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Failure, Trauma, and the Theatre of Negativity: the New Tragic in Contemporary Theatre and Performance

In this article, Alex Mangold identifies failure as a defining element of tragedy and argues that traditional understandings of the genre have been too narrow. Here, he asserts that tragic failure contributes to a tragic 'mode' that transcends genre definitions and, instead, extends to all kinds of contemporary theatre and performance. Examining a wide range of performance examples, including work from Sophocles to Sarah Kane, *Forced Entertainment*, Sasha Waltz, and Orlan, he argues that tragic failure, as it has come to be realized in examples of postdramatic writing and in site-specific or dance-based performance, is presented as an option, a dramatic choice, an outcome or part of an overall denial of dramatic form. The true power of the new tragic consequently lies in its ability to foster social change and a more ethical stance toward social dystopias. Alex Mangold lectures in the Department of Modern Languages at Aberystwyth University. He is co-editor (with Broderick Chow) of *Žižek and Performance* (Palgrave, 2014) and has published articles and chapters on the work of Sarah Kane and Howard Barker.

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I will start afresh, and once more make dark things plain.

FAILURE has always been one of the driving forces in tragedy and, indeed, of any tragic narrative. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is an early example of this when Oedipus vows to cleanse Thebes of the 'dark things' he has unknowingly become party to. As is well known, it is, first, the King's dramatic failure to understand the oracle's advice and, second, his inability to accept his predestined role that initially unleashes the play's tragic plot.

Yet it is also his arrogant dismissal of Tiresias's later accusations against him that lead to his eventual tragic downfall. Sophocles' tragedy unfolds when Oedipus fails to comprehend his failure and then, subsequently, decides to rectify its devastating outcome. By not accepting his role in the divine comedy the gods have laid out for him, the King's tragic failure is heightened into tragic trauma, and his efforts end with him taking his own eyesight in frustration.

Oedipus's inability to 'let it go' makes him stand out as one of the first genuinely tragic characters of theatre history – as someone willingly challenging the status quo, despite the fact that he is bound to fail. In *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles sets out to demonstrate that man is not just another tragic *pharmakos*; the King sets out to right a wrong against the odds of divine intervention and fate. However, Oedipus's role goes far beyond the spheres of political catharsis. In its deviation from the matriarchally defined norm of previous examples, Oedipus's tragedy and his failed initiation into the symbolic structure of the ancient Greek world turns the theatrical gaze inwards and makes Oedipus realize that his punishment is not enough. If he wants Thebes to be restored, he has to leave his position and be symbolically castrated; he is entering a traumatic narrative that ends with his taking his own eyesight as a punishment and as a symbolic gesture.

Oedipus's shortcomings thus become a defining moment in theatre history because, 'despite its failure, his initiation continues to

produce visibility, power and representation'.¹ Drawing on Jean-Joseph Goux's reading of the Oedipus myth, Olga Taxidou argues that the King's failure to remedy his actions and to halt his eventual tragic downfall actually help to construct a new form of Greek 'anthropocentrism'.² In other words, the play and the king posit man 'at the centre of the universe, a position from which he can begin to understand, to order and define'.³

***Oedipus* and Psychological Understanding**

Oedipus's failure to understand, to (re)act and to refrain from doing evil, then, is not only what makes the King's story innately tragic; it is also what makes him challenge his tragic role in a predefined setting of divine intrigue and power. Sophocles' tragedy is consequently one of the first instances of theatre in which man defies the emblematic order of the ancient world and tries to comprehend and compensate for what 'makes man human'.⁴

Oedipus's failure to let go of his own ambition and his desire to rectify his own mistakes is important here because it describes the very moment in which classical tragedy moves towards a more psychological understanding of the world. Failure seen as an elemental characteristic of any tragic narrative aspires to be more than a mere catalyst. It creates an opportunity to witness man's tragic disposition itself. Seen from a psychological perspective, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* arguably provides the first dramatic encounter with a psychologically split subject: the King, defined by his inability to avoid failure and his undeniable desire to act on it symbolically, stands for the tragic human disposition we all share.

Strictly speaking, *Oedipus Rex* posits the 'me' of the internal world against the objective world of an 'other' that can or cannot be challenged. The play consequently underlines the necessity of its hero's actions while simultaneously highlighting their utter futility. Tragic failure in Sophocles' tragedy is shown to become both: it is a psychological necessity just as much as it is an analytical attempt at understanding the very futility of

the human existence. As Karl Jaspers argues: 'Absolute and radical tragedy means that there is no way out whatsoever.'⁵ Consequently, failure in Sophocles' tragic theatre acts as a precursor to what today is considered to be the essence of all modern tragedy.

Needless to say, Aristotle's classic definition of tragedy as a narrative that could arouse 'pity and fear' through means of 'magnitude' and 'pleasurable accessories' falls somewhat short of acknowledging the special status failure can assume when it is set against the overwhelming idea of divine intervention or of perpetual psychological crises.⁶ It is also important to note that failure, in the sense in which it illustrates the tragic hero's actual flaw – that is, his own will and his capacity to 'understand, order, and define' – cannot be bound by a predefined dramatic structure.

Contrary to what Aristotle had in mind when he formulated his classical unities, failure, as part of a timeless tragic essence, has to be understood as part of a universal tragic 'mode' that extends from classical Greek and Roman tragedy to a contemporary understanding of the tragic aesthetic.⁷ Modern types of tragic theatre enable, as Peter Szondi puts it, 'a particular way of looming or actual (dialectic) destruction'.⁸

In this article I will argue that the 'tragic aesthetic' does not actually exist, because it is essentially all that is man and all he is not; further, that tragic failure understood as a dramatic 'mode' assumes a decisively psychological purpose because it defines and provokes the split subjectivity we all share.

As Taxidou's remarks above suggest, the failure captured in Oedipus's downfall may well lead to a better understanding of the world. Yet, at the same time, it also shows how futile our continuous attempts to change the world can be, given that our own symbolic order – the lawful structure of the world we inhabit, be it controlled by gods or by powerful individuals – is continuously reinforced by the relentless surfacing of our own tragic disposition(s) and its traumatic failure to be reconciled.

Taken as a main characteristic of the tragic 'mode', failure enables the presentation of

something that ‘perish[es] which is not supposed to perish, something which, after its violent removal, leaves an open wound that proves impossible to mend’.⁹ It also acts as a continuous rem(a)inder of the desire to relate, understand, and rectify the world.

What I would suggest is that tragic failure (and with it the very essence of the tragic aesthetic) amply illustrates our split existence by creating theatrically inexplicable instances of human inability and trauma. As such, it is neither bound by a certain dramatic form nor is it (pre)defined by its cultural epoch. On the contrary, failure is all a narrative needs to be considered truly tragic, be it clothed in ancient Greek, Shakespearean, or in any modern set of clothes.

Failure as Timeless Dramatic Measure

Failure here turns into a timeless dramatic measure; it enables us to experience the negativity of all human existence by locating it in our own psyche and in our own various worlds. As such, it lays bare the ‘open wound’ that Szondi speaks of, because it is, in effect, a tragic trope that leads to the psychological circumstances that enabled its dramatic representation in the first place. While dramatic forms may consequently shift and alter, the essence of tragic failure remains one of the clear defining features of the tragic aesthetic.

As Terry Eagleton notes, while the idea of the tragic changes through time, its many manifestations in contemporary culture remain as traumatic as ever:

Infinity lingers on as sublimity, and the traumatic horror at the heart of tragedy, still a metaphysical notion in the case of Schopenhauer’s Will, will be translated by Jacques Lacan as the Real, which has all the force of the metaphysical but none of its status.¹⁰

Contrary to George Steiner’s notorious claim that tragedy is dead due to the proclaimed death of God and the abolition of transcendental order in the modernist age, the tragic remains alive and kicking even after the formal abolition of Aristotelian ‘magnitude’ and the death of the big (transcendental) Other.¹¹ Rita Felski explains:

The idea of the tragic drifts free of the genre of tragedy and acquires a general theoretical salience and metaphorical power as a prism through which to grasp the antinomies of the human condition.¹²

Although new forms of the tragic aesthetic are less bound by what has come to be defined as the traditional tragic form, contemporary performance still makes use of a number of telling tragic principles, most of which are duly illustrated by their use of tragic failure. The examples discussed below are all manifestations of what Szondi refers to as the ‘looming or actual dialectic destruction’; they are all well equipped to ‘remind us of what we cherish in the act of seeing it destroyed’.¹⁹ As opposed to more traditional examples of the tragic, however, these examples rely far less on rigid dramatic form and instead make use of tragic and traumatic failure.

What most examples of the contemporary tragic have in common is their presentation of failure as a form of psychological trauma. Drawing on Felski’s idea that the new tragic has acquired a ‘general theoretical salience and metaphorical power as a prism through which to grasp the antinomies of the human condition’, failure in the chosen contemporary examples can occur in all kinds of dramatic and/or performative settings.¹³ Tragic failure, as it has come to be realized in examples of postdramatic writing and in site-specific or dance-based performance, can be an option, a dramatic choice, an outcome or part of an overall denial of dramatic form. Yet, it remains at the very heart of what is meant by the term ‘tragic’.

Since new forms of the tragic tend to do away with long-established generic traditions, some of the examples below have been described as purposefully negative or bleak, voyeuristic, or abstract. Some might argue that they are not even necessarily tragic. But, as Terry Eagleton explains, ‘Tragic art involves the plotting of suffering, not simply a raw cry of pain.’¹⁴

Presenting utter havoc as a means to convey tragic failure is, of course, not a valid technique for the creation of a new tragic aesthetic. Similarly, it is not enough merely

to stage failure as a way to avoid any form of traditional dramatic representation. Plays such as Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* (1998) and Forced Entertainment's *Speak Bitterness* (1994–) may offer only a limited degree of traditional tragic form, but they rely heavily on their explicit link to verbal and/or metaphorical failure. Kane and Forced Entertainment even question a number of established truths about the way failure is handled and how one copes with rejection and the traumatic pain that stems from it.

The suffering portrayed in these new forms of tragedy is, then, not entirely negative; it rather (re)presents unwelcome truths about our socio-psychological realities and the socio-political environment that surrounds us. Szondi:

Tragic is if something perishes which is not supposed to perish, something which, after its violent removal, leaves an open wound which proves impossible to mend.¹⁵

In such a setting, failure is no longer bound to the tragic exploration of character or to normative restrictions of the tragic narrative: it becomes a formal part of the dramatic narrative itself.

Kane's Symbolic Failure and Beyond

Tragic failure in Sarah Kane's plays mostly occurs in the form of personal failure, depicting her characters' inability to love and their gradual and persistent loss of formal and/or actual freedom. It also alludes to a psycho-political reality that transcends the notoriously violent dimension of her plays. In *Blasted* (1995), which deals with strong images of civil war and abuse, and *Cleansed* (1998), which reflects on abusive fascism and the Holocaust, she portrays prolonged forms of suffering and failure, aiming to illustrate how 'life is not as it should be; we are not as we should be'.¹⁶

Yet she does this while upholding Raymond Williams's claim that modern tragedy portrays 'men and women suffering and destroyed in their closest relationships; the individual knowing his destiny, in a cold universe, in which death and ultimate spiritual

isolation are alternative forms of the same suffering and heroism'.¹⁷

In Kane's theatre, tragic failure is both re-established and refined as a preconditioned lack of personal freedom and reciprocity that is aimed at psychological and socio-political realities outside the theatre. Instead of providing individual and social shortcomings in established kitchen-sink settings, Kane's work favours a more personal and intimate portrayal of failure. It finds its most telling examples in exaggerated episodes of explicit traumatic loss and in the metonymic failure of psychological and physical abuse.

Ian and Cate in *Blasted*, or Grace and Carl in *Cleansed*, are portrayed not so much as naturalistic representations of real-life characters, but as victims of an all-encompassing extremist and/or fascist political utopia. Ian first tries to rape Cate in an anonymous hotel room and is later raped by a nameless soldier against the backdrop of a horrendous civil war. Grace likewise fails to find her dead brother in a mental institution/university controlled by the abuser Tinker.

The violent theatrical landscapes in Kane's own version of the tragic aesthetic are, in other words, rarely aimed at reconciliation, and they never offer an actual alternative to the existential suffering they portray. None of Kane's characters are in a position to escape their abysmal fates and their personalized versions of traumatic failure. They are, by contrast, part of a universe that does not allow for traditional tragic sacrifice – Ian actually wants to die, tries to kill himself, and eventually dies only to come back from the dead a few moments later.

Kane's work thus constantly fails at establishing meaningful relationships, and refuses to suggest how the characters could defend themselves against their abusers. Cate and Grace never provoke their traumatic punishments and failures, while Ian and Carl's downfalls are caused by their innate desire(s) for reciprocity, making them exceptionally bad examples of theatrical justice.

It is important to note that the trauma experienced by Kane's characters is not caused by their failure to understand their

place in their respective social or transcendental environments or due to an accidental tragic error. Carl, Ian, and Cate rather exist in a predefined utopia of suffering and pain that leaves no room for anything other than constant failure. Thus, Kane's tragic failure is ultimately a political rather than an ethical one: her negative utopias do not allow for catharsis or for reconciliation. They are heightened reflections of an overwhelming individualist culture, where, in a world without freedom or actual individuality, love becomes punishable by anonymous perpetrators because it encapsulates the very essence of failure.

By abolishing the idea of ethos and of genuine interaction, Kane's traumascapes speak vehemently and unmistakably of a dystopic world without compassion. Her characters cannot connect with (an)other, so their existence has become enshrined in a permanent gap. Their constant failure to connect with each other has come to replace all other forms of personal interaction.

This has theoretical implications for the idea of tragic failure in a postdramatic theatre.¹⁸ Similar to such literary dystopias as Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, Kane's theatrical landscapes of terror present characters who are idealized tokens of 'what we cherish in the act of seeing it destroyed'.¹⁹ By being denied any form of authentic reciprocity, her characters act as tragic symbols of an ongoing death of authentic 'other'.

Failure, then, becomes more than a theatrical device for eventual reconciliation with the status quo. In the Kaneian tragic, traumatic failure becomes the characters' *raison d'être*. Ian and Cate, and to some extent Carl, Grace, and Tinker in *Cleansed* or the nameless characters of Kane's later plays, convey an appeal to decipher their psycho-political landscapes as heightened examples of psychological devastation.

In this way, tragic failure to connect with a meaningful 'other' can be a direct consequence of a uniform psychological austerity that finds its origin in an abusive and theatrically heightened individualist and consumerist culture. Kane's version of the

tragic creates dramatic dystopias of warning. By not reconciling their audience with the greatness and the comforting notion of a given status quo or an idealized utopia, Kane's plays effectively ask the spectator to re-inscribe the failure they depict into his or her own socio-political reality so as to avoid it. As Kane herself observed:

If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future, because experience engraves lessons on our hearts through suffering, whereas speculation leaves us untouched. . . . It's crucial to chronicle and commit to memory events never experienced – in order to avoid them happening. I'd rather risk overdose in the theatre than in life.²⁰

The Trauma-Tragic as Site of Witness

Kane is not alone in creating a more experiential tragic mode, despite being one of the first to experiment with form in such a way. Among those who have followed in her postdramatic footsteps are such well-known names as Martin Crimp, debbie tucker green, Ed Thomas, and Forced Entertainment. A common node in all of their work is a substantial contribution to this new experiential tragic aesthetic that is based on explicit and traumatic encounters with personal, social, and psychological failure.

It has to be noted, then, that examples of the new tragic such as Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), green's *Stoning Mary* (2005), and Forced Entertainment's ongoing performance project *Speak Bitterness* define themselves more by their experiential attitude to failure than by their explicit negativity. As with Kane, their intimate encounters with traumatic failure create an opportunity for psychological resistance in the real world. At the same time, they open up a real-life possibility for ethos and for genuinely political- and character-based action within the imaginative spaces of our own everyday realities.

While many of the examples above draw their potential to shock from the explicit portrayal of trauma and traumatic suffering, they are not limited to the portrayal of abuse and of visceral atrocities. As Patrick Duggan argues, the desire of traumatic encounters on

stage is 'to evoke a sense of being there in an attempt to generate an effect of "real" presence or presence in "reality"'.²¹ This does not mean that traumatic performances are only out to shock. Rather, a common characteristic of what Duggan calls the 'trauma-tragic' is an enactment of traumatic failure, or its most telling symptoms, with only limited cathartic release. It is thus no longer an overall moral compass that is being presented and which we are expected to follow; it is an experiential 'happening' aimed at our own experience of trauma and traumatic memory.

The trauma-tragic in Kane's and her successors' work makes a genuine effort to be more about the trauma than its modernist or classical predecessors. Seen from such a perspective, the trauma-tragic mode of the new tragic no longer enables coherent tragic narratives within a given dramatic framework because it acts as a 'possible site of witness' that 'offers an opportunity for testimony which may function as some form of catharsis (from trauma)'.²²

The Absence of 'Big Stories'

While I agree with Duggan's observation that contemporary forms of the tragic are symptoms of a wider psycho-political reality, his definition of the trauma-tragic as a theatrical mode falls short of acknowledging the wider impact tragic theatre and performance projects – and indeed the whole idea of a new tragic aesthetic based on tragic failure – make as a whole. As Duggan observes, examples of the trauma-tragic provide the means 'by which society can engage in attempting to understand, contextualize, and bear witness to its own social dramas and traumas'.²³ Yet, new forms of the tragic are not only a direct response to the so-called 'post-ideological' society, but they also act as a distinct call to social and political action.

Duggan asserts that he is not 'proposing that a trip to the theatre should indicate a moral map for the audience to follow as an ancient tragedy might have been seen to do'.²⁴ While in practice it is more than a moral map that is given to us here, the exact opposite is true: tragic failure and trauma in

the new forms of the tragic aesthetic outlined above indicate that something is amiss that needs to be rectified and presuppose an innate desire to make it right. Sarah Kane wants us to understand and/or experience the traumatic failures depicted, and to change the very circumstances that have had a hand in causing such dire circumstances in the first place.

One more example of this aspect of the new tragic is a telling monologue in Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), which summarizes the tragic dilemma of our consumerist and neo-liberalist times. Unable to establish meaningful relationships or to experience authentic love within their current social environment, Ravenhill's characters embark on sexual transactions that either traumatize them or open up prior traumata from sexual abuse. As Gary explains towards the end of the play, the main problem he, Mark, and Robbie face is not their psychological scars but the fact that they live in a uniform culture that will not allow their wounds to heal properly. Realizing that their world is dominated by one ideological narrative that denies actual individuality, Gary calls for more individualized narratives that would allow for actual reciprocity, despite knowing full well that these are usually few and far between:

We all need stories, we make up stories so that we can get by. And I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. . . . But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we're all making up our own stories. Little stories. It comes out in different ways. But we've each got one.²⁵

Gary, Mark, and Robbie's inability to engage with a meaningful narrative that could go beyond the limited scope of neo-liberalist ideology and consumerism demonstrates clearly that the failure they experience is not due to individual shortcomings, but is part of a more generalized problem. What *Shopping and Fucking* bestows is, in a sense, the realization that the system itself is broken and that we have all failed in providing a valid alternative. The new tragic portrayed

in Ravenhill's first full-length play incorporates failure into the very fabric of everyday consumerist realities.

The Impossibility of Reciprocity

In 1977, the French performance artist Orlan staged an experimental project called *Le Baiser de l'Artiste*, which established her as one of the most controversial performance artists of her time and led to her suspension from her teaching post.²⁶ Her idea was simple: based on two texts that she wrote in collaboration with Hubert Besacier, she developed a performance in which she sat behind a slot-machine based on an image of her naked body. Audience members were asked to put five francs into the slot below her chin. Once the coin was accepted, Orlan gave each audience member/customer a kiss. Women seemed to respond well to the idea of an attractive artist kissing strangers for money. Many men, however, felt that the performance outcome was too intimate for them. More often than not, they were also more reluctant to pay the full price and had to be urged by their female partners to participate.²⁷

Orlan's early critique of capitalist sexual transactions has generally come to be interpreted as an attempt to criticize the objectification of the female body and its use as a sensual signifier of intimacy. But it goes deeper than that. Orlan's performance was based on a simple question: would people respond to an offer of intimacy if it can be bought for five francs? Yet, it was also trying to portray sexual failure in a deliberately non-intimate environment. The fact that men were less prepared to give the full amount of money or shied away from the actual kiss indicates that they failed to recognize the transaction as an intimate yet friendly act. In this sense, Orlan's experiment shows that intimacy, as a commodity, cannot but fail in an 'individualist' culture.

As opposed to her later surgical performances, there is little actual trauma in Orlan's early work. But despite their non-traumatic nature, performances such as *Le Baiser de l'Artiste* still provide a number of aesthetic



DV8's *Strange Fish* (1992), conceived and directed by Lloyd Newson. Photo: Wendy Houstoun.

hints that could be interpreted through the prism of the new tragic and its intimate relationship with tragic failure. While Kane was among the first to employ episodes of abysmal trauma and psychological abuse in order to highlight the impossibility of reciprocity, other non-theatre-specific artists have come to share at least some aesthetic ground with her version of the new tragic.

DV8's *Strange Fish* is one of a number of physical theatre performances that draw on similar images of failure and impossible love, albeit portrayed almost exclusively by physical movement and dance. More straightforward dance performances such as Sasha Waltz's 2000 production *Körper* and its 2002 sequel *noBody* further illustrate that tragic failure is not restricted to the world of text-based theatre. In *Strange Fish*, for example, failure to communicate and a general inability to establish meaningful relations with an 'other' inform the plot and, as a consequence, the movement and the general pace of the production is centred on images of impossible or, indeed, failed reciprocity.

In Waltz's work, on the other hand, the division between the individual and his/her attempts to achieve a truly intimate encounter is more progressive: the abundance of physical possibilities invokes a tragic failure to communicate and postulates division between the dancers' bodies and their imagination. In *noBody*, the mind-body division prohibits reciprocal encounters because, despite their continued efforts, Waltz's dancers cannot connect in either of the two worlds.

Tragic failure here seems to be less of a godly ordeal or the result of an individual weakness. Waltz's, and to some extent Orlan's earlier work, and DV8's performances underline the simple fact that an availability of body does not necessarily result in a meaningful encounter with an 'other', especially not in times of uniform and standardized psychological need. As two telling examples of a new tragic in dance and physical theatre, Waltz's and DV8's work may serve as indicators that the impossibility of reciprocity should be seen as more than a source for simple trauma-drama.

It is both the ability and the competence of the one initiating and the one receiving that make interpersonal encounters meaningful and rewarding. Accordingly, the act of reminding the audience 'of what we cherish in the act of seeing it destroyed' and the idea of tragic failure are by no means limited to the theatre stage. The tragic failure depicted in these performances has a clear psychopolitical potential and is visible and dominant in a range of non-theatre performances and in physical theatre.

Poignancy in Forced Entertainment

There are a number of contemporary performance projects that play on such a notion without forcing audiences to witness explicit portrayals of physical or psychological trauma on the stage. However, few productions employ the point that reciprocity is bound to fail in a culture of heightened individuality and consumerism more poignantly than Forced Entertainment's *Speak Bitterness* and the more recent *Void Story* (2009).

As an ensemble that works with post-modern ideas of plot and meta-levels of audience reception, the Sheffield-based company has successfully questioned theatre conventions for more than thirty years. Yet it is the group's almost despicable honesty about neo-liberalist ideology that renders its (non) plots telling examples of a psychologically charged understanding of tragic failure. As Linda Taylor noted recently, what makes Forced Entertainment special is that it highlights uniform ideological constructs outside the world of the theatre and 'challenges our active complicity in the construction of the ideological fantasy'.²⁸ In other words, Forced Entertainment illustrates consistently our own tragic failure in more than just a few telling plot twists. By creating productions that question dramatic form and narrative conventions, it also makes us understand that we are complicit in making the broken and hollow social environments we all inhabit a continuous reality.

Failure is an undesirable outcome in most site-specific performances and is generally toyed with and alluded to throughout the performative process.²⁹ Forced Entertainment's work, however, considers tragic failure as a hidden option and embraces it as part of the production. In *Speak Bitterness*, for example, identity is questioned but also assigned at random, as a line of people behind a long table on stage make terrible confessions. Strangers admit to suicide bombings, terrorist acts, murders, and racism without actively engaging the audience in any other way than through their implicit complicity. Some of the confessions might be true, the majority are not. But it is this randomness that makes us question our own motives and our inability to act in more ethical ways.

In *Void Story*, on the other hand, the action is marked by a continuous absence of actual plot: four actors sit opposite each other reading voice-over dialogue to a predefined set of storyboards. The storyboards are projected on to a screen and the narrative is stereotypically traumatic, but read out without any depth or personal attachment. The missing elements – no actual personal



Above: Production shot from Sasha Waltz's *Körper*.

Below: From Forced Entertainment's *Void Story*.



encounters between the characters or the actors, a tragic failure to escape the trauma that is thrown at them, and so on – are only illustrated by their absence.

What both performances have in common is that they decisively illustrate common tragic failures without making them a thematic part of the plot. The randomness portrayed in the ridiculous trauma that befalls *Void Story's* characters is not used as a distancing tool, nor for illustrative purposes other than to question the randomness of uniform narratives and ideology.

Likewise, the random confessions people make in *Speak Bitterness* are not part of an eventual spiritual absolution. On the contrary, the audience is complicit in the hollow theatrical framework because it is a witness to something that could happen anywhere at any time. As opposed to taking ethical action, however, the audience keep watching a set of random confessions or senseless storyboards because it knows that the reality is not that far removed from what is seen on the stage.

The missing elements of reciprocity and encounters with an 'other' in Forced Entertainment's work ultimately ring true in our own lives. The only trauma witnessed in such performances is brought to light through a number of performative (postmodern) palimpsests aimed at the audience's political and ethical conscience. In this way, Forced Entertainment's work combines the best of two performance worlds: as an example of a non-genre-specific theatrical aesthetic, the company realizes tragic suffering and failure as part of a stand-in plot that is aimed at our senses and our sensibilities. As a performance-based company, however, it also implements structural failure – that is, the idea that the whole piece could fall apart at any given moment into the many meta-encounters with the audience.

Productions such as *Speak Bitterness* and *Void Story* seek to educate by presenting the failure to posit something real by playing on the fact that they depict an actual absence. In such a setting, our own innate tragic failure(s) are all the more palpable because they serve as a 'formal delegation of the spectator's imaginative capacity to the per-

formers; the performers are designated . . . as "the subjects supposed to know"³⁰.

Tragic Failure as a Theatrical Ethos

As I have indicated, the tragic failure to be found in new forms of the tragic aesthetic is by no means restricted to the world of theatre and performance. As an example that roams free of restrictive ideas of genre and of normative formal requirements, tragic failure can occur in a number of cultural phenomena and narratives as varied as in physical theatre, dance, Hollywood cinema, fiction, and site-specific performance.

Failure in the new tragic is thus no longer a form of tragic realization of fate, nor is it part of an overall existential dilemma aimed at social status and/or wealth. In the examples examined in this article, tragic failure occurs as part of an overall political message. What makes these contemporary forms tragic is their characters' inability to form meaningful relationships and to experience reciprocity and authentic relationships beyond the limited scope of the exaggerated neo-liberalist landscapes that they inhabit. Their implicit aim is to encourage the audience to become actively engaged and to question the almost inevitable tragic failure they portray.

Along these lines, the failure witnessed in new forms of the tragic aesthetic takes one further step towards understanding and analyzing the world that surrounds us. The failure we see depicted as part of the plot/form/psychological landscape/body of the performer not only becomes our own but also alerts us to the fact that we, ourselves, need to become active in order to avert it in our lives. Our human condition is inherently tragic because it is split. What the new tragic portrays is what Oedipus had to achieve: namely, we are helpless in the face of our own perpetuated failure to commit and act, yet we are still bound to act on it and/or try to avoid it.

What this new kind of tragic asks for is a commitment to our own nature. Instead of merely consuming the tragic aesthetic as an example of something negative and inevit-

able, we are asked to put ourselves in a position from which we are allowed to act, to understand and analyze. Thus, it calls for a new kind of spectator who will act to keep what is being depicted on stage from happening in real life. It demands a truly 'emancipated spectator', in the most literal sense of Rancière's concept, and inspires a special form of collective power:

The collective power shared by spectators does not stem from the fact that they are members of a collective body or from some specific form of interactivity. It is the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way.³¹

The true power of the new tragic and the way it depicts tragic failure thus lies in its ability to foster social change and to incite a more ethical stance toward socio-political ideologies that could further psychological and social dystopias. If the dystopian realities in such works as Kane's *Blasted*, Forced Entertainment's *Void Story*, or Waltz's *nobody* demonstrate one thing, it is that tales of missing reciprocity need not be the final word. The new tragic calls on a collective ethos, imploring everyone to act for a better world than the one it so vehemently portrays.

Notes and References

1. Olga Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity, and Mourning* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 45.
2. *Ibid.*; Jean-Joseph Goux, *Oedipus, Philosopher* (New York: Stanford University Press, 1993).
3. Taxidou, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy is Not Enough* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), p. 30.
6. Aristotle, *The Works of Aristotle*, Vol XI (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 327.
7. It has to be mentioned here that, while Aristotle's *Poetics* have certainly been influential, his reception proves to be somewhat peculiar, given that he did not

set out an actual unity of place and only very briefly mentions a unity of time (cf. Aristotle, 1924).

8. Peter Szondi, 'Versuch über das Tragische', *Schriften*, I (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), p. 209; my translation.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
10. Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: the Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Wiley, 2003), p. 225.
11. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 353.
12. Rita Felski, *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2004), p. 3.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
14. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. 63.
15. Szondi, 'Versuch', p. 209.
16. Kathleen M. Sands, 'Tragedy, Theology, and Feminism in the Time After Time', in Felski, *Rethinking Tragedy*, p. 84.
17. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), p. 121.
18. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London; New York: Routledge, 2006).
19. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. 26.
20. Sarah Kane, in Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, ed., *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 133.
21. Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 43.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 9–10.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 185–6.
25. Mark Ravenhill, *Plays One* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 66.
26. Jan Jagodzinski and Jason Wallin, *Arts-based Research: a Critique and a Proposal* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2013), p. 138.
27. Incidentally, this could also be read as a critique of consumerist culture, even though this was not an original intention of Orlan. The female pimping her mate out to another female of higher status gives an ironic twist to the whole randomness of the patriarchal 'sex market' dilemma.
28. Linda Taylor, "'There are more of you than there are of us': Forced Entertainment and the Critique of the Neoliberal Subject", in Broderick Chow and Alex Mangold, ed., *Žižek and Performance* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave: 2014), p. 127.
29. The performance collective Reactor would be an obvious case in point here. See <<http://reactor.org.uk>> for more details of their collective work on potentially (pre)failed happenings and events.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
31. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London; New York: Verso), p. 16–17.