

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gender and Sexuality

Watching as Praxis

P.A. SKANTZE

FOR WHOM THE TRAGEDY OCCURS

In the past the word most likely to be yoked to the word tragedy was genre: the genre of tragic literature, the genre of tragic drama. Yet, intriguingly, in two important recent works discussing the tragic and theater the word yoked to tragic is “experience.” Both Hélène Cixous in “Enter the Theatre” and Hans-Thies Lehmann in *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* write of the “tragic experience.” Why? I would suggest this shift has to do with an understanding of where tragedy occurs. In a time when our common usage of the word tragedy seems to be rendered banal by its ubiquitous appearance across every electronic form of media, what forms of art actually awaken us to the consequences of our actions and the actions of those in power? What forms of art reveal how the daily saturation of “disaster porn” threatens to freeze all sensory perception leaving only overwhelming powerlessness and its attendant anxiety?

First and foremost, a spectator’s experience of tragedy in the theater, which indeed can be intense and provoke profound change in understanding and potentially in behavior, remains protected from the everyday experience of tragic catastrophe: war, famine, death, loss, and the sudden reversals life seems to delight in. But as all artists and audiences for artistic productions know, recognition, sensory understanding, and personal or political change often can only occur at a distance from the living out of tragic circumstances. In Hans-Thies Lehmann’s figuring of the “tragic experience”:

The tragic cannot be conceived either as a manifestation of dialectic or as an intellectual paradox; it also cannot be conceived as an insoluble conflict or “insight” into subjective or world-historical collapse . . . if tragic experience were really thus, then tragedy . . . would merely illustrate relations that concepts can grasp more deeply and fully.¹

When my students explore practice as research methods, often I find myself inviting them to move beyond “illustration,” a paint- by-number rendering of the idea into the performance. So with Hans-Thies Lehmann, I argue that the spectator who is practicing, who is in the midst of a partnership with the theatrical art before her or him, becomes the locus for the transformation from illustration to experience, to recognition and beyond.

The scope of Lehmann’s book makes it impossible to do justice to his arguments, particularly about post-dramatic theater, in this chapter. However, with the emphasis of my work on the particularities of the bodies in the theater, their gender, race, nationality,

sexuality, I hope to augment our understanding of where tragedy happens. Reception cannot be separated from the bodies we bring into the theater, and simultaneously we shift fluidly between our various states in the course of a theatrical production, just as we do in the course of a lifetime. By thinking with Catherine Clément, Hélène Cixous, Sylvia Wynter alongside Lehmann's predominantly white, male European considerations, I hope to suggest that in performance the tragic experience can also allow us to see the tragedies inherent in the systems that have blinded us one to another.

Coping with tragedy then requires the spectator to theorize, and here let's be clear—to theorize is not to analyze, not to be caught in the perversely cool pleasures of the always already known dialectic. To theorize practically is to become the crucible for the mixing of the reception of the work before one and the decisions about how and when to accept the propositions theatrical performance presents: shall I “accept the unacceptable,” that mistaken messengers and parents unrecognized set the course for baffling disaster? And what to do with the aftermath of the disaster, when the spectator leaves her seat, picks up his coat, wanders out of the theater? As Cixous writes, the tragic is “the irreconcilable as ineluctable, the situation in which I must accept the unacceptable, or renounce what is most dear and most necessary to me because there is no right answer or happy ending.”² Cixous and Ariane Mnouchkine, the collaborative writer/director team who make theater with the Paris-based Theatre du Soleil, “dream” as do many makers of theater “of telling in such a way that something will move in reality. If not change—which would be enormously presumptuous—then at least be recalled, resuscitated, delivered from silence.”³

In this chapter I join Lehmann in querying the strange arc of the philosophical/literary ideas of tragedy which have so often drawn only upon the printed literary work even while the mask of tragedy appeared first above a stage, the theater as locus of tragedy. Instead as Lehmann writes, “the European intellectual opinion has held that something about theater ‘gets in the way.’” What Lehmann does not explore in this old prejudice beyond the knee-jerk anti-theatricality of the “feelings cloud reason” intellectual is how this distrust has always been gendered.⁴ What is valued in patriarchy is the fixed, the solid, the evident, and the evidence. One might reflect here on the basic masculine fear of generation and paternity, as Hortense Spillers wonderfully reminds us in her title “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Performance has most often been associated with Mama to Papa text, the printed dramatic work resting in the fixed pantheon of the canon.⁵ The distrust goes both ways in the sense of the medium itself and of those who make and watch it: the ephemeral can reinvent itself and the sensual responses of our bodies in a theater are unruly. Unruly women, unruly people of color, unruly queer people, all those theatrical types whose effect on the audience mars the pristine, ordered, and hegemonic world.

Much has been written on anti-theatricality, and Lehmann has a section on the prejudice in his book, but the patriarchal, white supremacist, homophobic systems underpinning the distrust of theatricality are not just theories, they are engines that drive the creation of character and as crucially engines that make and mar the reception of character.⁶ The joy of the ephemeral is its ability to reinvent itself and in this chapter I argue that new forms of performance production reorientate our experience of tragedy. Though most of us (who are not straight white males) by necessity have learned to borrow a straight white male character's sorrow and make it our own, many of the traditional stories fueling the downfall or the mistake or the misfortune of the hero are so sexist, so racist as to bar the female, queer, black/brown spectator from inhabiting the reversal and the recognition.⁷ Yet through performance intervention the tragic experience can occur

by way of the spectator's recognition of injustice. In ancient tragedy that injustice might have been set firmly at the gates of Olympus with meddling gods and implacable fate; as we come to understand the cost of inequality across the lines of gender, class, race, and sexuality, the spectator potentially receives old stories with a new sense of what fuels the cruelty, of how our own social configurations of power are as arbitrary and cruel as any slighted mythological deity. As spectators, the tragic experience occurs in time and in *our* times where the understanding of the human as what Sylvia Wynter terms a "genre" might reorientate our reception. Wynter's call to discard disciplinary, bourgeois categories in order to reinvent as praxis the genre of human potentially offers us as spectators in the midst of the tragic experience an understanding as profoundly moving in its complexity and in the praxis of its fluidity as the traditional teleological catharsis. Where the theatrical understanding of catharsis generally moved through the flaw, fall, and re-establishment of masculine power, potentially we in the praxis of being human spectators understand ourselves in the multiplicity and fluidity that is enacting contemporary citizenship.⁸

Let me pause for a moment to note how the emphasis I place in this chapter on the performance itself as crucible confronts Wynter's conception of the staleness of where we are now in our inability to move beyond bourgeois binaries and her positing of the human being not as a noun but as a verb—"being human as praxis." According to Katherine McKittrick, Wynter posits a collective "rewriting of knowledge as we know it"⁹ and according to Sarah Trimble Wynter's ideas pose:

a challenge that asks us – thinkers, creators, knowledge-makers, storytellers – to accept disorientation in exchange for the possibility of exercising "dazzling creativity" (p17) as we recalibrate our sense of who "we" are. Wynter's project of completely transforming Western ways of knowing derives from her argument, following Frantz Fanon, that humanness is hybrid. We are, in Wynter's terms, both *bios* and *mythoi*; flesh-and-blood organisms that also (re)invent ourselves by telling stories of where we came from and what we are.¹⁰

In the theater, the performance made by bodies for bodies hosts the very hybrid potential Wynter wants to suggest will open the space for the "dazzlingly creativity" of encounter, of *bios* and *mythoi*, the reanimation of storytelling that is the live performance with auditor. Cixous articulates her similar approach directly in terms of tragedy:

My plays . . . present the tragic in a performative manner by asking questions about the tragic, calling into question the tragic, trying to interrupt the end, the teleological, trying to write History in which "there is still some blank space" – still some indetermination . . . a theatrical writing which overflows tragedy – is it possible? – to write understanding the tragedy and at the same time overflowing it and asking in the play itself the question about the overflowing of tragedy.¹¹

Calling the tragic into question in terms of gender, sexuality, and race requires interruption and reconfiguration of time and space. Space configures the theatrical situation of tragedy. As Cixous notes, "to begin with there is the *Place*."¹²

The spatial theatrical setup for Western tragedy depends on patriarchal notions of gender. To have one exit from the stage in a Greek amphitheater understood to be the port and the other understood to be the city is to mark a difference between who travels away and who stays at home. In fact thinking as a director, I have always wanted to draw a stark and simple image for the remarkably durable notion of the need for a steadfast non-moving woman (or love object of whatever gender) to anchor our hero, our

protagonist.¹³ If there were a cord running from a wife—to use a conventional term—to her husband which remains slack while she stays faithfully in her place, quite literally the tragedy would begin when she shifted out towards something more than home, be it lover or another sort of passion than her domestic duties. As the protagonist, our hero, feels the tug on the line, he is literally pulled into an inevitable disorientation: she who has provided the stable ground from which he can always depart now herself departing. Needless to say, in many tragic theatrical narratives the cord does not even actually ever become taut; simply a whiff of suspicion that the woman has dislodged herself as trusty anchor and faithful home is enough to darken the mind of the protagonist as the spectacle of betrayal begins its relentless repetition on the stage of his imagination.

A short review of how this works in tragedy might begin with *Macbeth* following through to domestic tragedies by Ibsen to the most recent instance of an oddly traditional tragedy, *Hir* by Taylor Mac. In *Macbeth* Shakespeare diagrams for us the attribute of the fluid as feminine and the fixed as masculine, but does so in a way that delineates how much the genders borrow from one another in times of crisis. Lady Macbeth while an anchor at home awaiting her returning husband must consistently reinforce for her husband the value of fixity, “screw your courage to the sticking place” in contrast to his fretful indecision. Intriguingly she might be “unsexed” which on the one hand renders her masculine but perhaps on the other allows for a dual role as keeper and protector of the hearth. Quite palpably in word and act when she becomes unfixed, wandering in wit and disturbing the household by her constant movement, Macbeth, almost martinet-like, becomes the masculine killing machine he never was until now.

Other Shakespeare plays like *Cymbeline* as well as many tragedies in the repertory of European drama turn on the trick of proving a wife’s infidelity. Here too as with Othello’s demise the idea of infidelity is enough to undo our protagonist. Unmoored by suspected infidelity, he wants revenge or loses his sense of who he is in the world. As with Othello these men, pondering the moved and therefore inconstant wife, find their “occupation” gone. Century after century mobile woman undo male certainty in Ibsen (*The Doll’s House*, *Hedda Gabler*), in Wedekind (*Lulu*), in Lorca (*Yerma*) (fig. 8.1), in Tennessee Williams (*Streetcar Named Desire*). Even contemporary tragic work often repeats the trope. In Taylor Mac’s *Hir*, as with work by Sarah Kane (*Blasted*) and Mark Ravenhill (*Shopping and Fucking*), the dramatic story remains remarkably traditional even while the characters move out of the realm of heteronormativity. In *Hir* it is the mother who becomes a kind of scapegoat for the sons at war at home and abroad. One son, an ex-soldier returned from Afghanistan, comes home to find his sister Maxine has transitioned into Max, a second son, a change that sees his soldier brother escalate in masculinity in response. The failure of the mother to create stability for the children fuels the play; she is at once unreliable because her instability has made the ground on which the children stand unsafe and also ridiculed for her lack of easy mobility in understanding the choices made by her transsexual child.

The above paragraphs demonstrate how tediously recurrent is the use of a female character as a tool to make a narrative unfold. Incredible as it might seem, the theatrical roles women—and those queer characters who also play under the sign of the heteronormative woman to man—inhabit on the contemporary stage *still* consist for the most part as roles of reaction. Virginia Woolf’s astute assessment of women’s role at home in a world at war in *Three Guineas* as that of a mirror magnifying the frightened recruit to ten times the size of his training or ability applies equally to the theatrical world of tragedy.¹⁴ And it’s exhausting magnifying men all the time. It results in characters



FIGURE 8.1: Billie Piper in Lorca's *Yerma*: Young Vic, London, August 2016. Credit: Johann Persson/ArenaPAL.

onstage who by turns are hysterical, whiny, and suddenly violent.¹⁵ None of these responses represent actions of a protagonist but rather the reactions of a necessary component to the main story. To see the consequences of the heteronormative and patriarchal in theatrical production is to see the waste of (female/queer) energy necessary to drive the old stories. Here we might disrupt the weariness with Wynter's "genre" of the *human narrans*, the storytelling that gets us from one day to the next, from fear to a willingness to try again. To think about tragedy and gender, sexuality, and race is not to replace the white male face with the white female or the black male or the transsexual protagonist. Arguments can and have been made for *Antigone*, to take only one example, as a tragedy with a woman protagonist.¹⁶ But the see-saw of "now you are the subject, now I am" leaves the underlying power relations intact, whoever is wearing the costume. Instead of a universal human subject, being "human as praxis" means we must invent with "dazzling creativity" stories or performative interventions in stories that undo the fixedness, even in resistant philosophies, of gender, race, and sexuality. If we enter the theater practicing such creativity in reception, it is clear that as spectators we play a double role as auditor of a story moving across the space between players and audience and as spectators who refashion the story in the immediate moment as well as in memory.

Thus one way to redress or re-imagine gender in terms of tragedy is surely to write new work, create new forms of contemporary tragedy as does Caryl Churchill (see below). Another is to take Lehmann and Cixous at their words and let the theater do its work to reveal, remember, and to offer more than an illustration, to offer a way for the spectator to know the tragedy differently, to expand the field of tragedy beyond the individual. Illustration draws the crude lines of binaries and dialectic, limiting the exits to port or city. A modern rendering of the tragic experience instead addresses the spectator as the third term, not illustrating but theatricalizing, letting space exist between representation and consequences. Thus a space emerges that the spectator might theorize in and make room to reconfigure the tired dichotomies, accumulating through the time of performance new interpretations arising from what has been offered in the experimental space of the tragic experience.

PACIFIC OVERTURES. CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY 2017

Two instances of performative intervention in the last years will allow us to see how the space that invites the spectator to discern and inhabit the theatrical conditions for the tragic experience occurs whether the text comes under the category of tragedy or whether the production awakens the spectator to tragic conditions newly understood in the context of gender and sexuality played out against politics of race and colonial violence. In her brilliant *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* Catherine Clément dissects the sacrifice at the heart of tragic opera in her pithily titled chapter “Dead Women”: “All the women in opera die a death prepared for them by a slow plot woven by furtive, fleeing heroes . . .”¹⁷ Writing specifically of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* Clément reminds the reader of the centrality of the figure of a pinned creature, held motionless in order to be collected by the American who fixes “the butterfly woman to the board of the white Occident.”¹⁸ Even those who barely know opera have at some time or another seen a representation of the little geisha girl and the American soldier. For Sondheim’s *Pacific Overtures* this tragedy of the naïve Orient and the betraying invader lingers in the shadows.

Intriguingly the production history of *Pacific Overtures* includes a twist in the aesthetic genealogy. In 1988 David Henry Huang premiered his play *M Butterfly* in which the geisha turns out to be a man who plays a woman so well that the American lover professes never to have known him to be male. The much-acclaimed play brought to the New York stage a work that revealed the Occident in all its homoerotic glory. The actor B.D. Wong who played the title role in *M. Butterfly* appeared in the 2004 revival of *Pacific Overtures* as the reciter/narrator in a lavish revival on Broadway. As Marvin Carlson reminds us, the theater is always haunted by past productions and the manner in which this musical could be understood to realign sexuality, race, and imperialism transformed over the years:¹⁹ We arrive then at 2017 with director John Doyle to ask the question: now in this moment what conditions “of the theatrical situation must be fulfilled in order for tragic experience to occur?”²⁰

If, as I have suggested, traditional (and not so traditional) narratives of tragedy in theater often rely on women and their im/mobility, the opening of Doyle’s production enigmatically presents us with just such a vision. A beautiful, young, curious Asian actor (Megan Masako Haley) dressed in white wanders across a platform stage set between two blocks of bleacher seating on either side, making me at once intrigued and wary. Intrigued because a woman moving on stage alone is not what one expects to open a production of Stephen Sondheim’s *Pacific Overtures*; wary because a young, very innocent looking woman wandering onstage in a musical about Japan courts not only the dangerous

territory of orientalism but of the sexism/colonialism that refers to a nation as a “she” to be taken, most particularly the Western sexism that includes fantasies of the submissive services of an exotic geisha.

The audience witnesses this dicey opening from either side of a small runway of a stage in Doyle’s production at Classic Stage Company in New York. The small orchestra only partly visible in an alcove to the back of the action underscores our watching with Sondheim’s deliberate musical opening in a Japanese key, or at least a key that Western musical ears hear as Japanese, the “mystery” of the lone young woman looking curious, looking excited, and a bit wary. In her excitement and wariness she embodies a potential state of spectatorship one might have at the beginning of any production. The stage setup becomes a conduit for the “tragic experience” that theater constructs in part because of the deliberate address the actors employ through asides to us as this work is narrated. The asides are neither coy nor are they a bid for the entanglement beloved of immersive theater makers, but delivered coolly and deliberately in a reminder of how theater traditionally calls its audience to attend to the history it tells. This musical tragedy works as a tragedy visited on a country by entering us into the daily human costs of occupation and the coming of modern industrialization.

What happens to the civic of tragedy, the city state devastated by plagues caused by incest, in a global world? The original production of *Pacific Overtures* in 1976 asked this question lyrically in a moment in which in the US all the books on business were about the Japanese miracle, the boom that was Sony and Toyota. The musical unfolds—and I mean that verb to suggest a physical unfolding as in a series of screens—the story of the invasion of Japan by the West (and the East in the persona of Russia). Sondheim uses all sorts of tropes, often foregrounding every form of stereotype, but particularly ones about nation, to re-enact the shifting moment for an agrarian, ritualistically controlled society whose territories once sovereign become porous and available for trade and exploitation. There are few women characters, and they were played by men in the original production in an imitation of Kabuki. Sondheim has always been clear that the work is Japan seen from a US perspective. Despite the elegiac key of the late songs like “A Bowler Hat” in which the main character Kayama sings his transformation from Japanese fisherman to anglophile administrator, the finale “Next” combined a sorrow for loss with a rhythmic pounding that could not help but convey admiration for the ambition and scope of a capitalism unstoppable.

While capitalism has not been stopped—a reminder of our own tragic incapacity to create a just, economic system—the “boom” in Japan certainly has, and more pertinent to this production in 2017, the question might be reframed: “what happens to the civic of tragedy when the devastation is global?” In Doyle’s production, the young woman who plays a kind of spectatorial doppelgänger steps into the story to play the young wife who commits suicide as instructed by her husband Kayama, though the disaster he predicts as he sings to her that “there is no other way” but to kill themselves in shame at his failure does not in fact happen. Kayama returns in triumphant joy only to find Tamate dead. After that episode in the play the player returns to the role of a wandering listener, auditor, spectator (fig. 8.2). Only once more will Masako Haley enter the fictional world of *Pacific Overtures*. During the creepy song “Pretty Lady” she doubles as the innocent figure of Japan onstage and the menaced young woman surrounded by sailors who begin in beseeching and end in the barely restrained violence of spurned occupiers. Having seized the “land” by force, these sailors are outraged that their advances are not met with admiring submission.



FIGURE 8.2: Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures*, directed by John Doyle. Classic Stage Company, New York, May 2017. Credit: Joan Marcus.

I would argue that the figure of the young woman onstage as performance intervention changes the relation of spectator to the work in ways that create exactly the conditions for the tragic experience, the sensory dimension of *being together in the same time as others* in Lehmann's terms borrowing from Walter Benjamin.²¹ More importantly this sensory relation of spectator to the work occurs in ways that place gender, sexuality, and indeed race at the center of the question of tragedy. Or more precisely at the center of the contemporary challenge of our time to unfix the patriarchal, white central tragic figure not by substitution but by exploring the tragic experience as it offers reflections on the genres of human we narrate and inhabit.

We might think of singing as a form of aesthetic exploration of the tragic experience not simply because the history of tragedy begins in the sung/spoken oral of myth and narratives of community that become narratives of nation. In contemporary theater in the practice that is spectating, music changes the time and space of our reception, guiding us by rhythm and lyric and allowing for pauses underscored by orchestration. The crescendo of tragedy, the denouement of discovery, offers the composer of opera or musical theater an already prepared ground for the intervention of sung language. For those who find the moment in musicals when a character moves from speaking to singing absurd, the genre of opera exceeds that absurdity matching tragic expression note for note. What's intriguing about how *Pacific Overtures* works in Doyle's production is that what is heightened is not only the plot exposing the slow and inevitable encircling by larger powers of the small islands that form Japan, but the way in which we see two layers at once: the action of history, the action of the telling of the action of history. The theatrical nature of the tragic experience as Lehmann reminds us is "not simply a reflection, it is a pause in reflection."²²

By continuously returning the story to us as spectators, the players enact forms of reporting history that make us reconsider how we recollect the stories we *think* we know about the past. Sylvia Wynter's positing of being human as praxis in the exercise of reinvention through story aligns with a contemporary understanding of tragedy which moves away from the static philosophical concept illustrated by literary genre to the fluid shifting of experience, an experience created from the "theatrical situation—corporeal play on the stage and the mode of spectatorship unique to the theatre."²³ As Wynter argues for the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries, so the denotation of a work as a tragedy no longer works according to a list of plays in categories labeled tragic.²⁴ Lehmann quoting Olga Taxidou admonishes us away from genre and literature towards "the spectacular, physical, collective, physiognomic (as Benjamin would call it) dimension of tragedy."²⁵ In considering the works I chose to write about in this chapter on gender, sexuality, and race, I bore in mind my response to a question posed by my partner, "are there tragedies where a woman actually plays a protagonist?" My answer surprised me, "I don't know; I would have to see a production."

So I found myself not scanning a bookshelf for titles but thinking through memory towards the works I had seen. For example, Ivo van Hove's 2015 production of *Antigone*, I would argue, entered the spectator into the tragic experience via Creon, an unexpected turn particularly for those of us hanging on to the few plays with forceful tragic heroines. Alternatively, his production of Arthur Miller's *A View From the Bridge* employed a closely drawn square for a set in which incest was not at all a mystery to be revealed but rather an engine of narrative destruction for young women, in which homoerotic longing flashed across the masculine order disturbing the status quo and the conflicted men who labored to hide their desires.

Performance interventions in two version of *King Lear* in recent years opened out the philosophical weight behind the "love of old men" that underpins everything from Eliot's *Romola* to depictions of St. Jerome in Renaissance painting. While Shakespeare exposes Lear's folly, no one can doubt the pathos of the mad Lear and blinded Gloucester which works to erase our memory of the impossible fathers to daughters and sons that they have been. Both Ruth Maleczek in 1990 and Glenda Jackson in 2016 inhabited the theatrical space in a way that transformed the work of tragedy in the play. In the Mabou Mines version with Maleczek, the director Lee Breuer decided to change the pronouns to suit the gender reversals in the casting.²⁶ Lyric memory opened out to sensational discovery as Maleczek spat out "what a poor, bare forked thing is woman." With Glenda Jackson the transformations were just as startling while not being made by way of language. In Deborah Warner's production the combination of Jackson's extraordinary instrument, her body and voice, together with her age (80), created the conditions for tragedy across one of the few universals humans can share, namely becoming old. To cite just one example, Jackson implied that the character of Lear deployed the mad dementia Shakespeare's lines suggest: in her sing-songy voice she lulled her listeners into dismissing her as a demented old man only to drop into that vocal register exclusively her own to skewer her auditors with her clarity and her power.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM 2017

So here's a comedy, yes? Mismatched lovers, forest fairies, implacable patriarchs, a stolen Amazon who magically melts into her conqueror's arms. Heteronormativity, patriarchy, imperial rapine usually costumed in productions of this play so prettily that the spectator

with the actors passes over the narrative bumps, the fact that true love wins out in the end only because one lover remains under the influence of a drug. Even more cynical versions of *Midsummer* like the brilliant late twentieth-century production in New York directed by Liviu Ciulei where Hippolyta is stripped of her Amazonian motorcycle leathers and the leathers are burned onstage still let some things come around right by the end. In Joe Hill-Gibbons' production at the Young Vic in April 2017, however, the theatrical conditions for the tragedy in the comedy render this play a bewildering parable for our times with barely concealed violence and loss at the center of every love match.

If space conjures meaning again and again in the context of the corporeality that awakens the practicing spectator to her task, the set for this *Midsummer* established quite literally the impossible grounds on which we stand these days. The entire stage filled with dirt—not a dusting of notional gravel but dirt deep and loose enough to demand constant effort on the part of the actors to get from one place to another. On the back wall a mirror the length and height of the stage in which we saw ourselves. This is not a new trope in the theater but I would suggest in this performance the mirror rather than representing a gentle nudge of “see how silly we are and how our behavior looks when it is revealed to us” became as unforgiving as the ground on which the characters trudged (fig. 8.3). Its surface reflected back to us our participation in the recognition of the proximity between “happily ever after” and “mourning what we have lost” ever after.²⁷

At the heart of this production was a reinvention of the centrality of the lovers, characters too often relatively dreary and boring when compared with the drama of Titania and Oberon or the class warfare manifested in the representation of those silly,



FIGURE 8.3: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Joe Hill-Gibbons. Young Vic, London, February 2017. Credit: Geraint Lewis/Alamy Stock Photo.

uneducated mechanicals led by the ever-diverting Bottom. The dirt meant that all encounters marked the actor and changed her/his appearance and none more so than the confusion in the woods near Athens. The actors varied in race and stature as the text requires given the fight between Hermia and Helena over “being low.” Though the women had real physical power, as they needed to if they were to run about in the dirt, the men turned between lovers and spurners with casual physical menace. The enactment of the mistaken love scenes, the anger of the sudden spurned, the overenthusiasm of the newly devoted shifted swiftly to a real violence in the voice and gesture which demanded the audience see the vulnerability of the female bodies to the male potential to overpower. Thinking back to the production in this moment of public acknowledgment of the abuse of power available to men in theater and film makes me admire even more how much the production made us as spectators understand the different stakes in the woods for men and for virginal young daughters. The tussle before Hermia asks Lysander to sleep farther off is no cute “let’s wait until we are married” fumble, but a very near rape.

Overall grief reigned. Even after the return of Bottom to himself, the Duke watched him warily, Hippolyta looked back over her shoulder in longing for her former assheadman as if his bestial nature promised more affection than any coming from Oberon or the Duke he transformed into. As for the lovers, no freedom occurs despite the very end of the play when we are supposed to free them with our “hands” as Puck asks us—a Puck that embodied the kind of vicious British masculinity furious in subservience and ripe for taking it out on others. Instead Demetrius wanders about re-establishing the tragic, repeating forlornly, again and again, “Are you sure that we are awake?” He thus refuses the spectators the handy forgetting we are encouraged to enact of the fact that he alone does not have his eyes touched or the drug removed, and therefore we are aware that his supposedly true love is the product of manipulation and interfering magic.

At the point of the mechanicals’ play when all is supposedly returned to equilibrium, fathers no longer promising to kill their daughters, and Dukes accompanied by decorative Duchesses, the actors take up huge paint rollers and paint the mirror black, the one that has until now reflected us continually within the action. Small lights come up on the edge of the stage and a theater of sorts is established, one still full of the unforgiving earth, of mud made by water here and there. The refusal of participation that marks the erasing of the audience heightens the sense of what would in tragedy be a descent into the inevitable denouement. The “deus ex mechanicals” instead of providing a point of convergence where aristocrats can remind themselves of the bond between them by way of ridiculing the working class unleash instead more confusion. Even as the spectators get caught up in the giddy glee of the fabulous foolishness of Piramus and Thisbe, the commentary from the lovers is acidic enough to bounce back on themselves. Meanwhile the Duke and Hippolyta respond with something between bravado on the Duke’s part and an unseemly desire still in Hippolyta’s voice and gaze as she practices a different kind of spectating than we are accustomed to see in the finale. She creates the conditions for the most lamentable tragedy watching with a doubled gaze, longing to move back to freedom even as she is returned fully to the limited motion afforded an ex-Queen and now consort only.

In the end all are dirty, bewildered, ranting with unnameable loss and sadness.²⁸ This production made of *Midsummer* a contemporary form of tragic telling: these are Wynter’s humans as praxis and the praxis demands we as spectators face consequences rather than remain above the difficult ground. When still in the woods Titania narrates the out-of-jointness of nature due to her greedy fight with Oberon over a small Indian boy, born of

a woman clearly evoked as Titania's lover as well as friend. Titania's description of the earth's instability, the weather gone awry in response to the bickering pair sounds not unlike the evening weather on the BBC. The set cannot be separated from the ravages of global warming, ravages rendered here in lyric. The strange thing about this form of production that demands our attention is that though surely one leaves the theater sad, the catharsis happens in the pleasure of being awakened, of being called to account both as spectators and as humans who might with "dazzling creativity" revisit our stories first to set straight what is at stake and then to ask questions about where we go from here.

NO EXIT: *ESCAPED ALONE*

As I have argued, performative interventions make for one way to redress and re-imagine gender in terms of tragedy. Another intervention comes when a playwright writes new work and creates new forms of contemporary tragedy as does Caryl Churchill. In fact, she writes a form of deceptive tragedy, against the grain of the single protagonist. In *Escaped Alone* the revelation appears with characters in a garden, four women aged "at least seventy" as the dramatis personae directions dictate.²⁹ The deception invites us into a summer garden somewhere, most probably England. The spoken polyphony of lines winding round one another—something Churchill invented early on in her play writing—she has now reduced to sonic hieroglyphs, rather as if her earlier plays *Cloud Nine* or *Serious Money* were written by Walt Whitman and these late works written by Emily Dickinson. Her signature dialogue—broken, overlapping, intertwining—sets the quotidian scene, the content of the talk as normal as the garden party.

Like *Pacific Overtures* the performance intervention of *Escaped Alone* snaps the audience to attention. Few writers are clearer about what I suggested earlier is our own tragic incapacity to create a just, economic system, and the question now reverberating: "what happens to the civic of tragedy when the devastation is global?" With Doyle's direction of the Sondheim musical this happened both by the actors' direct address and by the doubled sense of seeing the platform on which the work unfolded and the people sitting opposite us watching, watching the stage, watching us watching them. In Churchill's new interventions in tragedy (including *Here We Go*: see below) a form of violent proscenium arch establishes both separation and entrapment. The "fourth wall" is surrounded by neon red lights in *Escaped Alone* that announce something like a barrier and a new dimension in time. For the audience member, the character speaking in that vicious frame clearly directly addresses us but from a place and time both yet to be and horrifyingly near.

Such dilation in the nonstory of the play becomes a kind of emotional promenade theater where, every time our guide steps out of the action to speak the consequences of the way we live now, the tragic experience accumulates as we move on our next stop towards the apocalyptic outcome. First, though, we don't know what Mrs. J (Mrs. Jarret) will say. All we know is that she is our "I" narrator, moving us into the scene with the barest of indications: "I am walking down the street and there is a door in the fence open and inside there are three women I have seen before."³⁰ Economical and effective, she sets the scene for us before the percussive, wandering, fragmentary chatter of the women begins. Then that segue, that sudden shock of red and light and a frame; Mrs. J steps away from the garden, stands alone and begins: "Four hundred tons of rock paid for by senior executives split off the hillside to smash through the roofs, each fragment onto a designated child's head."³¹ And so we enter the horror of the monologue, the dimension of an

unimaginable, all too imaginable future. Churchill's deftness in brevity establishes so much in just that one sentence: Class, money, power, and planned murder of the innocents. With the word "child" she shifts the stakes; this will happen often in the play. The tragic neglect of the next generation becomes intergenerational war (note the word "designated") again and again as these monologues hammer at the heart and the ear of the spectator. What's so remarkable is that here we meet what I spoke of at the beginning of this chapter, the relentless everyday evocation in media of tragedies in the world, but rather than having them reiterated as "what we all know," the spectator is laid bare to the descriptions so casually imparted by Mrs. J. The monologues are spoken matter-of-factly by a woman, without actorly intervention. The horror of the content then is harder to escape, not just initially when we have no idea what this relatively benign-looking woman in her seventies is going to say to us, but even further on as a spectator might begin to anticipate the next monologue.

Churchill's is a fine-tuned attention to the work of the spectator, to where tragedy occurs. Surely one possible response is to retreat, flinch away from the next speech, but the small bits of information forming something like a story in the women's talk when all four sit in the garden creates a traditional theatrical narrative of tragedy pulsing behind the violent interventions framed for us to hear (fig. 8.4). The dribble of words, "been away six years," begins to accumulate around the idea of "Vi" who murdered her husband, perhaps in self defense. The mystery of her actions, the potential of her as a tragic figure keeps being eroded by the suspicion of her interlocutors. A Churchillian suspicion this, nothing as demarcated as true doubt growing and becoming performed for the audience but rather a suspicion in passing, as everything seems to be in passing in this world. Even the monologues.



FIGURE 8.4: Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*. Directed by James Macdonald. Royal Court Theatre, London. January 2016. Credit: Geraint Lewis/Alamy Stock Photo.

All male presence comes by report through the mouths of the woman speaking. Vi might have murdered her husband; she did only get six years. Murdering one's husband might be a response to violence or to boredom or to both. The tragic figure however is not the middle-class woman but the scores of people just beyond the frame drowning and dying from thirst, becoming desperate in the search for the bare necessities as against the women in the garden. It is not that the women are posh or snooty, though they are all white, but that the price paid for gardens with power and light and running water occurs just beyond the threshold of that frame. The anxiety and confusion of middle-class life plays out against the desperation, reflecting for the spectator the peculiar modern condition we experience now where we fret about haste and the burden of commitments virtual and real within the context of the disasters, knowing that we inhabit a life that a small percentage of the world lives which is unavailable to most. So the tragic experience paradoxically is then heightened; the quiet calm of the monologues delivered as if nothing matters enough to speak forcefully or demand answers leaves the audience with work to do.

HERE WE GO

Neither death from old age nor the fall into dementia that occurs as part of aging can be designated tragic. While being born to die has its disadvantages, it is the condition under which we exist. So when do the theatrical conditions of tragedy obtain in the context of the natural conditions of death?

As with *Escaped Alone* one enters the Churchillian world of *Here We Go* by way of fragmented chatter. A party, people speaking semi-vapidly among themselves just loud enough for us to overhear. Then a figure steps out of the party setting. Lit by a spot she says, "I die in ten years from cancer" and then she returns to the chatter. This happens several times until Susan Engel, a Churchill veteran actor, steps out and says, "I die the next day, I see the bus but I think I can outrun it."³² Many things happen for the spectator as we hear the narration of future death. One of the most profound is the sense of loss when Engel tells us she will die the next day; suddenly I realize how I assume these fictional characters have some sturdiness, that they will go on (as they will of course for the duration of the run of the show at the National Theatre—barring tragic catastrophe). But the title does not contain "we" for nothing. "We" are going, sooner or later. During the party scene we come slowly to understand this is a wake for a man involved in politics.

The second scene brings the new form of proscenium arch we see in *Escaped Alone* before us. Harshly lit, this time with white light perhaps in honor of the snippets of supposed knowledge about passing over to the afterlife where everyone seems to see "a white light." In the middle and looking a bit like a pinned bug, the man whose wake we have been attending considers his life. The brightly lit frame holds him before us figuratively paused between life and death. We hear the musings of the corpse from the wake.

The third scene, however, makes more demands on the spectator than any scene I have witnessed in the theater. Without violence, amplification, choreographed murder, savage beating, this scene grabs the watchers by the throat by way of silence and a relentless repetition of care for the elderly person incapable of caring for himself. For twenty-one minutes (on the night I saw the play that was the duration) a black woman helps the man we last saw in the passageway between death and life get out of bed, dress and sit in the armchair that sits close to the bed. After he sits up dressed, she begins to undress him and

then help him back into bed. This takes place in absolute silence. Whereas John Cage made people uncomfortable for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, Churchill requires her audience to sit for twenty-one minutes together witnessing a very possible future if we live long enough to see it. As with *Escaped Alone* the tragedy comes in the form of the bargains made for the lives we live. It is no accident that the carer is a woman of color, no accident that the subscriber base for the National Theatre go to those wakes for friends and watch friends become enfeebled in precisely the same way as Churchill requires us to witness. At the party a young woman steps out to say, "I die of an infection five years from now; due to the overuse of antibiotics." Telegraphic and to the point, Churchill pinpoints the conditions of our collective tragedy. She makes equally clear the distance between those with the money to make the ending easier and those upon whom they depend to care for them.

Intriguingly in both the Churchill plays the female characters demarcate the terrain of the tragic. With Mrs. J in *Escaped Alone*, we look out onto a plausible and terrifying future. In *Here We Go*, the casually announced deaths come mostly through the mouths of the women and the final silent action of the woman caring for her elderly employer demarcates class, race, and the return of the domestic, but a domestic created by a precarious labor force and one even more vulnerable than the household where a wife might stray and destabilize a hero's world. As we watch and it is excruciating to watch the dull repetition, no talk, no easing of the shame and embarrassment of the suddenly incapacitated, we can see clearly that should that carer decide to leave, the man will be stranded, left to die in bed, alone.

A recent article in *The Guardian* with the cloyingly familiar title "scientists confirm what women always knew: men are the weaker sex" details the finding that women live longer than men, i.e., they endure.³³ The tragedy that Churchill invents, the tragic experience that I am suggesting occurs between active spectator and performers, understands endurance as a quality as well of witnessing, of interpreting, of acknowledging. The fierceness with which Churchill deploys these characters to show how we live now comes from an artistic perspective dedicated for years to unmasking patriarchy in works that honor the "dazzling creativity" Wynter urges us to employ. A "counter poetics" of the tragic on the part of the writer and the spectator might move us towards a future imagined by Jennifer Nash in the context of black feminist love politics as:

the idea that the radical future requires certain kinds of very hard work, pushing beyond our investments in selfhood and sameness, and reaching toward collectivities and possibilities. Nor does this vision neglect the host of ways that power and structures of domination work on and against bodies in quotidian and spectacular ways. It is a critical response to the violence of the ordinary and the persistence of inequality that insists on a politics of the visionary.³⁴

