

Death: (Re)Presenting Mortality and Moribundity PRAXIS: An Editorial Statement

By Kent Neely

John Singleton Copley's 19th century canvas *Watson and the Shark* is an extraordinary image. The young Watson, grasping for a handhold as his rescuers desperately try to out race the shark, brings rueful meaning to "the quick and the dead." Or, consider the horror, terror and injustice that take shape in the black, gray and white distorted bodies of Picasso's *Guernica*, an awful reminder of war's ravages. Nigel Llewellyn (*The Art of Death*, Reaktion Books, 1991) and Philippe Ariès have examined numerous representations in iconography, sculpture, easel art and architecture that depict mortality or moribundity and prove that finding death represented in art is not difficult. Certainly it proliferates in each of the arts.

The numerous haunted stories of Poe make the writer seem both demented and caricaturish but are, nonetheless, undeniably powerful searchings for a reasonable means of recognizing those dead and conveying the loss of those left living.

Film too has provided countless images of death; some remain intriguing. Nora Desmond's obsession with youth, herself and her servitude is ironically narrated by the man she will murder in *Sunset Boulevard*. Similarly, Charles Foster Kane's final words spur a search for his meaning, and supposedly the meaning of his life (if not life generally). And, Wim Wenders deftly escapes a maudlin version of life/death with his *Wings of Desire*, pondering whether angelic repose is preferable to life.

How many composers have created aural *memento mori*? Mozart, Fuaré and Brittain are remembered for their powerfully evocative requiems. And, is Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* less effective in prompting saddened feelings related to death?

All these may be surpassed in theatrical representations of death. The immediacy of art, the poetry of literature, the action of film, and the lyricism of music can be united in theatre where there is the added and unique experiential dimension. Theatre's shared time and space of representation is different in kind and magnitude from the other arts and therefore can make scenes depicting dying, death, or merely the contemplation of such, palpable in a most distinct way.

For instance, contemporary productions of ancient Greek plays allow modern audiences to join their Greek forebears and shrink at Oedipus' horror when he discovers Jocasta's body. Likewise, they may gasp as Medea chooses

to murder her children as justifiable vengeance upon Jason; or, they may yet contemplate Aeschylus' condemnation of blood revenge as the voice of a patriot whose war experience led him to question battle's effectiveness.

Similarly, Shakespeare is able to blend poetry and action so seamlessly that the power of his scenes is always available. When the unimaginable is made manifest and Hermione breathes again, the audience suspends their belief in death's finitude; when Jaques laments the predictability of life, we forget his self-absorption and melancholy and accept his profundity; when Richard III and Macbeth employ murder as a political tactic, we remain steadfast in their earned desserts but may be moved by their glimpse of self realization; when Hamlet contemplates "what a thing is man" his musing, quizzical to Rosencrantz, illuminates in us the quintessence of his dilemma and inaction; and, when Lear finally is reunited with Cordelia, carried dead in his arms, we are thrust into the moment when love conquers foolishness.

Marlowe gives us the epitome of hubris when his Faustus makes a deal with the devil for mortal knowledge at the price of his own damnation. In his final moments, Faustus pales at his own consequence and asks, "That time may cease . . . That Faustus may repent and save his soul."

Beckett, a wry Jacques, a sighted Tiresias, an elderly Hamlet, offers a version of man "born astraddle the grave." With him, humanity waits near a barren tree, a mound of waste, amid ashcans and all the refuse of existence reduced and distilled to the consummate questioning of being.

Genet goes further and suggests being is found in death. Roger and the Police Chief find immortality (and true being) comes in martyrdom and in memorium. Said's resolution for his identity is the ultimate absence.

Sam Shepard gives us ghosts that reminisce in *Fool for Love* and an unspeakable knowledge in *Buried Child*.

Reza Abdoh spoke in a voice colored by his knowledge of impending death and Tadeusz Kantor's last productions were ironically prophetic of his demise and of the questions that would linger afterward.

Theatre then would seem perfectly attuned to representing death but a dilemma remains. What does the theatrical moment represent? How does representation operate and, of course, why is there such a fascination with the idea?

The questions surrounding the representation of death in the theatre are especially intricate. Answers must conciliate the lack of action, the cessation of time and space; an enigma within the experiential realm of theatre. The lack of action is the cessation of experience, of being, of self. That elimination is acute in the West with its lineage from Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian beliefs.

Hiroshi Obayaski's collection of essays *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religion* (Greenwood Press, 1992) is a broad look at constructions of death between cultures and offers some perspective on why Westerners obsess on death. For example, the African Yombe believe that an infant lacks "personhood" and therefore is neither missed nor mourned if it prematurely dies. Perspectives like this, predominant in primal and agrarian groups, contrast sharply with those of the West. Indeed, Helen F. North's essay, "Death and Afterlife in Greek Tragedy and Plato," argues that the construction of death is inextricably attached to the development of the psyche, the foundation of the individual. George E. Mendenhall's "From Witchcraft to Justice: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament" points to the Old Testament millennium and its emphasis upon the experience "we term 'history.'" One is reminded of Mircea Eliade's concept (the "terror of history") which prompts people, reliant upon history for a sense of self and identity and who are horrified by the unpredictability and instability of history, to absolve their terror in the infinitely recoverable myths that religion provides. Leander E. Keck corroborates that idea with his "Death and Afterlife in the New Testament," stating that resurrection solved the theological problem (i.e. how does the author of life allow misfortune to those who are faithful) and in "Death and Eternal Life in Christianity" Obayaski notes that Augustine provided a more attractive possibility: the dead's immediate access to paradise and an implied continuance of consciousness (i.e. of self).

The allure of resurrection as a continuance of self exists even in post-modern times. P.M.H. Atwater (*Beyond the Light: What Isn't Being Said About Near-Death Experience*, Carol Publishing Group, 1994), is, herself, a survivor of a near death experience (NDE). Her collection of accounts, all true but anecdotal, would seem persuasive proof of a life beyond this.

A counterpoint is made in *Dying to Live* (Prometheus Books, 1993). Author Susan Blackmore explores the phenomenon surrounding NDE and provides scientific explanations for virtually all the side-effects (whether it be out of body experiences, lights at the end of a tunnel, the rapid review of one's life and so forth) as normal activities in a dying brain. Such phenomenon have been seen by others as proof of an after-life because "Death is an idea they do not like. The self is an idea they do like; an everlasting self they like even better." Still, Blackmore's rational (but somewhat dispassionate) account leaves the door open for physical events which defy us such as the study by two Iowa psychiatrists (Russel Noyes and Roy Kletti) of people who have had extraordinary life threatening experiences (e.g. survivors of alpine falls). One such account quotes a survivor as "I felt intense fear; my thoughts speeded up; time slowed down; and my attention was redirected toward survival and deeply imbedded memories;" or

another that related “he felt no more fear, ‘in fact, at that moment I became elated.’”¹

In any case, death is an experience of exceptional stress, change and anxiety for the person losing life and those for whom that life has meaning. A great deal of work and professional specialization has been attached to hospice endeavors which serve the dying and the bereaved. *Personal Care in an Impersonal World: A Multidimensional Look at Bereavement* (John D. Morgan, ed., Baywood Publishing Company, Inc., 1993) identifies a range of means for dealing with life’s end. The book documents the unusual ways that the dying and the living try to affirm that “the person is not simply ‘one out of many,’ but that the person is a unique *event* in history” (substantiation for Eliade and Keck?). Perhaps most extraordinary are the documented instances in which the bereaved have sex (sometimes quite promiscuously) soon after the death of a loved one (often a spouse); an extreme assertion of the survivor’s being and consciousness (and denial of death).

Blackmore’s cool analysis of death may explain why so many theatrical presentations continue to grapple with it.

We are biological organisms, evolved in fascinating ways for no purpose at all and with no end in any mind. We are simply here and this is how it is. I have no self and ‘I’ own nothing. There is no one to die. There is just this moment, and now this and now this. (264)

Can humans be that indifferent when a loved one dies? Can a life be given resolution by a detached and factual obituary? As Western culture advances and the individual’s primacy becomes further affirmed, is it abnormal to ease the grief, to perpetuate the memory of the departed or even believe in a heavenly reunion? Indeed, are not these the questions which continue to propel theatrical representations of death? And is not the theatre particularly adept for such representations since, at core, it deals with consciousness defined in action, the substance of being, of self?

This special edition of PRAXIS provides diverse views on the representation of death in the theatre. Donnalee Dox’s essay is a most fitting beginning. She asks how theoretical constructions relating to death balance against the actual experience of personal loss. Noreen Barnes-McLain’s essay on AIDS plays follows and chronicles a most contemporary development: the group of plays which relate to the pain and persecution attendant upon AIDS sufferers’ deaths. Steven Burch examines the Bill T. Jones/Arlene Croce controversy over Jones’ work *Still/Here*, a piece created with people who were

survivors of terminal disease or who were dying. James Frieze, Dean Wilcox and August Staub study different performances which feature death and dying as subject matter or as plot/performance device and provide critical or theoretical commentary. The final two essays deal with the rare theatrical event that seeks not to objectify death but to bring it within the audience's experience via performance. Dunbar Ogden's and Robert L. Erenstein's offering is an extraordinary examination of a medieval resurrection drama as originally performed and as recently remounted. Finally, Les Wade takes a look at the All Saints' Day celebration at St. Roch's, New Orleans as a contemporary performance that reconciles the living and the dead.

These eight essays provide an exceptional array of ideas about representing death. Certainly these cannot be considered conclusive. Nevertheless they are stimulating discourse about the representation of death.

Notes

1. Was Borges prescient of such a condition when he wrote *The Secret Miracle*? The short story chronicles the death of Jaromir Hladik by firing squad. "He had asked God for a whole year to finish his work; His omnipotence had granted it. God had worked a secret miracle for him; German lead would kill him at the set hour, but in his mind a year would go by between the order and its execution. From perplexity he passed to stupor, from stupor to resignation, from resignation to sudden gratitude." *Labyrinths*, New Directions, 1964, p. 93.

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