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

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## **‘I will start afresh, and once more make dark things plain’:<sup>1</sup> Failure heightened as trauma**

Failure has always been one of the driving factors of tragedy and, indeed, of any tragic narrative. As an early example of this, Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* illustrates this point 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, secondly, his inability to accept his predestined role which unleash the tragedy’s initial tragic plot. But it is, of course, also his arrogant dismissal of Tiresias’s later accusations against him that eventually lead to his tragic downfall. Sophocles’s tragedy specifically 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. What Sophocles sets out to show us in *Oedipus Rex* is that man is not just another tragic *pharmakos*; the king sets out to right a wrong against the odds of divine intervention and fate. But Oedipus’s role obviously goes far beyond the spheres of the political catharsis. In its deviation from the matriarchally defined norm of prior examples, Oedipus’s tragedy and his failed initiation into the symbolic structure of the ancient Greek world, in fact, turns the theatrical gaze inwards and makes Oedipus realise 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 him 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’,<sup>2</sup> as Olga Taxidou notes. Drawing on Jean-Joseph Goux’s reading of the Oedipus Myth<sup>3</sup>, Taxidou argues that the king’s failure to remedy his actions and to stop his eventual tragic downfall actually help to construct a new form of Greek ‘anthropocentrism’.<sup>4</sup> The play and the king, in other words, posit “man” at the centre of the universe, a position from which he can begin to understand, to order and define.<sup>5</sup> 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’s tragedy is consequently one of the first instances of theatre in which man defies the emblematic world order of the ancient world and tries to comprehend and compensate for what ‘makes man human’.<sup>6</sup>

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's *Oedipus Rex* arguably provides us with our 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 stand 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's 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 reminds us: 'Absolute and radical tragedy means that there is no way out whatsoever.'<sup>7</sup> Failure in the tragic theatre of Sophocles consequently acts as a precursor to the very idea of what we would today consider the essence of all modern tragedy.

Needless to say that Aristotle's classic definition of tragedy as a narrative that could arouse 'pity and fear' via means of 'magnitude' and 'pleasurable accessories'<sup>8</sup> 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. It is also important to note that failure, in a sense that it illustrates the tragic hero's actual flaw, i.e. 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 three classical unities,<sup>9</sup> failure as part of a timeless tragic essence, as I would argue, therefore has to be understood as part of a universal tragic 'mode' that extends from classical Greek and Roman tragedy to our own contemporary understanding of the tragic aesthetic. Modern types of tragic theatre enable 'a particular way of looming or actual (dialectic) destruction',<sup>10</sup> as for instance Peter Szondi would put it. What I will posit throughout the following, then, is the understanding that the 'tragic aesthetic' as such does not actually exist because it is essentially all that is man and all (s)he isn't. I will argue 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 us to understand and order the world that surrounds us. But, at the same time, it also shows us how futile our continuous attempts to change it are, given that our own symbolic order (i.e. 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. Failure, understood as a main characteristic of the tragic 'mode', enables the presentation of something that 'perish[es] which is not supposed to perish, something which, after its violent removal, leaves an open wound which proves impossible to mend'.<sup>11</sup> But it also acts as a continuous rem(a)inder of our own 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 theatrically creating 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 respective cultural epoch. On the contrary, failure as part of a tragic mode that has at its heart the very essence of failure itself 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 a decisive element of the tragic mode 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 respective world(s). As such, it can always lay bare the 'open wound' Szondi speaks of because it is - in effect - a tragic trope that will lead us 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 will always remain one of the most 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 because

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.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to George Steiner and his notorious claim that tragedy is dead due to the proclaimed death of God and the abolishment of transcendental order in the modernist age,<sup>13</sup> the tragic thus remains alive and kicking even after the formal abolition of Aristotelian 'magnitude' and the death of the big (transcendental) Other. As Rita Felski notes in her introduction to *Rethinking Tragedy*, today

[t]he 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.<sup>14</sup>

Although new forms of the tragic aesthetic are therefore less bound by what we have come to define as traditional tragic form, contemporary theatre and performance still make use of a number of telling tragic principles, most of which are duly illustrated by their use of tragic failure. The examples I discuss below are all manifestations of the 'looming or actual dialectic destruction' Szondi speaks of; they are all well equipped to 'remind us of what we cherish in the act of seeing it destroyed'. But as opposed to more traditional examples of the tragic, they rely far less on rigid dramatic form than they make use of tragic and traumatic failure.

What most examples of a contemporary tragic have in common, then, is their aestheticization of failure as a form of psychological trauma. Similar to the 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', as Felski would have it<sup>15</sup>, failure in contemporary examples of the tragic "mode" I have alluded to above can occur in all kinds of dramatic and/or performative settings. For the purposes of this article, I will suggest that failure as part of a tragic "mode" can influence dramatic frameworks just as much as it can initiate actual plot lines or manipulate the body of a tragic performer/dancer. Tragic failure, as it has come to be realised in examples of postdramatic writing and in site specific or dance-based performance, in other words, can be an option, a dramatic choice, an outcome or part of an overall denial of dramatic form. But it remains at the very heart of what we mean when we're referring to something as "tragic".

I am aware that such a free interpretation of the tragic aesthetic will generate a number of critical objections. Because new forms of the tragic tend to do away with long-established genre traditions, some of the examples I mention below have often been primarily described as purposefully negative or bleak, voyeuristic or abstract. Some might argue that they are not even necessarily tragic. But as Terry Eagleton reminds us: 'Tragic art involves the plotting of suffering, not simply a raw cry of pain'.<sup>16</sup> 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 to merely stage failure as a way to avoid any form of traditional dramatic representation. Plays such as Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* (1998) or Forced Entertainment's *Speak Bitterness* (1994-) may offer only limited amounts of traditional tragic form, but

they rely heavily on their explicit link to verbal and/or metaphorical failure. Companies and playwrights such as Kane and Forced Entertainment even question a number of established truths about the way we handle failure, how we cope with rejection and how we relate to the traumatic pain that stems from it. The suffering and the loss portrayed in these new forms of tragedy, then, is not entirely negative; it rather (re)presents unwelcome truths about our socio-psychological realities and the socio-political environment that surrounds us. As Szondi points out, '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'.<sup>17</sup> In such a setting, form is no longer the issue it once was; failure as a concept 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.

### **'I REFUSE, I REFUSE, I REFUSE':<sup>18</sup> Sarah Kane's symbolic failure and beyond**

Tragic failure in Sarah Kane's plays mostly occurs in form of personal failure; it depicts her characters' individual inability to love and their gradual and persistent loss of formal and/or actual freedom. But it also always alludes to a psycho-political reality that transcends the notoriously violent dimension of her plays. Particularly her earlier work in *Blasted* (1995), which deals with strong images of civil war and abuse and in *Cleansed* (1998), which reflects on abusive fascism and the holocaust, Kane portrays prolonged forms of suffering and failure that are aimed at the illustration that 'life is not as it should be; we are not as we should be'.<sup>19</sup> Yet she does so while upholding Williams's more traditional 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.<sup>20</sup>

In Kane's theatre, I would argue, tragic failure is both re-established and refined not via an elaborate presentation of the world's political dilemmas or her characters' internal conflicts. It is more often set as a preconditioned lack of personal freedom and reciprocity that is aimed at the 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, and 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*, for example, are portrayed not so much as naturalistic representations of real life characters; they are staged as victims of an all-encompassing extremist and/or fascist political utopia. Ian in *Blasted* first tries to rape Cate in an anonymous hotel room and is later raped by a nameless soldier in a setting of horrendous civil war. Grace in *Cleansed*, similarly, fails to find her dead brother in a mental institution/university controlled by a nameless abuser named Tinker. The violent theatrical landscapes in Kane's very own version of the tragic aesthetic, in other words, are generally not aimed at reconciliation; they never offer an actual alternative to the existential suffering they portray. None of Kane's characters are ever in a position to escape their abysmal fates and their personalised versions of traumatic failure. On the contrary, because they are 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 constantly fails at establishing meaningful relationships and avoids to suggest how her characters could defend themselves against their archetypical abusers. Cate and Grace never provoke any of their traumatic punishments and failures: they do not find themselves caught in a dystopic nightmare devoid of hope because they couldn't decipher their own tragic destinies or the path

the Gods laid out for them. Ian's (and later also Carl's) respective downfall (Ian is left to starve in a bombed-out hotel room with no eyes; Carl in *Cleansed* is first humiliated, then mutilated and later killed) are in fact exceptionally bad examples of theatrical justice; they only seem to be caused by their innate desire(s) for reciprocity. It is therefore important to note that Kane's characters become traumatised not because they cannot understand their place in their respective social or transcendental environments or because of 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. We could argue that Kane's tragic failure is ultimately not an ethical but a political one: her negative utopias do not allow for *catharsis* or for reconciliation. They are heightened reflections of an overwhelming individualist culture: in a world without freedom or actual individuality, love in the form of craved-for reciprocity 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* thus 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, of course, several theoretical implications for the idea of tragic failure in what is commonly described as postdramatic theatre.<sup>21</sup> Similar to literary dystopias such as Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, Kane's theatrical landscapes of terror portray Ian, Cate, Carl and Grace, C, M, B and A, and the nameless character of her final play *4.48 Psychosis* as idealised tokens of 'what we cherish in the act of seeing it destroyed'.<sup>22</sup> I would argue that, by being denied any form of authentic reciprocity, her characters actually act as tragic symbols of an ongoing death of authentic 'other'. Failure, in Kane's own version of the new tragic, then, becomes more than a theatrical device for eventual reconciliation with the *status quo*. In the Kaneian tragic, traumatic failure rather becomes their ultimate *raison d'être*. Ian and Cate, and to some extent also Carl, Grace and Tinker in *Cleansed* or the nameless characters of Kane's later plays, all convey an appeal to decipher their psycho-political landscapes as heightened examples of psychological devastation: 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. I would suggest that Kane's version of the tragic creates dramatic dystopia(s) of warning. Because Kane's plays never truly reconcile their audience with the greatness and the comforting notion of a given *status quo* or an idealised utopia, they effectively ask the spectator to re-inscribe the failure they depict into his or her own socio-political reality and avoid it in real life. As Kane herself has pointed out:

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.<sup>23</sup>

Although being one of the first playwrights of her generation to openly experiment with theatrical form in such a way, Kane's approach to a more experiential tragic mode has luckily not remained the only one. Amongst those who have followed in her post-dramatic footsteps are such well-known names as Martin Crimp, Debbie Tucker Green, Ed Thomas and, as an example of a more ensemble-based post-dramatic aesthetic, the extraordinary performers of Forced Entertainment. What all of their work has in common is a substantial contribution to new and less genre-restricted forms of a more experiential tragic aesthetic;

one that is based on explicit and traumatic encounters with personal, social and psychological failure. It has to be noted, again, that examples of the new tragic in experimental plays and performances such as Crimp's *Attempts on her Life* (1997), Green's *Stoning Mary* (2005) and Forced Entertainment's ongoing performance project *Speak Bitterness* (1994-) define themselves more by their experiential attitude to failure than by their explicit negativity. Similar to Kane's more radical take on the tragic aesthetic, their intimate encounters with traumatic failure rather create an opportunity for psychological resistance in the real world. But, at the same time, they also open up a real-life possibility for *ethos*, for genuinely political and character-based action within the imaginative spaces of our own everyday realities.

Although a lot of the examples mentioned above draw their shocking potential from the explicit portrayal of trauma and traumatic suffering, they are not necessarily limited to the portrayal of abuse and of visceral atrocities. As Patrick Duggan argues in *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance*, 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''<sup>24</sup>. This does not necessarily mean that traumatic performances are only out to shock. What characterises contemporary examples of what Duggan calls the 'trauma-tragic', rather, is an enactment of traumatic failure or its most telling symptoms with only limited cathartic release. In this new form of tragic aesthetics, it is no longer an overall moral compass that we are expected to follow and that is being presented to us; it is an experiential 'happening' aimed at our own experience of trauma and traumatic memory. The trauma-tragic we can see in examples of Sarah Kane's and her successors' work is no longer characterised by attempting a resolution through form. Instead, Duggan notes that trauma-tragedy as a contemporary tragic 'mode' 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)'.<sup>25</sup>

While I agree with Duggan's general train of thought that contemporary forms of the tragic are symptoms of a wider psycho-political reality, I believe that 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'.<sup>26</sup> But I would argue that new forms of the tragic are not only a direct response to our so-called 'post-ideological' society; they also act as a distinct call to social and political action. Whereas Duggan's conclusion states 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',<sup>27</sup> I suggest that the exact opposite is true: Tragic failure and trauma in the new forms of the tragic aesthetic outlined above warn us, it indicates that something is amiss that needs to be rectified and it presupposes an innate desire to make it right. Sarah Kane and her successors do not only want us to understand and/or experience the traumatic failures they depict; they also want us to change the very circumstances that have had a hand in causing such dire circumstances in the first place.

Let me turn to one more example of this non-genre restricted nature of the new tragic. There is a rather telling monologue in Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) that perfectly summarises the tragic dilemma of our consumerist and neo-liberalist times. Realising that they are far from being in a position

to establish meaningful relationships or to experience authentic love within their current social environment, Ravenhill's characters embark on a number of sexual transactions that either traumatise them or open up prior traumata from sexual abuse. As Gary puts it ever so eloquently towards the end of the play, the main problem Mark, Gary and Robbie are facing is not their psychological scars but the fact that they live in a uniform culture that will not allow their wounds to heal properly. Realising that their world is dominated by one uniform ideological narrative that denies actual individuality, Gary calls for more individualised narratives; narratives that would allow for actual reciprocity, despite knowing fully well that they are usually scarce 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.<sup>28</sup>

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 tells us exactly one thing here: that the failure they experience is not due to individual shortcomings, but that it is actually part of a more generalised problem. What *Shopping and Fucking* bestows on us, in a sense, is the realisation that the system itself is broken; that we have all failed in providing a valid alternative. The new tragic portrayed in Ravenhill's first full-length play incorporates tragic failure into the very fabric of our everyday consumerist realities.

### **'It's not a thinking thing at all':<sup>29</sup> Failure as a necessary option**

In 1977, 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. It also led to her suspension from a teaching post at an art school.<sup>30</sup> Her idea was simple: based on two texts that she had written in collaboration with Hubert Besacier, she developed an installed performance that saw her sitting behind a slot-machine that was based on an image of her naked body. Audience members were asked to put five Francs into a slot below her chin; the money fell through and ended up in her lap. Once the coin was accepted, Orlan would give each audience member/costumer 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.<sup>31</sup>

Orlan's early critique of capitalist sexual transactions in postmodern times has generally come to be interpreted as an attempt to criticise the objectification of the female body and its use as a sensual signifier of intimacy. But it obviously goes a little deeper than that. Orlan's performance was based on a simple principle: would people respond to an offer of intimacy if they can buy it for five Francs? In an increasingly capitalist and individualistic culture, it turned out that the kiss itself was more shocking to men than it was to women. But was Orlan's experimental performance not also trying to portray sexual failure in a deliberately non-intimate environment? The fact that women seemed to be more open to the experience is not necessarily a point for the predominance of patriarchal power relations. The fact that men were less prepared to give the full amount of money or that they shied back from the actual kiss could indicate that they failed to recognise the transaction as an intimate yet friendly act. Is not Orlan's



experiment with the idea of a beautiful artist kissing a stranger for money also saying that intimacy as a commodity cannot but fail in an 'individualist' culture?

As opposed to her later surgical performances, there is only little actual trauma buried in Orlan's early work. But performances such as *Le Baiser de l'Artiste* still provide a number of aesthetic hints that could be interpreted via the prism of the new tragic and its intimate relationship with tragic failure. While Sarah Kane was amongst the first playwrights to employ episodes of abysmal trauma and psychological abuse to highlight the impossibility of reciprocity within a less traditional theatrical framework, other non-theatre specific artists have come to share at least some aesthetic ground with her version of the new tragic. *Strange Fish* by UK performance company DV8, for example, is just one of a number of physical theatre performances that draw from similar images of failure and impossible love, albeit that they are 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* furthermore illustrate that tragic failure is not restricted to the world of the theatre, nor is it a particularly British phenomenon. In DV8's *Strange Fish*, for example, failure to communicate and a general inability to establish meaningful relations with 'other' inform a lot of the piece's plot and, consequently, the movement and the general pace of the production is centred on images of impossible reciprocity. In Sasha Waltz's work, on the other hand, the division between the individual and his/her attempts to achieve a truly intimate encounter is more of a progressive one: the abundance of physical possibilities in *Körper* eventually invokes a tragic failure to communicate just as much as it postulates an actual division between the dancers' bodies and their imagination. In *nobody*, their respective mind/body division eventually simply prohibits actual reciprocal encounters because, despite their continued efforts, Waltz's dancers simply cannot connect in either of the two worlds.

Tragic failure here too seems to be less of a godly ordeal or the result of an individual weakness. What Waltz's and DV8's performances underline, rather, is the simple fact that an availability of body does not necessarily result in a meaningful encounter with 'other'; especially not in times of uniform and standardised psychological need. As two telling examples of a new tragic in dance and physical theatre, both Waltz's and DV8's work may serve as indicators that reciprocity and its impossibility should be seen as more than a source for traumatic failure. It is both the ability and the competence of the one initiating and the one receiving that make interpersonal encounters meaningful and rewarding. I would suggest, accordingly, that the act of reminding us 'of what we cherish in the act of seeing it destroyed' and the idea of tragic failure are by no means limited to the theatrical stage. The tragic failure depicted in these performances has a clear psycho-political potential and is visible and dominant in a range of non-theatre related performances and in physical theatre.

There are a number of contemporary performance and theatre projects that play on exactly such a notion without forcing audiences to witness explicit portrayals of physical or psychological trauma on stage. Only very few contemporary productions, however, employ the point that reciprocity is bound to failure in a culture of heightened individuality and consumerism more poignantly than Forced Entertainment's *Speak Bitterness* (1994-) and their more recent *Void Story* (2009). As examples of a more theatre-based ensemble that works with postmodern ideas of plot and meta-levels of audience reception, the Sheffield-based theatre company has been successfully questioning theatrical conventions for more than 30 years now. But it is first and foremost their almost despicable honesty about neo-liberalist ideology that renders their (non)plots telling examples of a psychologically charged understanding of tragic failure. As Linda

Taylor recently noted, what makes Forced Entertainment special is that they not only highlight uniform ideological constructs outside the world of the theatre, but also that the company ‘challenge our active complicity in the construction of the ideological fantasy’.<sup>32</sup> In other words, Forced Entertainment are constantly illustrating our own tragic failure in more than just a few telling plot twists. Because their productions question dramatic form and narrative conventions, they also make us understand that we are in fact complicit in making the broken and hollow social environments we all inhabit a continuous reality.

There are a number of aesthetic ways Forced Entertainment employ to highlight such tragic failure on our part. But the most telling examples of their implicit ideological critique can certainly be found in their ongoing productions of *Speak Bitterness* and *Void Story*. In most site-specific performances, failure is not only an undesirable outcome but is generally toyed with and alluded to throughout the performative process.<sup>33</sup> Forced Entertainment’s work, however, not only considers tragic failure as a hidden option but 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 whole plot 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 onto a screen and the narrative is stereotypically traumatic but read out without any depth or personal attachment. The missing elements (no actual personal encounters between the characters or the actors, a tragic failure to escape the trauma that is thrown at them etc) are illustrated by their absence only. What both performances have in common, however, is that they decisively illustrate common tragic failures without thematically making them 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 is it used for illustrative purposes other than to question the randomness of uniform narratives and ideology. The random confessions people make in *Speak Bitterness* are also not part of an eventual spiritual absolution. On the contrary, as an audience, we are complicit in the hollow theatrical framework because we are witnesses to something that could happen anywhere at any time. As opposed to taking ethical action, however, we keep watching a set of random confessions or of senseless storyboards because we know that our realities are by no means far removed from what we see on stage. The missing elements of reciprocity and actual encounters with ‘other’ Forced Entertainment’s work is illustrating are ultimately all ringing true in our own lives. The only trauma we witness in such performances is not so much buried with the characters on stage, but is brought to light through a number of performative postmodern palimpsests aimed at our own political and ethical conscience. 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 realises 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, they also implement structural failure, i.e. the idea that the whole piece could fall apart at any given minute, into their many meta-encounters with the audience. Plays such as *Speak Bitterness* and *Void Story* seek to educate by presenting the failure to posit something real, i.e. they play 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 performers, the performers are designated, [...] as ‘the subjects supposed to know’’.<sup>34</sup>

### **Instead of a conclusion: Tragic failure and the idea of a theatrical *ethos***

As the above already indicates, the tragic failure we can find in new forms of the tragic aesthetic is by no means restricted to the world of theatre and performance. As an example of a new tragic aesthetic which 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 in site-specific performance. Failure in the new tragic is thus no longer a form of tragic realisation of fate, nor is it part of an overall existential dilemma aimed at social status and/or wealth. In the examples I have mentioned in this article, tragic failure rather occurs as part of an overall political message. What makes contemporary forms of tragedy 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 they inhabit. Their implicit aim is to encourage its audience to become actively engaged and to question the almost inevitable tragic failure they portray. Along these lines, I would argue that the failure we witness in new forms of the tragic aesthetic takes one further step towards making us understand and analyse the world that surrounds us. In new forms of the tragic, the failure we see depicted as part of the plot/form/psychological landscape/ body of the performer not only becomes our own, it alerts us to the fact that we ourselves need to become active and avert it in our real lives. Our human condition is inherently tragic because it is split. What the new tragic portrays is what Oedipus had to achieve: 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 the tragic asks for is a commitment to our own nature. Instead of merely consuming the tragic aesthetic as an example of something negative and inevitable, we are asked to put ourselves in a position from which we are allowed to act, to understand and analyse. What the new tragic and its employment of tragic failure asks for is a new kind of spectator; one that 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 the word that according to Rancière, emancipated art inspires a special form of collective power because

[t]he 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 [...]<sup>35</sup>

The true power of the new tragic and the way it depicts tragic failure consequently lies in its ability to foster social change and to incite a more ethical stance toward socio-political ideologies that could further our psychological and social dystopias. If the dystopian realities in works such as Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, Forced Entertainment's *Void Story* or in Sasha Waltz's *noBody* can tell us one thing, then, it should be that the death of the other and that tales of missing reciprocity need not be the final word. As is the case with all tragic art, what the metaphorical prism of the new tragic reminds us of is 'what we cherish in the act of seeing it destroyed'.<sup>36</sup> The new tragic therefore calls on our collective *ethos*: it implores us to act for a better world than the one it so vehemently portrays.

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- <sup>1</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Richard Jebb (ed.). (Cambridge: CUP, 1887), line 132.
- <sup>2</sup> Olga Taxidou. *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning*. (Edinburgh: EUP, 2004), 45.
- <sup>3</sup> Jean-Joseph Goux. *Oedipus, Philosopher*. (Stanford University Press, 1993).
- <sup>4</sup> Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning*, 45.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Karl Jaspers. *Tragedy Is Not Enough*. (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1952), 30.
- <sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *The Works of Aristotle, Vol XI*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 327.
- <sup>9</sup> It has to be mentioned here that, while Aristotle's normative poetics have certainly been influential, his reception proves to be somewhat peculiar, given that Aristotle himself never spoke of an actual unity of place and only very briefly mentions the unity of time in his *De Poetica* (cf Aristotle 1924).
- <sup>10</sup> Peter Szondi. 'Versuch über das Tragische', *Schriften I*. (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1978), 209 – my translation.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. 209.
- <sup>12</sup> Terry Eagleton. *Sweet Violence. The Idea of the Tragic*. (Oxford: Wiley, 2003), 225.
- <sup>13</sup> George Steiner. *The Death of Tragedy*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 353.
- <sup>14</sup> Rita Felski. *Rethinking Tragedy*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 2004), 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Felski, 2008, 3.
- <sup>16</sup> Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 63.
- <sup>17</sup> Szondi, 'Versuch', 209.
- <sup>18</sup> Sarah Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, in *Complete Plays*. (London: Methuen, 2001), 227.
- <sup>19</sup> Kathleen M. Sands, 'Tragedy, Theology, and Feminism in the Time After Time', in Felski, *Rethinking Tragedy*, 84.
- <sup>20</sup> Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 121.
- <sup>21</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, Transl. by Karen Jürs-Munby, (London & New York: Routledge, 2006).
- <sup>22</sup> Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 26.
- <sup>23</sup> Sarah Kane in Heidi Stephenson & Natasha Langridge (eds.), *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 1997), 133.
- <sup>24</sup> Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance*. (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2012), 43.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 185-186.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Ravenhill, *Plays One*. (London: Methuen, 2001), 66.

<sup>29</sup> Forced Entertainment, *Void Story*. (2009), Dir. Tim Etchells.

<sup>30</sup> Jan Jagodzinski & Jason Wallin, *Arts-based Research: A Critique and a Proposal*. (Rotterdam: Sense, 2013), 138.

<sup>31</sup> Incidentally, this could also be read as a critique of our consumerist culture, albeit that it was originally not intended as one by 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.

<sup>32</sup> Linda Taylor, "'There are more of you than there are of us': Forced Entertainment and the Critique of the Neoliberal Subject', in Broderick Chow & Alex Mangold (eds.), *Zizek and Performance* (Palgrave: Basingstoke & New York, 2014), 127.

<sup>33</sup> The performance collective Reactor would be an obvious case in point here. See <http://reactor.org.uk/> for more details on their collective work on potentially (pre)failed happenings and events.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. (London & New York: Verso), 16-17.

<sup>36</sup> Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 26.