

Reinventing tragedy in the modern age

May 11 2012



Tragedy. Credit: Jeff Rozwadowski, Creative Commons

This year's Cambridge series at the Hay Festival will include a debate about how we make "good tragedy" today.

Taking part are Professor Adrian Poole, Professor Alison Sinclair and Jennifer Wallace. The debate is just one of five panel discussions organised by the University for the Festival, which this year celebrates its 25th anniversary. The series also includes a number of stand-alone talks by Cambridge academics, including Professor Susan Golombok and Professor Lawrence Sherman.

It is the fourth year for the Cambridge series at Hay, which takes place from 31st May to 10th June, and the first time it has included panel discussions on a range of contemporary issues. Professor Poole, who has taught an undergraduate course on [tragedy](#) for many years and is author of *Tragedy: a Very Short Introduction*, says Aristotle set out to answer

the question of what makes good tragedy when he composed his influential handbook, *The Poetics*. He says: “For Aristotle, ‘tragedy’ mainly meant a form of drama, though it also connoted a kind of story, of which Homer’s *Iliad* was exemplary. The answers to this question are bound to look very different in 2012.

“We have many more ways of telling stories in words, sounds and visual images than were available to the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare and Racine, and of disseminating them to audiences around the world, now at the press of a button – all of which will have some impact on our ability to make – and respond to – ‘good tragedy’.”

Jennifer Wallace, author of *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy*, says that the media and the public still tend to respond to tragic events in ways that echo the age-old traditions which go back to Greek tragedy, for instance, turning horror into narrative and seeking an explanation for events by telling individuals’ stories. However, she says Aristotle’s notion of catharsis is much more problematic now and can be hard to justify.

She says: “Aristotle implies that through witnessing tragedy, we purge ourselves or gain relief. This suggests tragedy has some moral or therapeutic function in society. But is there such a phenomenon now as “compassion fatigue” or “tragedy porn”? Is it still possible to consider witnessing others’ suffering morally improving or enriching?”

For Alison Sinclair, professor of modern Spanish literature and intellectual history, our continuing fascination with the tragedies of others and the popular media’s obsession with offering up disaster for consumption opens up interesting questions about the fine line we often tread between thrill and horror. “I am intrigued by why we are moved to consume such stories. While they may not qualify as cathartic our consumption of them raises interesting issues about our experience, and our experience of our experience, that it might be difficult to confront.”

She says 20th century Spanish writers like Federico Garcia Lorca and Ramon del Valle- Inclán grappled with the need to reinvent tragedy for a modern audience. Lorca sought to meld elements of Greek tragedy with contemporary social realities in plays such as Blood Wedding, she says, but arguably either avoided catharsis or undercut it. By contrast, Valle-Inclán theorised in 1920 that a new form was needed to replace tragedy. “The aim,” she says, “was to interrupt the processes of identification and/or catharsis, the point of this being to free the spectator, or indeed to force the spectator, not to feel, but to think, both about what is on the stage, but also about the implications for him or herself.”

Jennifer Wallace adds: “In an era of 24/7 news and constant potential exposure to tragedies around the globe through the internet, it may be paradoxically difficult to focus the kind of active, sympathetic attention on suffering which dramatists could do in the past. Does that matter? Is the capacity to make what might be termed a ‘good tragedy’ the hallmark of human civilisation, or an indication of a humane society?”

More information: www.hayfestival.org

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Reinventing tragedy in the modern age (2012, May 11) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-05-reinventing-tragedy-modern-age.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--