished the multicolored reflections of light that bounced off the tower's massive grillwork into their living rooms, bedrooms, and studios. A new show every day. Urban gigantism turned into inspirational light. This too is something to see and to see by.

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