

Introduction: Reflections on the Tragic in Contemporary American Drama and Theatre

by Johanna Hartmann and Julia Rössler
The Journal of American Drama and Theatre
Volume 31, Number 2 (Winter 2019)
ISSN 2376-4236
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In Tony Kushner's provocative play *Homebody/Kabul* (2002), Milton reassures his daughter Priscilla during their trip to Afghanistan where they investigate the disappearance of Priscilla's mother and Milton's wife, "we shall respond to this tragedy by growing, growing close. . . ." Priscilla blankly replies, "people don't grow close from tragedy. They wither is all, Dad, that's all."[\[1\]](#) While Milton interprets their situation as a tragic story from catastrophe to future hope, growth, and communality, Priscilla's view is focused on the concrete suffering, defeat, and regress that will not contribute to some higher purpose. At the heart of this brief exchange between Milton and Priscilla lies a profound paradox which speaks of Kushner's shrewd placement of tragedy between the human subjects' transcendence and his or her irrevocable defeat. Similarly, in her play *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* (1994), Paula Vogel, deeply disturbed by the fact that when seeing Shakespeare's *Othello* she would rather empathize with Othello than with Desdemona, poses the question if Desdemona deserved death, had she indeed been unfaithful to Othello. In Vogel's rewrite of this classic tragedy, she reflects on how our individual response to what we see, our pity and empathy, depend on the formal and structural properties of a play but also on our sense of the social legitimacy for these feelings.[\[2\]](#) She shifts the focus from Othello to Desdemona and from Othello's "flaw" of rogue jealousy to the systemic suppression of women in a patriarchal society.

Tony Kushner and Paula Vogel are two representative writers of contemporary American drama and theatre who exhibit a strong interest in tragedy from aesthetic and ethical perspectives. As the articles in this issue reveal, it is in particular the notion of the tragic that, as a mode of thought, presents the social, historical, and cultural predicaments of contemporary human existence. As the plays reconsider and renegotiate our understanding of human suffering, deadly defeat, irreversible conditions of existence, and the loss of hope, they are highly reminiscent of various core tenets of Greek tragedy.[\[3\]](#)

Yet, tragedy seems to be an unlikely genre in American literature and theatre, as the dominant cultural narratives foster individualism, self-reliance, the belief in continual progress, speak of self-made men who realize their versions of the American dream, and even bestow the pursuit of happiness as one of the fundamental and "inalienable" rights on Americans. However, these ideals and dominant narratives relegate responsibility to the individual and thereby increase the sense of failure and suffering if they are not fulfilled.[\[4\]](#) Furthermore, they stand in stark contrast to the sense of precarity and vulnerability which Foley and Howard describe in their introduction to the *PMLA* special issue *The Urgency of Tragedy Now* as "a pressing sense that crucial social and political institutions are in danger, as is the planet itself."[\[5\]](#)

This feeling has, if anything, intensified over the last five years due to the rise of right-wing parties, the disregard of human rights, the erosion of democratic institutions in various countries, environmental disasters, the fear of a looming economic recession, political tribalism, and the resulting polarization of American society. In our everyday lives, we routinely encounter the ubiquity of the terms “tragedy” and “the tragic” in a wide variety of sad and sorrowful events and occasions. Steiner claims that the “semantic field” pertaining to these terms “remains as indeterminate as its origin . . . rang[ing] from triviality . . . to ultimate disaster and sorrow.”^[6] The use of these terms in order to refer to suffering in the real world is reflected by our familiarity with tragedy as a literary genre. As Lehmann reminds us, the tragic is not a representation of reality but a “perspective,” a “mode of seeing” that is produced and facilitated by the “echo chamber of tragic art.”^[7] At the same time, as Foley and Howard point out, a rhetoric of the tragic can veil “complicity” by framing events as inevitable instead of resulting from deliberate actions and personal responsibilities.^[8]

Beyond its colloquial meaning, tragedy refers to one of the most long-lasting dramatic genres. Its history is marked on the one hand by a “tradition of hostility to tragedy” from Plato to Steiner, but also by the recognition of its value from Aristotle to Felski.^[9] For example, Steiner famously declared that tragedy as a dramatic genre loses its meaning in our contemporary culture because according to him, “the metaphysics of Christianity and Marxism are anti-tragic.” He concludes: “That, in essence, is the dilemma of modern tragedy.”^[10] Even though Steiner was convinced that true tragedies can only exist under strictly limited conditions, looking at the history of the American drama and theatre, there is strong evidence that—despite the lack of academic attention at times—tragedy as a dramatic genre and theatrical practice has been a timely and expressive dramatic form to articulate and comment on the *conditio humana* in the contemporary world throughout the twentieth century—from Eugene O’Neill and Susan Glaspell, to Arthur Miller, David Mamet, and Suzan-Lori Parks.^[11] In fact, during this period, tragedies written by American authors have expressed and thematized realities that dominant ideologies and systems of values have suppressed and marginalized. Steiner’s definition of tragedy does not “fit” these contemporary plays as they are not based on a belief in the metaphysical entities that defined the fate of the tragic hero in antiquity, Shakespeare’s time, and early modern France. However, from a theoretical point of view, over the last 20 years or so, tragedy as a genre has been reevaluated by scholars of various disciplines,^[12] and Steiner’s book *The Death of Tragedy* has permanently shaped the discussion.^[13]

In this issue on the tragic in American drama and theatre, we offer reflections on the tragic in the tensional field between theory and practice and its potential to explore universal themes of human existence in relation to contemporary realities. Tragedy’s presence in the contemporary theatre landscape^[14]—ancient, Shakespearean, or contemporary—gives expression to a “tragic sensibility” that is fueled by the complexities of life today but also by “the toxic matter bequeathed by the past to the present.”^[15] In fact, tragedy as a literary and dramatic form has lost none of its creative, thematic, and aesthetic fascination and attracts dramatists, theatre practitioners, and philosophers alike.

Tragedy and the tragic are often used interchangeably. Yet, what constitutes the idea of the tragic in American drama and theatre of today? Contemporary playwrights search for ways of expressing a sense of the tragic by exploring the inconsistencies of American myths with the individual’s situation. The essays collected in this issue explore these reflections on the tragic in contemporary American drama and theatre by combining an interest in aesthetics with a reference to current and local cultural, social, and political debates. They address in particular how American dramatists reflect on, rewrite, actualize, and interrogate the potential of the tragic and tragedy as a dramatic form in regards to the troubling question

of what constitutes pain and suffering. The essays speak of a fascination with the tragic as a model of thought which manifests itself in a mode of writing, interpretation, and expression through which playwrights raise fundamental questions about the causes of human suffering. Some draw compelling connections to the state of national politics, the alarming generational traumas caused by wars fought by the US throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and oppressive and dehumanizing societal structures that allow for racism and discrimination. In this respect, many plays conceive of the tragic not as a metaphysical category but as a mode of interpretation and as a symbolic representation that correlates human suffering with particular moments and conditions in US American society and history. The tragic dimensions of human experience that the plays envision dispel an exile of responsibility, cause, and guilt to the metaphysics of fate, gods, and an indifferent universe. Instead, they reveal their particular potency as a mode of affect and formal experimentation and thereby invoke an ethics of self-reflexive confrontation. Almost all plays discussed in this issue (e.g. the plays by Kushner, Hudes, Rabe, and McLaughlin, and the stage adaptation of Bechdel's book) draw on music, musical genres, and the return of the past through spectres and ghosts. On a formal level, they provoke the audience's reflection on contemporary life conditions and renew "perceptions [which have] become increasingly habitual and automatic."[\[16\]](#)

As the essays in this issue show, the tragic offers strong images of making sense of human suffering, freedom, and will. Even though the authors often suggest that the failure of or resistance to human agency are central ideas that inform the sense of the tragic that contemporary plays envision, they also stress the dramas' remarkable departure from tragedy's metaphysical determination. Human suffering is captured no longer as inescapable but as a result of the paralyses, grievances, injustices, and negative developments within a society. Indeed, contemporary drama resonates with Christopher Bigsby's view that, "rebellion ultimately lies at the heart of the tragic sensibility."[\[17\]](#) This raises ethical questions of individual, collective and structural responsibilities, and "answerability," but also focuses on agency and control.[\[18\]](#) In this respect, Toby Zinman's claim that "tragedy demands more of us than tears," is a reminder that tragedy is also a matter of our commitment and responsibility.[\[19\]](#) In contemporary drama, this recourse to action and agency as important mechanisms in the overcoming of injustices caused by socio-political and historical circumstance is relevant in order to envision alternative, contested, and open, but eventually less dogmatic and normative narratives of change and progress.

In his essay "Rewriting Greek Tragedy/Confronting History in Contemporary American Drama: David Rabe's *The Orphan* (1973) and Ellen McLaughlin's *The Persians* (2003)," Konstantinos Blatanis investigates two rewritings of Greek tragedies in the context of recent US American history, arguing that in *The Orphan*, David Rabe rewrites Aeschylus's *The Oresteia* to address the relation between historical circumstance, trauma, and violence. Blatanis elaborates that in this self-reflexive gesture, the play appropriates its own means of interpretation and reflection as it speaks, of the "urgency of its own historical moment" to address the policies and politics of the Vietnam War not only by discursive but also by artistic-affective practices and means. He further argues that the "conscious theatricality through which the play interrogates its own position in history" relates directly to its intention to draw attention to "historical agency as well as . . . political accountability" in recent US history. In a continuation of the essay's argument, Ellen McLaughlin's *The Persians* (2003), which is also modeled on Aeschylean tragedies, acknowledges the interrelation between history and human tragedy. According to Blatanis, the process of rewriting ancient Greek tragedies speaks of the critical possibilities offered by the tragic form for dramatists to respond to the failing acknowledgment of historical agency during the Iraq war. Consequently, tragedy resurfaces as a model of reflection most apt for dramatists in order to negotiate the

impact and effects of recent historical events. Reading these plays as a “historiographic venture” means viewing the tragic subject in concrete relation with history as a material and actual agent of human existence.

In her article “Haunting Echoes: Tragedy in Quiara Alegría Hudes’s *Elliot Trilogy*,” Nathalie Aghoro discusses how the *Elliot Trilogy* (2012–2014) by acclaimed Latin-American dramatist Quiara Alegría Hudes unearths the tragic mark that US wars left on three generations of a Puerto-Rican family living in present day Philadelphia. Aghoro reads Hudes’s family trilogy as an exploration of the “isolated, tragic subject” that returns from war and his necessity to reconnect and reintegrate into the community. After his service in Iraq, Elliot, the tragic hero of the play, returns to Philadelphia and embarks on an emotional quest to reconnect with the past of his family as he tries to build new relationships in order to overcome a profound feeling of alienation and isolation. The play stages three years in Elliot’s life which are haunted by what Aghoro terms a “fatal error in judgment”: Elliot’s first shooting victim looms in the play as an unceasing, invisible presence. Yet, instead of conceiving of the Aristotelian *hamartia* as an exemplification of destiny and as an end of human agency, Hudes’s play links this fatal flaw to the inhumane forces of war in which agency itself reveals a highly precarious interrelation between human action and the attribution of guilt and responsibility. On a formal level, Aghoro points out, the expressiveness of a Bach fugue, jazz music, and Puerto-Rican folk music supplement the subject matter as an elemental dramatic force in all three plays and expresses the tragic fragmentation of its characters between disintegration and reintegration, isolation and communality, desperation and hope, and death and life. Aghoro views the trilogy’s rethinking of the tragic as a prism to unearth the play’s engagement with the actual realities of war in light of severe interpersonal alienation and isolation that are internalized by the tragic subjects. In line with its emphasis on the importance of the community as a vital “network of human connections,” the play symbolically represents and stages forms of recovery and healing.

The essays collected in this volume show that contemporary American drama’s response to injustices, terrors, and dehumanization are not to be sought in metaphysical forces that are beyond human control, but result from actual material conditions and real historical circumstances. In her article “‘Take Caroline away’: Catastrophe, Change, and the Tragic Agency of Nonperformance in Tony Kushner’s *Caroline, or Change*,” Joanna Mansbridge interprets the internalized subservience and reluctance to participate in change by the black maid and main protagonist Caroline Thibodeaux as a “tragic agency of non-performance.” Set in 1963 in the deep south of Louisiana, history is the one agential force that leads to tragic circumstance as the play stages the commodification of black female labor against the omnipresent symbolic legacy of structural oppression and racism. Caroline’s inability and refusal to participate in change draws attention to the play’s interest in the sources and circumstances of Caroline’s existence, which, according to Mansbridge, is marked by an inner rift as she “inhabits an ontological space of abjection—neither subject nor object.” Recalling Blatanis’s reading of contemporary plays, Mansbridge argues that *Caroline* rejects the unavoidability of human agony as the tragic condition of human existence in order to foreground that “suffering is *not* inevitable” but results from “larger social conditions” that “reverberat[e] as an ongoing historical present.”

Tony Kushner’s preoccupation with theatre as a site to raise questions about the sources and circumstance of human suffering and agony in relation to actual economic, cultural, and political realities of US American society also centrally informs his landmark play *Angels in America* (1991). In her article “The Poetics of the Tragic in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*,” Julia Rössler explores how Kushner’s rethinking of the tragic condition is very much grounded in a political gesture that situates human

suffering in relation to unjust and unequal material and historical circumstances that define contemporary American society in the 1980s as one of permanent struggle against the oppressive forces of utopian ideals, one-directional politics, racism, religion, and sexual discrimination. On the one hand, the “poetics of the tragic” that Rössler identifies in *Angels in America* refer to the play’s rethinking of the tragic condition outside the familiar notions of irreversible fate and finality as it links tragic necessity to the transformative powers of human will and agency. On the other hand, Rössler argues, Kushner develops a distinct dramatic style as the dynamic of interpersonal conflict and the constant clash of different world-views characterize the play’s unique oscillation between conflict and resolution, past and future, defeat and victory, self and other. This reveals the dialectical movement of the play as symbolically referring to the play’s vision of struggle as an elemental force in the striving for societal equilibrium which overcomes the paralyzing forces of tragic circumstance by foregrounding, according to Rössler, the “value of human will and agency.”

The tragic as a mode of interpretation and affect is also central to Maureen McDonnell’s discussion of the Broadway musical *Fun Home* (2015), which is based on Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006). McDonnell explores in “Branding Bechdel’s *Fun Home*: Activism and the Advertising of a ‘Lesbian Suicide Musical’” how the marketing campaign dropped the musical’s main themes of suicide and sexual orientation in order to advertise the production as a musical about father-daughter relations, thus emptying the innate tragic dimension of the story of its relevance and meaning. McDonnell discusses how the erasure of the musical’s core subject matter of homosexuality and the fear of centralizing a strong masculine female shows the marginalization of pressing social issues in the genre of the musical, which, McDonnell adds, often offers accessible entertainment and life-affirming stories and is under high pressure to earn a profit. Moreover, McDonnell outlines how lesbian women are usually highly misrepresented and function as comic elements in musical productions rather than as human subjects worthy of serious contemplation: “By featuring a butch lesbian as its lead, *Fun Home* was culturally revolutionary, providing a cultural—and commercial—landmark for mainstream musical theater,” McDonnell writes. Lesbian women are often framed as essentially tragic figures who are “isolated, doomed, and suicidal.” *Fun Home* discards such a flat and one-dimensional depiction of a lesbian protagonist as abnormal and insane. Viewing *Fun Home* through the prism of the tragic reveals its resistance against consensual stereotyping as the tragic conditions of the protagonist’s life result from loss and stigmatization, supposed “normalcy,” and deviation from these arbitrarily set standards. As maintained by McDonnell, these experiences innate to everyday human existence establish the lesbian female protagonist as a more universal character and pave the way for a new and timely politicized tradition of musical productions (for instance mirrored in the legalization of equal marriage at the time of the musical’s run).

The essays collected in this guest-edited issue add to the ongoing research and discussion of tragedy and the tragic in contemporary American drama and theatre, even though the limited scale of the project led to the exclusion and neglect of other relevant dramatists.^[20] By adding to the debate reflections of concrete examples with regard to the tragic, these essays provide insights into a diverse selection of plays, and the ethical, cosmic, and civic structures they envision through the lens of human action in moments of crisis. As the “persistence of a tragic mode in modernity” pertains to human experiences in a universal way even today, it is increasingly determined by changes and upheavals in the political and socio-cultural dimension that change over time.^[21] It is this simultaneity of permanence and variability that requires for the tragic to be continually historicized, rethought, and re-envisioned.

This issue is a result of the conference “Tragedy in American Drama and Theatre: Genre—Mediality—Ethics,” held at the University of Augsburg in 2017, a project that was generously supported by the German Research Foundation, the Bavarian American Academy (Munich), Gesellschaft der Freunde (Society of Friends) and the research program Ethics of Textual Cultures (both Augsburg University). We are thankful for all authors who have agreed to publish their research in this issue. Furthermore, we would like to extend our thanks to the peer reviewers who have generously offered their expertise during the process, and in particular to the editors of *JADT*, Naomi J. Stubbs and James F. Wilson, for their support and interest in our project. Finally, we would like to thank Hubert Zapf for his insightful comments and support during the organization of the conference and Katharina Braun for meticulously proof-reading the essays.

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[1] Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), 40.

[2] Paula Vogel, *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*, in *The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013).

[3] For a discussion of the aesthetic and formal dimensions of ancient tragedy in opposition to a “modern tragic sensibility” see Rita Felski, “Introduction,” in *Rethinking Tragedy* ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008): 10–11.

[4] Compare with Rita Felski’s summary of Terry Eagleton’s argument in “Introduction,” 9. See also David P. Palmer, “Introduction,” in *Visions of Tragedy in Modern American Drama: From O’Neill to the Twenty-First Century* ed. David Palmer (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2018), 8–9; and Peter Lancelot Mallios, “Tragic Constitution: United States Democracy and Its Discontents,” *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (2014): 708–72.

[5] Helene P. Foley and Jean E. Howard, “Introduction: The Urgency of Tragedy Now,” *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (2014): 617.

- [6] George Steiner, “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered,” in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Felski, 29.
- [7] Hans-Thies Lehmann. “Drama, Tragödie und Auslaufmodell Stadttheater,” interview by Arno Widmann. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 26 August 2014, (our translation).
- [8] Compare with Foley and Howard, “Introduction,” 617.
- [9] Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 62.
- [10] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1961), 324.
- [11] Compare with Palmer, ed., *Visions of Tragedy*; Brenda Murphy, “Tragedy in the Modern American Theater,” in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Bushnell (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 488–504.
- [12] Compare with Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, reprint 2007); John D. Lyons, *Tragedy and the Return of the Dead* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018); Stephen D. Dowden and Thomas P. Quinn, *Tragedy and the Tragic in German Literature, Art, and Thought* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2014); Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks, eds., *Philosophy and Tragedy* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000).
- [13] For a range of essays on the theorization of tragedy and the tragic before the 1960s see Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall, eds., *Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963).
- [14] For example, Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* (Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre), Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (Neil Simon Theatre), Paula Vogel’s *Indecent* (Cort Theatre). See also Eleftheria Ioannidou, *Greek Fragments in Postmodern Frames. Rewriting Tragedy 1970–2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- [15] Poole, *Very Short Introduction*, 35.
- [16] David Savran, “Loose Screws: An Introduction,” in *The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays*, Paula Vogel (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996), xi.
- [17] Christopher Bigsby, “Foreword,” in *Visions*, ed. David Palmer, xvii.
- [18] Felski, “Introduction,” 11.
- [19] Toby Zinman, “American Theatre since 1990,” in *Visions of Tragedy in Modern American Drama*, 213.
- [20] E.g. Robert J. Andreach, *Tragedy in the Contemporary American Theatre* (Lanham: University Press of America); Palmer, *Visions*; Kevin J. Wetmore, *Black Dionysus: Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003).

[21] Felski, "Introduction," 14.



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PUBLICATIONS**

"Introduction: Reflections on the Tragic in Contemporary American Drama and Theatre" by Johanna Hartmann and Julia Rössler

ISSN 2376-4236

The Journal of American Drama and Theatre

Volume 31, Number 2 (Winter 2019)

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