

Book Review: Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance

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Trauma-Tragedy investigates the extent to which performance can represent the 'unrepresentable' of trauma. Throughout, there is a focus on how such representations might be achieved and if they could help us to understand trauma on personal and social levels.

Tamara Felisa Micner believes that the book will speak most directly to students and scholars of theatre or psychology, though practitioners or enthusiasts of either field might find it instructive.



Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance. Patrick Duggan. Manchester University Press. October 2012.

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In *The Actor and the Target*, [Declan Donnellan](#) (the co-artistic director of the theatre company *Cheek by Jowl*) writes about performing and experiencing performance as universal impulses: "There is a persistent need to witness acted-out representations, [...] the hunger in each of us to act, and to be acted to, is inbred". This hunger includes acting out and witnessing live performances of trauma – of traumatic events and their fallout – in a mode of theatre recently named "trauma-tragedy".

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As traumatic events such as the Guantanamo Bay detentions and other such human rights violations continue around the world, [Patrick Duggan's](#) *Trauma-Tragedy* examines the ability of live performance to represent trauma – and the significance of that ability. A Lecturer in Theatre Studies at the University of Exeter and a theatre director himself, he analyses both the theory and the practice of trauma-tragedy, and situates the genre within a society which mainly experiences trauma through mediated means, such as television and the Internet.

In line with the contemporary scholarly consensus on the nature of trauma and its effects, the book advocates a definition of trauma "which moves away from a focus on the event, and the physical injuries it causes, to a focus on the psychological impact of it". This view originates in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis/psychotherapy, led by practitioners such as Jean-Martin Charcot and Sigmund Freud, and takes on great relevance within the context of live performance. For, whether as spectators or as performers, we learn far more about ourselves and each other through performances of the psychological effects of trauma rather than the physical.

In this vein, Duggan separates body and mind with regard to trauma, by advancing the current argument that the body experiences trauma at the time of the event, but the mind processes it only afterward, when the body is absent. He therefore rejects the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder as such, as it "implicitly suggests that the originating event is the only trauma". He divides trauma into the original moment (*trauma-event*) and its "disruptive return" (*trauma-symptoms*). Thus, trauma marks a repetitive, present, intrusive experience for those who suffer it: "a perpetually present absence", continually re-performed in the mind. For anyone with direct or indirect knowledge of trauma, this depiction rings true.

The twentieth-century plays which he cites as examples make the case for theatre's capacity to represent trauma (and examining earlier plays – such as *Macbeth* or *The Duchess of Malfi* – might also have proven fruitful). His analysis of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, especially, affirms that live performance can “create a constant sense of traumatic presence, a traumatic reality”. The play presents a series of traumas including rape, cannibalism and eye-gouging – drawn from the 1990s conflicts in the Balkans – to make the audience both confront trauma and experience it indirectly. By obscuring the rape and eye-removal rather than staging them “in reality”, *Blasted* forces its spectators to imagine the acts themselves. This internal simulation of real trauma creates what Duggan calls “a presence-of-trauma effect”. Such a disturbance, he concludes, could cause audiences to be moved to take ethical action in the so-called real world, as Kane suggested she wanted.

The book's conclusion, however, backs down from this assertion. Duggan more safely insists: “I am not hoping or suggesting that attending performances stimulates an audience into action for political change, nor am I 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”. Instead, he sees trauma-tragedy as “a lens through which we can view, define and understand certain instances of contemporary performance which are addressing trauma”. Though appealing to both a scholarly and a wider audience, *Trauma-Tragedy* stands as an academic rather than a political or polemical work. It speaks most directly to students and scholars of theatre or psychology, though practitioners or enthusiasts of either field (or both) could also find it instructive.

Duggan makes sure to acknowledge the complex ethics of representing trauma in a performative, public forum. Rightly, he never claims that theatre can replicate trauma, or that it ought to; rather, theatre is a forum for catharsis, empathy and collective experience. Theatre shows us who we are, and that is enough.

Duggan buries some of his key points, such as dividing trauma into event and symptoms, and takes as given certain claims which warrant defending, such as the statement that “violence is becoming increasingly normalized and pervasive” in today's world. Given how often violence is mediated, that it seems to be [decreasing overall](#) and that most of us live in modern cities rather than a state of lawless nature, do we not experience violence less than our ancestors? It could be possible we are simply more divorced from it, through cinema, television, video games, and the like.

Crucially, *Trauma-Tragedy* stresses that theatre represents trauma both truthfully and without moral commentary. It is a space in which we safely explore the best and worst of our experience.

Tamara Micner studied English at Yale University, and Modern and Medieval Languages at the University of Cambridge. She worked at Google in between, and now writes for the theatre, magazines and blogs. She tweets [@tamamic](#) and writes about the arts, travel, and food on [micner.blogspot.com](#). [Read reviews by Tamara.](#)