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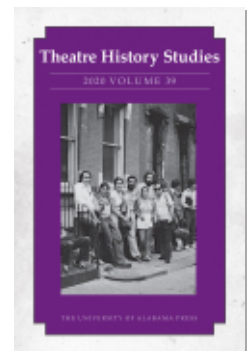
The Risk Theatre Model of Tragedy: Gambling, Drama, and the Unexpected by Edwin Wong (review)

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from Wager to Smith and concludes that, while both focused on diversity, Smith found a profitable way to do so. Arena Stage also differentiated itself from other regional theatres in its diversification, and Galella quantifies that claim by tracing hiring choices, audience outreach, work with communities of color, and the percentage of productions by diverse playwrights (178, 180). Again, balancing both the progress made and the failings of a given project, Galella's examination of *Oklahoma!* reveals the diversification of the characters supported by historical research but also notes the lack of indigenous people and acknowledgment of their forceful removal from the land. Finally, the epilogue takes the reader up to 2016 and a play commissioning project focused on American politics.

This book is a useful choice for a reader wanting to move beyond a history of Arena Stage as a regional theatre, and it delivers as a critical history divided into three areas of examination. Galella's work is a clear addition to ongoing conversations about diversity, national trends, the influence of money, and racial liberalism in theatre. Readers interested in the cultural context of Arena Stage in particular will be well served, as will readers interested in any of the three productions considered in-depth.

—KATHY L. PRIVATT

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The Risk Theatre Model of Tragedy: Gambling, Drama, and the Unexpected. By Edwin Wong. Victoria, BC: Friesen, 2019. Pp. xi + 337. \$13.99, paperback.

The Risk Theatre Model of Tragedy: Gambling, Drama, and the Unexpected is valuable for scholars, directors, and playwrights, as Wong sweeps through centuries of theoretical models and classic texts on tragedy and the tragic hero to arrive at a contemporary performance theory he calls *risk theatre*. In the book's nine chapters and four parts, Wong posits tragic heroes as characters who meet their fate in unhappy confrontations within the vernacular of gambling thrills and high-stake consequences, intertwined with commodification pushed up against life's hidden value. He calls the concept putting "a modern face on an ancient art" (xxvi). The ideas provide a fresh, distinctive method for analyzing and staging tragedies.

Wong begins by noting three-part structures and cycles that have informed

human civilizations (e.g., Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government; and life's journey of birth, growth, and decay). He then proposes his own three-part structure for his risk model (*temptation, wager, and cast*) or, as he calls it, a "troika of parts" (11). As he moves from his opening to describe and advance his case, he becomes exceedingly invested in this notion of three-part structures. Wong next posits the "arrangement" of his troika of parts: *gradual tragedy, backloaded tragedy, and frontloaded tragedy* (31). He spells out three guidelines that, if followed, "may result in enduring and memorable creations" (53). He enumerates three forms of risk theatre: *stand-alone, parallel-motion, and perpetual-motion* (55–56). He uses his vast knowledge of literature to instruct on "commonplaces of tragedy," which achieve their effects through "a combination of the three c's: *confidence, capacity, and compulsion*" (142).

The author's primary purpose in adopting a gambling analogy is to grapple with three primary questions: What is tragedy? (chapters 1–3). Why is tragedy what it is? (chapters 4–5). How is it composed? (chapters 6–7). The book then concludes with musings on tragedy's uniqueness and on the applications of risk theory in other genres and in modernity (chapters 8–9). Wong lays out numerous case studies throughout the book to test his assumptions and reinterpretations of this long-studied genre.

While clearly knowledgeable about an extensive array of topics across time such as economic structures and unintended consequences of a character's actions, there are lengthy quotes, sometimes too many, from great literary works that he analyzes and then applies his concepts. The writing itself is a mix of conversational, yet philosophical, gestures as Wong connects back to the beginning, middle, and end terminology of Aristotle's *Poetics* and to texts such as *The Iliad*. He makes stops throughout literary history with writers from Shakespeare and O'Neill. He often takes on a prodigious tone in his musings:

"Tragedy makes its characters suffer so that their lives may be transformed into works of art" (29).

"Tragedy, I therefore propose, is an economics of the final resort that examines the opportunity cost involved in being alive" (105).

Wong's framing of the structure of a tragic plot could parallel, in terminology at least, how others, such as Freytag, have thought about the chronology of a literary plot. In Wong's sphere, a tragic character is ushered through phases of a predicament and downfall. In the initial phase of his model, the hero is tempted in spectacular events that draw spectators into the action (11–13) (parallel to the *inciting incident* and *rising action*). In the middle section, heroes lay

everything on the line after determining “the price they are willing to pay to achieve their desire’s goal” while also spending time in vacillation and strategizing about the hand they hold (16–19) (parallel to a series of *conflicts* pushing the action forward). The hero’s final point of no return is when the die has been cast and the “Rubicon is crossed,” followed by an aftermath of loss and suffering (20–30) (parallel to the *climax* and the *denouement*).

However, Wong’s ideas cannot be reduced to a sort of magical renaming of plot parts. Rather, he has composed a complex argument to offer readers a new perspective for viewing how tragedy brings audiences the unexpected and the improbable. He provides noteworthy methods for analyzing the psychological processes of a tragic hero. Further, a gambling analogy is not simply a basket of terminology. It is a concept that contemporary readers, in this present age of risk, will be able to identify with as a cultural norm—just watch a reality television show or tune in to a political debate on gun control or invest personal funds in the volatile stock market.

Finally, Wong rests his argument by proposing that the definition of *tragedy* is ultimately ambiguous owing to its failing of three conventions that make a definition “robust”: “ties to etymological roots,” harmony “between a term’s technical and lay usages,” and a stable meaning over time (245). He claims it is owing to this ambiguity that “it has been possible for me to reinvent tragedy as risk theatre, and doubtless, it will be possible for others to reinvent tragedy again tomorrow” (245).

This author’s theory is unlikely to result in a paradigm shift that displaces a myriad of standards and methods for studying tragic heroes. Yet, that doesn’t seem to be his goal. Wong articulates how humans use language differently over time, including how they respond to the word “tragedy” itself. Wong accepts that “after two and a half millennia, *tragedy* is still a term in search of a definition” (255). In real life, Wong has pulled his theory out of the abstract and is watching it play out in practical application. He sponsors a playwriting competition in collaboration with Langham Court Theatre, inviting submissions based on his model that will appeal to twenty-first-century audiences. His work is keeping tragedy alive and well.

Ultimately, the book provides a thoughtful means of considering this genre while building on previous models and while providing a distinctive twist that results in a new application—a vision that has been a long time coming.

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