

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Risk Theatre Model of Tragedy: Gambling, Drama and the Unexpected**, by Edwin Wong, Victoria, Canada, Friesen Press, 2019, 363 pp., \$8.48 (Kindle), \$43.44 (hardback), 23.77 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-5255-3755-4 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-5255-3756-1 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-5255-3757-8 (e-book)

Edwin Wong begins the preface of his work with these words, 'Tragedy today is a tired art. It no longer earns the attention and publicity that it did in previous ages'. In this book, Wong presents an innovative reinterpretation of tragedy and original theory of drama for the twenty-first century to create a new 'risk theatre' model. He begins by arguing for risk being at the core of tragedy and that 'the tragic occurs when risk runs awry'. A 'risk theatre' model can be defined as a model of performance and playwriting that focuses on the risks and gambles taken by, and presented to, the main protagonists within the genre of tragedy.

After completing this book, Wong founded the Risk Theatre Modern Tragedy Playwright Competition, the largest for the writing of tragedy, along with the Langham Court Theatre and the inaugural 2019 contest saw entries from 182 playwrights representing 11 countries. At present, there are calls on playwrights worldwide to submit plays for the second annual **2020 Risk Theatre Modern Tragedy Competition**, juried by an international panel of professionals, anonymous to each other and the public until the winners are announced. It is my understanding that proceeds of the sale of this book go towards the costs of this competition.

This book presents fresh approaches and perspectives in relation to the teaching and writing of tragedy and, as such, is a useful resource, particularly for theatre studies and secondary drama teachers.

Structures and theories of tragedy and risk theatre are examined, using Greek tragedies, Marlowe, Shakespeare and others, including O'Neill. A thread that is woven throughout this text is the notion that the 'risk theatre model' replicates the crises of our time and mirrors the contemporary human condition. Aspects of tragedy such as temptation, dissonance, the unexpected, chaos and the uncertain speak to the globalised, 'volatile' modern world and are a motivator for the writing and use of 'a risk theatre' model. Wong believes that risk theatre can be both entertaining and educative.

To be honest, the book title did not grab my attention immediately and scanning through the pages did not do much to entice me to read this book. However, once I began to read, I was enticed by this thought-provoking, insightful and compelling read that, once started, was extremely engaging and impossible to put down. Despite it being a fascinating, interesting, compelling read there were moments when the sheer volume of examples, from ancient and historic theatre, left me somewhat lost. However, Wong does alleviate confusion by recapping and summarising carefully at the end of each of his nine chapters.

The Book is divided into four separate parts which systematically cover the topic and flow efficiently and cohesively from one to the other in building up a strong argument underpinned by examples and an extremely broad and extensive knowledge base. Part One examines the structure of tragedy and introduces the idea of gambling and making a bet (or wager) that is an essential component of risk theatre. As Wong states, 'Risk theatre posits that each dramatic act is also a gambling act. Thus, the tragic occurs when risk runs awry, and risk theatre entertains by dramatizing this risk.' Part Two traces the philosophy concerned with, and within,

tragedy as well as four principles that tragedy engages. Part three is concerned with the 'poetics' of tragedy looking at how to write tragedy and the features it needs. Part four looks 'beyond tragedy' to other genres and the place of risk theatre in contemporary society. Of interest in this part of the book is Wong's discussion of Comedy as an open system of 'milk and honey' versus tragedy as a closed system of 'perpetual shortage and rolling blackouts'. He describes tragic heroes as strong, charismatic and with a sense of endurance versus incompetent, weak comic characters.

We are led to a deep understanding of the proposed model and why Wong believes so passionately in the role of tragedy in today's society. In the final (ninth) chapter, which is concerned with 'why risk theatre today', Wong concludes with these words 'Tragedy, by forever dramatizing risk, adds to our understanding of risk. And I think that tragedy, because it adds to our understanding of such a captivating and elusive concept, has a claim of being the greatest show on earth.'

As his biography states, Edwin Wong lives in Victoria, British Columbia and is an award-winning classicist with a master's degree from Brown University, where he focused on ancient theatre. His other research interests include epic poetry.

### Notes on contributor

*Carol Carter* is a lecturer at the University of Newcastle in the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre (ELFSC) and the School of Education (conjoint). She is also the review editor of NJ.

Anyone who would like to participate in the reviewing of books and/or knows of books that require review please email Dr Carol Carter at [carol.h.carter@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:carol.h.carter@newcastle.edu.au)

Carol Carter  
*University of Newcastle*

 [carol.h.carter@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:carol.h.carter@newcastle.edu.au)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5556-6747>

© 2020 Carol Carter  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14452294.2019.1705178>

