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<b>Title</b>	<i>Is Tragedy still Alive?</i>
<b>Description</b>	Discussion on whether tragedy still exists in modern culture, whether in films, modern theatre or and other creative arts.
<b>Presenter(s)</b>	Oliver Taplin and Joshua Billings
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**Oliver** The fourth and final topic in this discussion between myself Oliver Taplin and Josh Billings is the question; is tragedy still alive. Certainly the death of tragedy has been repeatedly announced. Nietzsche even thought that it was killed off by Euripides and Socrates back in the fifth century BC.

Well there is no doubt that the word ‘tragedy’ is still alive, but it is merged for our purposes at least that the core is applied to, if you like, an art form. To a shaped narrative, to something that is presented under certain circumstances to a public, and whose essence somehow lies in the way in which it is crafted. So the daily news, the chaos, the randomness, the inexplicability of the tragedies that we read about in the newspaper. We are going to have to put them on one side; they are not really what we are talking about today.

But are we talking, I wonder, only about theatre?

**Josh** Well, we might not be. If you look at novels or films, you can often find works that call themselves tragedies, that are related to tragedies and that have major affinities with it. In fact, if you look at the classics, classical scholars often argue that Greek tragedies are fundamentally derived from epic, which is a narrative form and not a dramatic form.

As far as novels go, when you think of tragedy, you normally think of the great 19th Century novels; George Elliot, Thomas Hardy, Henry James in English, Flaubert in French, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in Russian. Those works do seem related to tragedy. Something like *The Brothers* [[Caramotsov 0:01:43]] or the *Mayor of Casterbridge*. They described humans dealing with powerful and destructive forces beyond their control.

**Oliver** And they sometimes actually, explicitly refer to Greek tragedy don’t they?

**Josh** Quite often. There are references to Greek tragedy all throughout George Elliot’s work, and Henry James uses the word ‘tragic’ on practically every page of some of his books. And you could argue that the novel has produced more, and more lasting tragic stories over the last two hundred years. The novel today is the mass media that tragedy was for the Greeks and for the Renaissance as well.

But I would say that despite those affinities there is an important difference, and it is that novels take us into the inner worlds of their characters. They show us consciousness. They make the decision making an internal act. Whereas theatre shows us actions.

And so there's in some ways a distance that takes place in the theatre, between the audience and the character that does not so much exist in narrative forms where you can enter the character's head. I think that makes the experience of tragedy on stage a more reflective one, although perhaps a less emotional one. You don't have sentimental tragedies in the way that you have sentimental novels, or if you do they haven't survived as well.

**Oliver** Right, but then what about film?

**Josh** Film in some ways must obviously be able to be tragedy because we have films of theatrical tragedies; Laurence Olivier's Hamlet or Orson Wells's Macbeth and Othello, or the freer adaptations of Akira Kurosowa or Pasolini. Then you could also say that film has that same external focus, that it generally does not take us into people's consciousness, and that it shows us more their actions than their thoughts.

Lots of films have elements of tragedy in them. Film Noir is a great example, or the character dramas of Ingmar Bergman. But I would also want to see a difference between film and theatre in that something about film is capacious. It takes in so much more of life than any theatrical experience does. It represents more variety and it does so more realistically.

So film to me perhaps inclines more towards ethic than towards tragedy. There is something about the intensity of the physical presence of an actor, and the focus that a staging creates that makes an effect of tragedy in the theatre, for me at least, different and stronger.

**Oliver** Yes, although I was wondering, sometimes you seem to be making film sound stronger, sometimes you seem to be making theatre sound stronger. I think, as you say, there is no doubt that they are siblings, they go closely together film and theatre, but at the same time as being siblings, they are rivals.

I was rather fascinated - if you go into the Metro in Moscow you will find that the posters for the theatre are considerably more conspicuous and more numerous than the posters for film. You go down into the tube in London; it is the other way around. It is the film posters that dominate and the theatre posters have to take second place.

But I think, as you say, you might want to diminish the differences between the two, but there is something difficult to put your finger on which lies, not in the subject, nor in the emotion, nor in the intensity. Where sometimes you seemed to be saying film was more intense, sometimes theatre more intense, but something to do with physical presence, with physicality.

There in the theatre are the actor's physical bodies which have solidity, they have a sweat, they have a grunt about them. These actors who are - they are not real, they are not the real thing, they are impersonating, they are pretending, but they do so in a way that is - when it is good - extraordinarily persuasive. And the persuasiveness lies somehow in how strong and how beautiful their portrayal of the part is. And it produces a physical as well as a mental engagement from the audience.

So I do think that the vicarious experience of the emotion and thought which I see is characteristic of tragedy does also get engaged in cinema, but it is different. There is something crucially different when it is done in the presence of the sufferer. Even though Oedipus has not really plunged his eyes out, even though Hamlet has not really been poisoned by the sword, there is something about the actual physical presence, in the same space at the same time, that gives it a different quality from cinema.

**Josh** Yes, we feel that extra dimension of presence in the theatre very powerfully, even though of course what we see in front of us is much less realistic than what we see in front of us in a film. A film can show us life as the eye perceives it, but a theatre shows us something that is in that focus, in being pared down to a theatrical set and to a three dimensional represented experience.

**Oliver** I would very much want to say that theatre in the last one hundred years, the last one hundred and twenty years, has gone on producing tragedy, has gone on producing new tragedy. That tragedy is very far from dead and I don't just mean Ibsen and Chekhov, I say just, you know, these are great play writers under any cannon. I would say the same for O'Neal and Miller, but more recently than that, there is a modern metamorphosis of tragedy within our own times.

There is perhaps though, something crucially different in that tragedy of our times is increasingly what I would call 'interrogative.' It is more questioning, there is less confidence, there is less... there is no absolute, there are no acceptability or values –except in moral values – how absolute is religion? How secure is knowledge? How secure is language and meaning? How secure is our knowledge of other people? How secure is our knowledge of ourselves? Tragedy seems to be opening these things up. Opening the can of worms of uncertainly and relativity up.

**Josh** And one of the things that it is opening up most of all is tragedy itself. It is opening up the models that were used for understanding tragedy on stage. Samuel Beckett wrote once that there is nothing more grotesque than the tragic. And that was not to say that his plays were not grotesque or were not tragic, it is that there is some interrogation of the tragic form going on in them, and that often brings with it a kind of ironic distance. A way that tragedy and reflection on tragedy, or tragedy and ionising tragedy, come together.

So Beckett's works, for example, are often quite comic, and they can be funny even in the moment perhaps that they show people in the greatest and the most utterly unbearable circumstances.

**Oliver** I suppose laughter has never been a fatal enemy of tragedy. There is a [[Kiara Squirrel 0:09:55]], there is a darkness and light that one can see most obviously in Shakespeare, similarly in Beckett.

If you think of the grave digger in Hamlet or the door keeper in Macbeth, these are very funny scenes; they can be played for some really good laughs. At the same time, they are clearly not there just to provide comic relief, just for laughs. They are there because they actually darken the surrounding tragedy and show that laughter and weeping if you like are not as far apart in our human experiences as we might think.

**Josh** You could say the same of Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' or 'End Game'. In Godot you see these two tramps who spend the whole time on stage, and they are always trying the leave the stage and they just can't do it somehow.

**Oliver** "Let's be going" they said.

**Josh** Yeah, and so they find themselves in a dilemma that is both incredibly funny and utterly terrifying, being trapped in a world that won't ever let you assert your own free will.

**Oliver** I mean the comedy is not the end in itself is it?

**Josh** Not at all. Lots of people like to introduce the term 'tragic comedy' for works of Shakespeare, or for works of Beckett, or even for late works of Euripides, and I don't think that we need that term at all, because tragedy in...

**Oliver** It is a cop-out term isn't it really?

**Josh** It is, we don't need to invent a term to deal with tragic comedy, when tragedy is always able, has always been able to integrate elements of comedy without becoming comic, without resolving in the way that we expect comedies to resolve. And Beckett is a great example; Brecht is also a great example of an author who uses comic elements to heighten the sense of despair, the real sense of something being wrong.

**Oliver** Beckett and Brecht are now both of a previous generation. What would you say to somebody who said that, “Alright, I will allow you Beckett and Brecht, but tragedy died with them.”

**Josh** Well, I would say that Harold Pinter, who recently died, has written works that are undeniably tragic. They are tragic in a much more visceral and violent way than Beckett’s tragedies, but they have some of the same alternation of extreme comedy and absolute tragedy. They similarly bring us to places that we don’t go in everyday life, and that are really the darkest parts of human existence, and they integrate also the lighter parts.

But I don’t think that diminishes the darkness of Beckett or Pinter. If anything, I think it makes the darkness even darker, and Shakespeare is the master of that.

**Oliver** I suppose that the strength somehow is that they don’t only take us to the edge of the abyss, they don’t only take us to the dark, but they take us strongly to it. Perhaps all sorts of things can give us a glimpse of ‘the horror, the horror’, but these play writers, partly through the physicality of the theatre, take the vicarious experience in a way that is hugely powerful and strong.

And perhaps here we are arriving at some sort of tentative conclusion. It seems to have emerged from all of our four dialogues that the defining mark of tragedy is that it takes us to parts of human experience that other art forms can’t reach. That it is the art form, or that art form above all others that take us fully into the otherwise unfaceable.

**Josh** And holds our hand as we get there. By the way it represents these parts of our existence; it allows us both to watch them, to enjoy them and to learn from them through the degree to which they are transformed into art.

**Oliver** Yes. I can remember, I heard Peter Sellers, you know, the great American director Peter Sellers saying that “What tragedy does is give a voice to those who are otherwise silent.” To those who are otherwise unheard. And it also gives to parts of human experience that would otherwise reduce us to silence. It gives those parts of experience a voice.

**Josh** It is our own silence that it gives a voice to, as well as the silence of people who are more objectively voiceless.

**Oliver** Yes, so tragedy takes us into the unfair, the disturbing, the uncontrollable, but it doesn’t just say, “Well there you are, human life, there it is, chaotic, cacophonous, unfair. . .”

**Josh** And it also doesn’t just say, “This is how you. . .” it doesn’t tell you, “This is how to avoid it” either. It doesn’t give you a lesson that you can necessarily take away.

**Oliver** No, but what it does do is give it – at least I would say – some kind of strength, it says, “Be resilient.” Life is full of suffering, but that is not a reason for being passive. You are just saying, in that case, “I will lie down and let life roll over me.” And the tragedy somehow gives more depth to our lives and gives us more strength to live our thoughts with feeling, and that is one way of saying that it helps us to live life to the full.

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