

## Postdramatic Greek Tragedy

**Peter A. Campbell**

Postdramatic is the term that Hans-Thies Lehmann uses to describe contemporary theatrical performances that do not follow traditional or recognizable modes of dramatic structure. Most criticisms of the postdramatic pose the requirements of modern representation and the necessity of drama against the absurdity of offering a theatrical art without dramatic conflict. As illustrated by Bernd Stegemann, the critique of the postdramatic is that it lacks “dramatic believability” because of its subversion of dramatic story and character.<sup>1</sup> The postdramatic, however, is not defined by Lehmann as the lack of drama, nor is the concept of the “dramatic situation – as a medium for understanding and depicting human behavior” entirely rejected.<sup>2</sup> In its regular use of dramatic texts, postdramatic theatre is not necessarily non- or even antidramatic, but is a theatre that does not valorize drama above all other elements of the theatrical experience. As Lehmann explains,

Wholeness, illusion, and world representation are inherent in the model “drama”; conversely, through its very form, dramatic theatre proclaims wholeness as the model of the real. Dramatic theatre ends when these elements are no longer the regulating principle but merely one possible variant of theatrical art.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, drama is of great significance to many postdramatic works as they struggle with the efficacy, validity, and necessity of representation and narrative as it relates to contemporary culture and art. The postdramatic is defined by the search for significant expression when, as Lehmann argues, “almost any form has come to seem more suitable for articulating reality than the action of a causal logic with its inherent attribution of events to the decisions of individuals.”<sup>4</sup> The postdramatic reflects and expresses the diminishing ability of the unified narrative form of drama to compel an audience into an illusion of a world.

When we turn the term onto adaptations of Greek tragedy, we are able to consider that these formative texts of Western drama are now being used as material for postdramatic performances: the “drama” made “postdramatic.” Despite recent alternative readings that emphasize those nontextual elements of Greek tragedy

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Peter A. Campbell is associate professor of theater history and criticism at Ramapo College of New Jersey. His essays appear in journals including *Modern Drama*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, and *Body Space Technology*, and in the collections *Sarah Kane in Context* (Manchester UP) and *Unbinding Medea* (Legenda). Professional theater work includes directing his adaptations *iph.then*, *Yellow Electras*, and *medea and medea/for medea* at the Incubator Arts Project in New York City.

that are subjugated by Aristotle, most critical discussions and theatrical works return to the plot, the drama itself.<sup>5</sup> As Page duBois argues, “Classical scholars and students of ancient theatre have for centuries, since the earliest work on Greek literary and philosophical texts in the early Renaissance, interpreted fifth-century tragedy through the lens of Aristotle’s prescriptions on tragedy in the *Poetics*, written in the fourth century BCE.”<sup>6</sup> The discourse on tragedy has for centuries been dominated by readings and misreadings of Aristotle’s analysis of plot, of the individual character and his or her psychology, and the emphasis on the dramatic action leading to catharsis for the spectators, all of which make drama the natural center of investigation. In this essay, I will argue that the postdramatic use of Greek tragedy signals an aesthetic and cultural shift towards the subversion of dramatic plot that is not meant to destroy drama, but rather to reduce its centrality in theatrical art.

In a sense, the postdramatic works to finally disempower the prevalence of the Aristotelian model of theatre, with its focus on plot and character, which still dominates our representational modes despite its dependence on a unified dramatic narrative and a dramaturgy that places an individual character’s actions and psychology in a causal relationship to the dramatic events. By tracking how ancient Greek tragedy has been adapted in classical, modern, postmodern, and postdramatic theatre, I examine the place and function of drama in these different theatrical explorations. I do not argue against the Aristotelian centrality of drama for historical reasons, as duBois does, but instead because the postdramatic use of ancient Athenian tragedy has the potential to create theatrical experiences that are especially provocative and vibrant to a contemporary audience. By rejecting the Aristotelian ordering of the theatrical experience but using some of the same materials on which Aristotle based his analysis, postdramatic Greek tragedy ultimately holds great potential for theatre that speaks to the move away from narrative that is prevalent in our early twenty-first-century representational forms. The inherently problematical “post,” as it is in the postmodern, can mean beyond, after, or some combination, but always already implies a relationship to the drama, which is fluid and defined differently in various postdramatic works. That relationship, however, is in a line of theatrical adaptation that already existed within the tragic form of the fifth century BCE.

### **Drama and Adaptation**

Greek tragedy in Athens found its material by retelling in new and varied form the myths and legends of the Greek heroes and gods. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides recycled, revised, or referenced their predecessors’ and colleagues’ work, almost always “returning to the same core narratives.”<sup>7</sup> Tragedy did not require new dramatic subject matter but rather, as Peter Burian has argued, “constitute[d] a grandiose set of variations on a relatively few legendary and formal themes, forever repeating but never the same.”<sup>8</sup> The context and conventions of Athenian

performance gave tragedy a formal structure that allowed the audience to accept and embrace the amendments to the legendary stories it witnessed. In this environment, the tragic poets were not only allowed but were, in fact, encouraged to play with the expectations of the genre. In fact, the success of the tragic genre during the fifth century BCE depended upon a “complicity of the audience”<sup>9</sup> that relied upon knowledge of the staging conventions and an intimacy with the legendary stories that constituted the basic plots of the tragedies. As David Wiles points out, however, this does not mean that the Greek audience knew “what was fated to happen.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, the genre itself, as well as the myths it often used, were “highly malleable, and the job of the dramatist was not to reproduce myths but to recreate them.”<sup>11</sup>

The best example we have of this intertextuality in Greek tragedy is from the only core narrative treated by all three tragic poets in an extant, complete tragedy: Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*, Sophocles’ *Electra*, and Euripides’ *Electra* all focus their dramas on the return of Orestes to Argos and the revenge that he and his sister Electra plot and then enact against their mother Clytemnestra and her lover and co-conspirator Aegisthus. While each of these tragedies has certain characteristics that remain intact from version to version, there are both major and minor differences that shift the emphasis of the narrative and reinvent the story for its audience. These shifts were not meant simply to distinguish each poet’s work from that of his predecessors, but also reflected the interests and concerns of the tragic poets and probably those of the contemporary society. There is little doubt that in their retelling of the mythological stories the tragic poets were expected to make them contemporary by “superimposing the present upon the template of the past.”<sup>12</sup> David Wiles argues that this was part of the growth of tragedy, which became a genre in which

mythic subject matter was not a residue of old tradition, but was introduced into tragedy as a means of generating critical distance, so issues of the moment could be turned into issues of principle. By transferring immediate political hopes and fears to the world of myth, tragedians encouraged their audience to judge as well as to feel.<sup>13</sup>

Dramatic subjects were thus used and re-used as material to be interpreted differently by both artists and spectators. Because of their ubiquity, the mythical narratives, and their manifestations in Greek tragedy, have obviously retained a great deal of resonance to audiences, even in translation. The plots of these legends are familiar to many, not only because audiences recognize them from literature or history but because they have become archetypal in understanding elements of human behavior, a part of the legacy of Western social and psychological culture. Furthermore, since “much of the cultural continuum of the classical world has been appropriation

and representation without true knowledge of the actual, original cultures,<sup>14</sup> we are merely participating in the cultural heritage by continuing this process and making new versions without being overly anxious about how close we are to the cultural tradition we are “appropriating.” Incomplete, fragmentary, inaccurate, and unprovable interpretations of the structures and reception of Greek tragedy have, nonetheless, created understandings of that drama that continue to dominate Western theatre to this day.

Since the fifth century BCE, then, the adaptation of Greek tragedies has taken many forms, but has been strongly influenced by its interpretation by Aristotle and his focus on drama and character. This use of Greek material, however, always creates particular representational issues. As Roland Barthes describes, whenever attempting to stage Greek tragedy,

[w]e never manage to free ourselves from a dilemma: are the Greek plays to be performed as of their own time or as of ours? Should we reconstruct or transpose? Emphasize resemblances or differences? We always vacillate without ever deciding, well-intentioned and blundering, now eager to reinvigorate the spectacle by an inopportune fidelity to some “archeological” requirement, now to sublimate it by modern esthetic effects appropriate, we assume, to the “eternal” quality of this theater.<sup>15</sup>

Barthes stakes his claims in the fact that most modern adaptations of Greek tragedy attempt to update the Greek drama through a setting somehow analogous to the Greek one, or cling to the archaeological in attempts to recreate Greek staging and performance style. These modern adaptations tend toward the Aristotelian requirements of coherent plots with unified characters, and often depend upon an idealized, nostalgic view of the Greek drama and culture. They also tend to work toward a clarity of vision and meaning, which often privileges a modern perspective, or emphasizes elements of the original that resonate or are in sympathy with the adaptor’s contemporary situation. Sophocles’ *Antigone*, for example, has been adapted by writers from Jean Anouilh and Bertolt Brecht to Athol Fugard and Tom Paulin to explore various relationships between individuals and their communities and leadership. Other plays, such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Flies* (a version of the Orestes myth) and Jean Cocteau’s *The Infernal Machine* (a version of the Oedipus myth) draw pictures of modern societies struck numb by the inability to determine right behavior and the role and source of fate in the modern, existential world. Each of these adaptations creates analogous and unified representational worlds and modern, psychological characters that attempt to make the Greek story fit into a modern setting. They use the dramatic and mythological resonance of the Greek material to help strengthen a specific modern parable; thus, they strengthen

their own story by both giving it an ancient genealogy and showing the various connections and contrasts between the world of the Greek tragedy and their own worlds. These analogical adaptations can have multiple perspectives, as with the individuated crowd members of *The Flies*, and most of them have unsatisfying, ambiguous resolutions. These perspectives and ambiguities, however, are there in order for the audience “to get a better bearing on the meaning of a complex but nevertheless singular reality.”<sup>16</sup> Most modern adaptations are meant to create a closed, unified world for interpretation and clarity.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), for example, Eugene O’Neill creates a modern family structure that dominates the play, placing even the disordered, Civil War-torn United States into the atmospheric background of the family drama. O’Neill’s characters have been created for an almost novelized world that is tightly constructed with modern stage naturalism through stage directions and dialogue. Even though many deaths and murders analogous to those in *The Oresteia* take place, the focus in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is not, as it is in Aeschylus’ trilogy, on the historical or political ramifications of the characters and their actions as they affect the world around them; instead, O’Neill clearly focuses on the private, psychological motivations for those violent actions and the resultant psychological effects on the individual characters and the Mannon family. While the play features many alienated characters and complex plot movements, it is still nonetheless a singular and unified world. By using a classical myth as a structural framework, O’Neill attempts to give his own story a strong relationship to dramatic art that has been around for millennia. O’Neill himself was working to create at the level of the Greeks, claiming his play had the potential to be “the biggest thing modern drama has attempted. Far the biggest! You have to go back to the Greeks and Elizabethans to tie it.”<sup>17</sup> O’Neill thus sees his own work as exemplary of the tradition as T. S. Eliot refers to it in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” This vision places contemporary art in a continuum with great art of the past, and the talented artist as the catalyst that can find and mold the new material that can fit into the tradition. The true modern artist must have “the historical sense,” which

involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what

makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.<sup>18</sup>

This valorization of the tradition (and of the individual artist) represents a strong vein in modern adaptation, which often involves a modern artistic mind reconceptualizing the ancient Greek dramas into more modern versions that nonetheless maintain a sense of the eternal that all great art, in Eliot's conception, must both include and inspire. It is an interesting blend of nostalgia for the past and the idea of a dramatic tradition that is constantly being added to and reinforced by new art, as well as an insistence that the individual maker of art is still the center of the artistic process. This also reveals a clear preference for the dramatic and literary aspects of the theatrical art form as it does not consider the entirety of the theatrical production at all, focusing instead on the work of the individual author and the drama.

Even some more radical adaptations still cling to a coherent dramatic whole, if in surprising ways. The Performance Group's version of *The Bacchae*, *Dionysus in '69*, uses Euripides' tragedy about belief and the god of theatre as a vehicle for its own claims about the purpose and function of theatre and ritual. Led by director Richard Schechner, the Performance Group, in fact, attempted with *Dionysus in '69* to perform a ritual-type theatre. Taking advantage of the obvious metatheatricality of the subject matter, the production disrupted traditional audience/performer boundaries in its attempts to expand the possibilities of theatrical art and, sometimes literally, handed the power of dramatic narrative to the audience. These disruptions occurred frequently during the performance and, in fact, broke down entirely at the conclusion when the actor playing Dionysus revealed himself to be William Finley, who was running for political office in New York in 1968. Pentheus' death and dismemberment occurred when the performers created a birth canal (from which the audience witnessed Dionysus being born at the beginning of the piece) that here acted as a tunnel of death. The actor portraying Pentheus was stuffed through the tunnel whose floor was made of the male performers' stomachs and whose walls and ceiling were made of the female performers' legs and thighs. This antibirth resonated especially strongly, as the production itself had been a series of shifts between sexually charged seductions and orgies and their repression by Pentheus. This binary expression of Freudian-like release and repression was a strong part of Schechner's interpretation, since sexual liberation was posited as seemingly superior to sexual repression and analogous to political liberation (if not outright freedom, as Finley's declamations at the end did have a strong sense of potentially fascist demagoguery, which ironized the sometimes facile exaltation of sexual liberation). The engagement with the larger, political world was explicit here, but it evolved out of psychological (and psychosexual) desire and knowledge.

The Performance Group's production also had a nostalgic quality, but here it was for the idea of ritual in the Greek theatre. In its own modern way, it attempted

an archeological project, as it created a ritual-like environment that was analogous to the sort of theatrical and civic ritual that Schechner envisioned as the original performance environment of the tragedies. Schechner was also breaking down the boundaries between performance and reality; in his essay “The Politics of Ecstasy” he discusses the goal of this type of theatre to express a “counterforce of great unifying, celebratory, sexual, and life-giving power”<sup>19</sup> that seeks “to undermine representation” and achieve what Schechner calls a “‘symbolic reality’ that is at once ritual, theater, art, and reality.”<sup>20</sup> Despite some elements that veered toward the postdramatic, especially in its recognition of the acts of performance, the theatrical experience was nonetheless unified in its antirepresentational goal. In fact, Schechner presents “the theatre itself as an alternative model of social interaction and political structure.”<sup>21</sup> While the production alienated actor from character and, sometimes, character from audience, it did so in the hopes of expressing this alternative model of interaction, which might break down more traditional modes of communication and form something new and more viable.

*Dionysus in '69* did not fragment character or narrative, nor did it follow the Aristotelian suggestions for consistency. Instead, it split both the drama and the characters into two parts, the “performed” and the “real,” in order to both show this duality and subvert the notion that these two things are significantly different. Schechner and the Performance Group opened up the possibilities of theatre and performance by trying to subvert the boundaries between performance and everyday life, and did so in ways that encouraged compatibility and understanding between performer and audience and, thus, between theatre and “reality.” Like most modern adaptations, *Dionysus in '69* encouraged a new understanding of the ancient material for the contemporary world; however, it examined the potential of performance and ritual as a gateway to new possibilities of communication and discourse. While it fragmented the story of Euripides’ *Bacchae* by mixing the past story of the mythology with the present story of the actors, it nonetheless created a new dramatic narrative that joined the mythology and the metatheatrical present into a new allegory of the construction of performance and its similarities to the construction of reality.

Like the Greek tragic poets, O’Neill and Schechner found events in the stories that were analogous to events occurring around them in the (somewhat) contemporary world. These two examples take radical directions in adaptation but still use the essentially modern tools of analogy and archaeology in recreating their dramas. O’Neill creates an alternate world in which his version of *The Oresteia* will take place, but it is a consistent and linear world that “honors sequence and causality in time and space” as well as in character.<sup>22</sup> Schechner constructs a world and shows the audience its literal and figurative construction as it is produced on the stage in the performance. It is a “critique of the established order”<sup>23</sup> in both its theatrical form and its dramatic content, and this form allows for the subversion of

audience/performer boundaries to show the close relationship between performance and reality. Both O'Neill and Schechner recognize a sort of tradition as well, as O'Neill's ambition to be like the Greeks is similar to Schechner's emphasis on the ritual quality of performance, and their choices of Greek tragedies are based on their beliefs that the texts represent inspiring and important dramatic qualities that they hope will resonate in their own adaptations. Using analogy, O'Neill creates a new world that resonates with the Greek story but creates modern psychological characters for its nineteenth-century American setting. *Dionysus in '69* interrupts the Greek story and characters to create a complicated allegory about the relationship of performance and reality by exploiting both the metatheatricality of *The Bacchae* and the potential ritual of Greek tragedy. In the end, though, the drama is still central.

### **Drama and the Postmodern**

While the centrality of drama is clearly diminished when we discuss postmodern adaptations of Greek tragedy, there are still many works that cling to the dramatic structures despite some significant subversions. There is clearly overlap between postmodern and postdramatic remaking of Greek tragedy. Most of this overlap has to do with narrative subversion and the role of the audience in creating meaning, which are important components of both the postmodern and the postdramatic. Both kinds of work necessitate an acknowledgement of the shifting place of narrative, whether it is in terms of the modern or in terms of the drama. The influence of televised and cinematic media on drama and performance, and the sense of the fragmented postmodern world is certainly related to the ubiquity of television, film, and computers, and the constant interruptions that these media entail as defining elements of contemporary culture. For playwright and historian Charles Mee, Jr., this leads to an aversion by some writers and audiences to traditional writer-centered work and the importance of avoiding definition or even too much guidance by a writer:

Traditionally, a playwright is godlike and organizes the audience's view of the universe. It's authoritarian; it's given to you and you take it or leave it, and you have to take it because you're sitting there and all the doors are closed. All these old narrative structures are in some fundamental way authoritarian. Part of the struggle in the arts is to figure out a way for a person sitting alone in a room to come up with a structure that allows other people to take part in the making of the experience.<sup>24</sup>

With this generative goal, creating matrices for audience members to create interpretations instead of simply positing them, postmodern and postdramatic remakings veer significantly from most drama, which depends on the creation of



unified representational worlds that may offer some ambiguity but tend to formulate structural frameworks that limit interpretation. As Mee observes, current dramatic forms, even the relatively recent innovations of those like O'Neill and Schechner, seem "just too pokey" for people who spend their lives watching television and the web:

So you're taking in information that is sometimes relevant, sometimes irrelevant, and all the time you're following six or eight narrative lines simultaneously. We do that and call it relaxing. Whereas you walk into a theatre and most plays give you a single narrative for two-and-a-half hours. It's just not interesting enough, and it's definitely not real, not the ways things are occurring today.<sup>25</sup>

Mee believes that the fact "[t]hat things don't have narratives shouldn't be seen as a criticism because the world doesn't have a narrative anymore. . . . [I]f you're dealing with a world where those orders and structures are disintegrating or being purposefully destroyed, then you won't have an old-fashioned narrative."<sup>26</sup> As we have seen with O'Neill and Schechner, most modern adaptations choose to see the Greek works as having accumulated layers of dust, and thus, as Patrice Pavis explains, "in order to make the text respectable, it was enough to clean up and get rid of the deposits which history, layers of interpretation, and hermeneutic sediment had left on an essentially untouched text."<sup>27</sup> Remaking, Mee's term for his works that use Greek tragedy, has as its primary goal not an excavation of the Greek work, but rather an exploration of the contemporary. It uses Greek works as material to juxtapose against more contemporary material. As Elin Diamond suggests, the use of "re" in discussing performance "acknowledges the pre-existing discursive field, the repetition within the performative present"<sup>28</sup> that any remaking necessarily entails, and highlights the legacy of intertextuality that, as discussed above, is especially prominent in Greek tragedy. In postmodern remaking, the structure, resonance, and cultural power of Greek tragedy become as much the subjects of theatrical investigation as the plots and characters themselves.

Mee is by no means alone in his observations of the narrative confusion of the contemporary world. One important point of agreement in the abundance of theoretical writing on the so-called postmodern condition is the poststructuralist claim that language and communication are problematic, which compels theorists and artists to perform a critical rethinking of what are generally considered the foundations and structures of our civilization.<sup>29</sup> Fredric Jameson, in his essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," notes that the breakdown of these structures has led to a political and artistic culture that seems "increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current

experience.” He concludes that “all that is left” for our cultural creations “is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, for Jameson, one of the requirements of cultural work in the postmodern world is a message of “the failure of the new, the imprisonment of the past.”<sup>31</sup> Some of this anxiety is simply a recognition of the basic intertextuality of cultural formulations in general, in which everything is some version of something that has already been done. Most versions of the postmodern, however, are focused explicitly on the relationship of the past to the present because the structures of that past, like language, are still present but too problematic to depend upon for the clear generation and communication of meaning.

Linda Hutcheon finds the crux of the postmodern in recognizing that the “important postmodern concept of ‘the presence of the past’” is not “a nostalgic return” as it is in the modern conception; rather, “it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society.”<sup>32</sup> Hutcheon describes postmodern culture as being intrinsically involved with “what we usually label our dominant, liberal humanist culture” because it “contests it from within its own assumptions.”<sup>33</sup> The fascination with the past, which is instilled in and strengthened by the recognition of intertextuality in art forms, is especially relevant to the discussion of contemporary remakings of Greek tragedies. These remakings obviously create a relationship between a past text and culture and the present. In modern conceptions, like those of Eliot’s essay and O’Neill’s play, that relationship is intrinsically nostalgic, for there is an inherent valorization of the cultural tradition that is being used. For Hutcheon, postmodern art “paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies.”<sup>34</sup> This type of “ironic dialogue” tends, like intertextuality in the Greek tragedies, to exploit the audience’s knowledge of the source material and focus the audience on the differences in the way the stories are told. The tragic poets’ use of familiar plots and myths caused the audience to consider that material in new ways that might bring up new questions or perspectives. Postmodern remaking is, thus, problematized remaking. It critiques its own culture and structures while recognizing its own place within the culture and structures. As Philip Auslander points out in *Presence and Resistance*, “[T]he postmodern . . . artist has no choice but to operate within the culture whose representation he or she must both recycle and critique.”<sup>35</sup> Auslander’s concept of postmodern theatre involves a similar “ironic dialogue”:

Because postmodernist political art must position itself within postmodern culture, it must use the same representational means as all other cultural expressions yet remain permanently suspicious of them. . . . It must interrogate the means of representation themselves as structures of authority.<sup>36</sup>

The postmodern artist must, therefore, use the means of the culture to critique the culture, setting up works that contain “nostalgia for the past simultaneous with its derision, and the constant attempt to prop up mythic readings of history even as they are seen as risible.”<sup>37</sup> This makes Greek tragedy a particularly poignant site for the postmodern. The Greeks, as the central dramatic heritage of Western drama, serve the role of cultural past and tradition perfectly. In fact, in his exploration of the roots of postmodern theatre, Pavis concludes that “postmodern theatre cannot define itself without recourse to classical norms.”<sup>38</sup> Postmodern theatre, like architecture and other art forms, is dependent upon the classical structures and narratives because it needs them in order to “establish its own identity.”<sup>39</sup> While not all postmodern theatre uses the Greeks as source material, most postmodern theatre artists use some historical or even canonical text as one of the texts with which they work.<sup>40</sup> Jameson’s observation that the modern “alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject”<sup>41</sup> in the postmodern is a key element in distinguishing between modern and postmodern remakings. Along with the fragmentation of the subject, the fragmentation of the plot or narrative in a self-conscious manner is essential to postmodern remaking. This is not just the intertextuality of stories or allusions to other sources or a re-ordering of the tragic plots, but what Marvin Carlson calls an “obsession” with citation, with “textual material consciously recycled, often almost like pieces of a collage, into new combinations with little attempt to hide the fragmentary and ‘quoted’ nature of these pieces.”<sup>42</sup> Postmodern remakings break apart the characters and stories from within and occasionally also bombard them with other material from without, creating a frequently disjointed narrative and potentially fragmented subject, which often means the characters themselves become fragmented. They often, however, still maintain the dramatic elements of the source works, and sometimes even use them to make their disparate elements coherent.

In *Oedipus Loves You* (2007), a postmodern remaking of the Oedipus myth, the Irish company Pan Pan uses the basic structure of the Sophocles play but makes the family contemporary and suburban, barbecuing in the backyard and sharing psychotherapy sessions. Antigone, Creon, and Tiresias form a band that interrupts the narrative to play songs that are more relevant to their psychological states than to the plot. These interruptions serve to fragment the story and, to some extent, the characters, exploiting some of the postmodern techniques discussed above. The New York-based company The Shalimar, in their 2006 remaking of the Phaedra myth, *La Femme est Morte, or Why I Should Not Fuck My Son*, focuses its postmodern lens on machinations of attraction and power from a decidedly contemporary but not psychological perspective. The structure, which borrows from both Seneca’s *Phaedra* and Georges Bataille’s novel *Ma Mère*, follows the mythological tale from Phaedra’s attraction to Hippolytus in the absence of her husband Theseus,

to Theseus' falsely reported death, to the accusation of rape, to Theseus' surprise return, to Hippolytus' grisly death, and to Theseus' recognition. In both of these works, we have moments of Brechtian alienation, when the actor and character are clearly separated for the audience, primarily because they are speaking or singing text that is obviously not from the source material. However, as in most postmodern remakings, by the end of both pieces the audience is, despite the fragmentations and interruptions, watching an adaptation of the conclusion of the source myth. The beginning, middle, and end of Aristotelian tragedy remain significant to the dramatic structure. In *Oedipus Loves You*, which to a great extent satirizes both the seriousness of the Sophocles play and its psychological interpretation, the more serious moments exploit that very same mythology to gain significance and resonance with the audience. When Oedipus returns after blinding himself, his speech confirms the vitality and relevance of the story to the contemporary world: "You know what the biggest regret of my life is right now? That I was born. That's pathetic, isn't it? As miserable as it gets. What did I do to deserve this? I love you all."<sup>43</sup> The play both critiques the myth and its modern valences while at the same time recognizing their attraction and power. While these postmodern remakings interrupt the narrative and the characters at points, there is still a reclamation of that mythology; it is as if in these constructions the drama cannot be suppressed, despite the best efforts of the artists and audiences involved. This is, to some extent, a function of the tragic structure, which insists on the inevitability of both character and plot; these postmodern remakings ultimately cling to these constructions.

Both *Oedipus Loves You* and *La Femme est Morte* are also focused on critiques of specific elements of modernity. Pan Pan's work functions as a critique of both the Oedipal myth and the dominant Freudian interpretation of it. The staging of the play used many techniques that further complicated the viewing and interpretive experience for the audience. When I viewed the production at PS122 in May 2008, there were three rooms framed behind the forestage area of the backyard, and the two technicians were off to the stage right side and visible throughout the performance. This created a landscape of sorts, and there was a great deal of simultaneous action that competed for the attention of the audience members. Each element, however, was still directly related to the events of the story and helped illuminate or commented upon them. There were, for example, two large flat-screen televisions over the rooms. One of them showed a live feed of Oedipus and Jocasta's bed; at the beginning of the play, these two were under the covers presumably engaged in some kind of sexual activity, although they both emerged wearing undergarments. This same shot of the bed was always present, helping the audience visualize the sexual subtext of the original myth, this remaking of it, and the dominant Freudian interpretation of both. The other flat-screen television changed regularly. At the beginning, it was used to show text written on a sheet of paper that emphasized the action or dialogue being performed. It was also used to show very small puppet

versions of the characters imitating the action of the onstage characters. In the long therapy sequence of the play, in which all the characters are psychoanalyzed by Tiresias while hanging out in the backyard, a series of psychology flashcards were shown on this screen with the names and definitions of different diagnoses.

In *La Femme est Morte*, the primary framing device is a chorus of sorts consisting of two paparazzi and the “star-fucker” Tiresias,<sup>44</sup> who interrupt, change, influence, and comment upon the action through dance and, mostly, through versions of pop songs from the 1980s to the present. The critique set up here is of a corrupt and fatuous celebrity culture, and the piece uses found text from sources, such as Britney Spears and the notorious publicist Lizzie Grubman, to show the superficialities that feed the power of celebrity. These texts are then juxtaposed with Theseus, whose modern-day general uses the words of Generals MacArthur and Patton to justify his deeds of violence and war as the only means to defend against barbarity. The cultural critique is strong and clear, and makes contemporary the themes of the Phaedra myth by making the crisis a public affair in a way that is recognizable for a contemporary audience. The love between Phaedra and Hippolytus seems constructed and lustful, as this is a world in which sincerity is difficult to imagine. The juxtaposition of this insincerity with the fact that Theseus’ nation is at war is the stronger focus of critique, but it is not psychological; instead, the critique is political and straightforward and, at times, very effective, especially in the Patton speeches that clearly speak of contemporary events, even though a good portion of the audience recognizes them as historical. The story being told here is still a drama, although a postmodern one that embraces interruptions, song, and even the occasional breaking of audience boundaries, as when a character hiding in the audience lets his cell phone ring, interrupting the action and the otherwise separated audience/performer relationship.

These two examples demonstrate clear shifts in characters and structures that distinguish postmodern from modern remaking, as the fragmented structures and characters of *Pan Pan* and *The Shalimar* are clearly distinct from O’Neill’s unified characters and linear plot in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and even the unified performative world that Schechner has his performers create in *Dionysus in ’69*. While both *Pan Pan* and *The Shalimar* cling to the drama, they do not, in the end, follow it to similar conclusions, as do both O’Neill and Schechner. Nor do the characters have the same psychological consistency that defines the Mannons and their fate and that even Schechner’s performers/characters maintain. The writers of these postmodern remakings find in the foundational drama of Western civilization the perfect site for their critiques of their own cultures. At the same time, their own remakings in many ways propagate the same cultural and theatrical hegemony: by continuing to use these texts, they give them historical and representational power. This simultaneous “enshrining” and “questioning” of the past is what Linda Hutcheon repeatedly calls the “postmodern paradox.”<sup>45</sup> By using Greek tragedies as

the material from which they choose to mount their cultural critiques, these kinds of remakings find themselves in the (ironical) center of the postmodern project, as they use some of the texts most central to Western culture, and certainly to Western drama.

### **The Postdramatic**

The postdramatic is different from the postmodern most clearly in its relationship to the drama. It is not so interested, as postmodernism is, in a world beyond the modern, but in theatre and performance beyond drama. The shift of our use of Greek tragedy from retellings of the stories, as in the classical and modern examples above, to postdramatic remakings is an example of a further development of Greek tragedy and its relationship to its audience. The postdramatic implies a new, contemporary level of critical distance, one which allows us not just to avoid the closeness or discomfort of the contemporary story by using historical or mythological material, but insists that we also see the construction and legacy of the stories and characters as content for examination, interrogation, and, in many cases, entertainment. Postdramatic structure highlights the interruption and fragmentation of story and character, and is rarely concerned with following along or even reinventing the structure of the narrative. Instead, it leaves those fragments and interruptions in the liminal space of the performance, just as multiple forms of information and narrative come to us through the burgeoning, mediated ether. In this sense, it is arguably a more effective representation of the contemporary human experience: the fleeting, fragmented moment, the brief and sudden inspiration, and, inevitably, the terrors of existence. Richard Foreman's distinctly postdramatic ideas of the purpose of theatrical art lead him to attack the very idea of a subject as a "trivial" distraction from

what art is deeply about—the full, multi-dimensional “presence” of whatever subject is being obliterated by the power of “present-ness.” However, by the usual gluing of our attention onto the ostensible “subject matter”—we try to protect ourselves from the deep ego-shattering experience of art.<sup>746</sup>

The infatuation with the subject is what makes drama compelling for many audiences, yet for Foreman it is merely a distraction from the real purpose of art. The postdramatic also focuses its attentions on presence itself, subjugating the “subject matter” of the drama to what Foreman sees as its proper subsidiary position.

The obfuscation of interpretation is deepened in the postdramatic by the disruption of the readable structures of drama and character, preventing the spectators from focusing primarily, or even at all, on the “subject matter” and insisting instead that they are aware of the “present-ness” of the performance itself.

As David Barnett explains,

Postdramatic theatre becomes a theatre of language in which the word is liberated from representational or interpretive limitation in a bid to deliver it as an associative piece of communicative material. The postdramatic theatre-text can refuse to represent and leave all possible readings open. . . . [T]he production itself can offer a similar refusal. The interpretation takes place in the audience, if at all.<sup>47</sup>

While Stegemann dismisses the movement of the interpretation to the spectators as the “hubris” of the postmodern idea that perspective is necessarily subjective, even Aristotle placed the effect of the work on the spectators, and not the drama itself, as the purpose of the dramatic form.<sup>48</sup> The stronger argument here is about the legitimacy of the act of performance. Stegemann insists that in the postdramatic “the human subject is revealed to be a particularly clever self-performance artist”;<sup>49</sup> according to this thesis, the postdramatic rejects drama because it believes the “act of observing humans for the purpose of examining and understanding human behavior and their actions is considered to be an illusion and a habituated lie.”<sup>50</sup> The postdramatic use of Greek tragedy, however, seems to indicate not a complete rejection of the drama but merely a rethinking of its place within the theatrical experience that brings into question the possibility of the representative “whole” that drama depends upon for its mimetic and representational efficacy. The postdramatic does not necessarily propose that all drama is a lie, but does foreground for the spectators the potential and regular manipulation of narrative through language and character that exists as an inherent part of the dramatic form.

In their postdramatic remakings of Greek tragedies, theatre artists such as Heiner Müller, Jay Scheib, and Dood Paard use ancient Greek texts as material to help them express and portray the contemporary and highlight the construction of drama and performance. They do not try to remount or emulate the Greek versions, and do not depend on the Greek story to provide a shelter or meaning for them. Instead, they use the myth of Medea as material to express their anxieties about the very act of representation. For Müller, Medea becomes the perfect mythological “center” for his triptych *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape with Argonauts*. This piece contains no stage directions at all, no character designations in its first and third parts, and a dialogue between Medea, Jason, and the Nurse in its central part. While there is a chronological feel to the three parts of the story, there is no clear dramatic narrative. Müller desires that the audience of his theatre “derive information from expression,”<sup>51</sup> and, thus, his texts are highly associative and complicated, and structured using montage or other nonlinear strategies. According to Sabine Wilke, this complex material forces the interpretive possibilities to

expand: “The reader [and theatre-goer] is confronted with a simultaneous medley of conflicting stimuli that are all present in their own right, but that do not necessarily contribute to ‘a meaning of the whole.’”<sup>52</sup> This clearly postdramatic impulse to avoid the illusion of “a meaning of the whole” also helps to emphasize the “sensual perceptions” of the audience by frustrating attempts at “analytical and rational understanding.”<sup>53</sup> This is a direct reversal of both Aristotle’s and Brecht’s ideas about the way that drama should function, and reveals Müller’s distinctly postdramatic view of theatre: while the world is filled with political oppression and humanity’s hatred and violence, Müller does not see a dialectical dramatic form as being a satisfactory mode of representation. Thus, for Müller, remaking a text through simple analogy or archaeology and, in so doing, attempting a better understanding of the past and present, is inadequate. The only true potential for change lies in breaking down the dramatic and cultural structures of that legacy.

Jay Scheib’s *The Medea* incorporates texts from several versions of the Medea story to exploit the Medea myth as performance material. The piece uses video and multiple performance spaces and reverses the chronological plot sequence of Euripides in order to subvert narrative and undercut character motivation and causality. Scheib hopes this structural reversal will lead to his goal of Suspense:

We all know how Medea ends. We barely remember how it starts. I want to strike Suspense into the heart of what we are making. The horrific revelation, the bloodied footprints in the hall, fear, paralysis, paroxysms of nausea—Suspense in the camera angles—Suspense in the use of time. Suspense and her great accomplice—broken expectation—these are our tools.<sup>54</sup>

This idea of Suspense becomes the guiding principle of Scheib’s work, and it overrides any concerns about logic, causality, plot, or even emotional or character coherence. Scheib doesn’t work toward fragmentation *per se*, but instead explores individual moments as unique, thus leading to a piece built from fragments: of character, of emotion, of action. This concentration on the individual moment, which relegates the narrative to subsidiary importance, works together with the reversal of narrative to create a focus on details and juxtapositions. Scheib’s *The Medea* thus does not proceed “according to the model of suspenseful dramatic action.”<sup>55</sup> Instead, it focuses on “the eventful present . . . the gestures and movements of the performers, the compositional and formal structure of language as soundscape, the qualities of the visual beyond representation, the musical and rhythmic process with its own time,”<sup>56</sup> all elements of Lehmann’s postdramatic. Scheib builds a theatrical event that does not serve narrative or plot. Instead, the work “liberates the formal, ostentatious moment of ceremony from its sole function of enhancing attention and valorizes it for its own sake, as an aesthetic quality.”<sup>57</sup> *The Medea* inverts the



plot in order to “liberate” the moments of terror, psychology, and emotion that Scheib wants to explore, shifting the event from the story itself to a sequence of valorized aesthetic moments.

Dood Paard’s *medEia*, which has been touring internationally since 1998, is an all choral text version of Medea performed by three actors. Company member Oscar van Woensel, in collaboration with performers Manja Topper and Kuno Bakker, composed the text to a great extent from the found text of English language pop songs. It has no character designations, and although in production it was broken up amongst the three performers, there is no indication in the text of character individuation;<sup>58</sup> in the New York premiere production I viewed at PS122 in September 2007, the performers sometimes spoke in the voice of a character such as Medea or Jason, but usually adopted an unembellished, plain voice. Without character designations, stage directions, or act or scene breaks, it is a text that indicates little about dramatization, though the major plot points of the mythical text are addressed. What makes this text and its performance characteristically postdramatic begins with this choral text, which makes the primary mode of performance not mimetic but rather narrative: we are witnessing an actor or actors telling us about what is happening to a mythical character, instead of watching an actor explain or experience the actions of a character. It is in no small part mimesis that differentiates Greek tragedy from the oral narrative and dithyrambic choral performance that typified predramatic Athenian performance. The chorus here, too, is in a dithyrambic mode, serving not as an interlocuter for actors but as a collective narrator for a mythical story. This has the effect of minimizing the dramatic elements of the performance, and the production helped enhance this effect by presenting almost no imitative movement, gesture, or dialogue. Instead, the production was split into four parts, each involving the three actors standing next to each other and facing the audience and, sometimes, each other. The progression of the piece was marked only by three interruptions, signaled by the tearing down of a paper wall, loud music, the slides of various locales that progressed at a strobe-like speed, and the retreat of the actors to another wall of paper that they raised further upstage. The final interruption left nothing but the empty theatre space, the torn papers, and the actors up against the back wall. This movement away from the audience is also a metatheatrical move away from the drama itself. The last line of the play, a choral “Fuck you,”<sup>59</sup> was delivered by the actors with their heads down looking at the floor, and was followed immediately by a blackout. While this text can clearly be attributed to the character of Medea, in the context of the performance it also served as a clear rejection of the traditional drama and its implied creation of a world for the audience. According to Jacob Gallagher-Ross, “Dood Paard’s postdramatic aesthetic banishes dramatic action from the stage so we can begin to see it clearly again” not in our art, but in the contemporary world in which we live.<sup>60</sup> This is a clear rejection of drama’s need for “wholeness, illusion and world representation”

as the “model of the real,”<sup>61</sup> instead turning the focus of the theatrical experience clearly onto the spectators and their subjective perceptions of story, of character, and of the act of representation.

In these three postdramatic remakings, the drama of Medea is still a vital part of the theatrical works; it is, however, no longer the controlling factor, the first in Aristotle’s list of the elements of tragedy, the whole, complete story. In Müller’s destruction of character and plot through the creation of landscape, and in Scheib’s reversal of plot and focus on the hyper-real action of the momentary present, they create the essential relationship necessary for the postdramatic, as Lehmann describes it:

a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama, at a time  
“after” the authority of the dramatic paradigm in theatre. . . .  
“After” drama means that it lives on as a structure—however  
weakened and exhausted—of the “normal” theatre: as an  
expectation of large parts of the audience, as a foundation for  
many of its means of representation, as a quasi automatically  
working norm of its drama-turgy.<sup>62</sup>

Postdramatic Greek tragedy, then, uses the foundational texts of Greek drama as a way to investigate the specific legacies of theatre, and, as a result, is ultimately and always metatheatrical, about the event, the creation, and the reception of the theatre. It also, however, reflects the significant disintegration of the unified narrative in contemporary life. While it is possible that the postdramatic is “throwing the baby (drama) out with the bathwater (postmodernism)” and that theatre’s function “in contemporary society could become exhausted,”<sup>63</sup> one can also argue that by ignoring the mimetic shifts brought about by the problematics of language and the ubiquity of mediated representational forms, the theatre risks becoming something that needs to be fed, diapered, and coddled, or left to die like its most famous Greek character. Like Oedipus, drama will most likely survive and continue to dominate mainstream forms of theatre, as our cultures still desire the illusion of a whole that can be found in a satisfying drama. But the postdramatic impulse, and specifically its manifestations in using Greek tragedy as material, suggests something beyond that drama that more convincingly represents a fragmented, decentered world.

## Notes

1. Bernd Stegemann, “After Postdramatic Theater,” trans. Matthew R. Price, *Theater* 39.3 (2009): 21.

2. Stegemann 21. The institutionalization of the postdramatic in Germany as described by Stegemann is in sharp contrast to my own experience in the United States, where the postdramatic has not established significant footholds in commercial, regional, or academic theatres. While it has

certainly made its way into the scholarly discourse in the English-speaking world, it has by no means reached the hegemonic status that Stegemann describes (22). Stegemann's fear that dramatic theatre will disappear from the stage does not seem an imminent danger in the U.S.

3. *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jurs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006) 22.

4. Hans-Thies Lehmann 181.

5. See, for example, Page duBois's "Ancient Tragedy and the Metaphor of Katharsis," *Theatre Journal* 54 (2002): 19–24 or Rush Rehm's *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002). DuBois critiques the lens of Aristotle and Rehm focuses on the significance of space in the performance of Greek tragedy. Both insist upon a renewed exploration of nontextual elements of Greek tragedy. While the spatial and staging elements of tragedy have been addressed recently by many (perhaps, most influentially, by Oliver Taplin in *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy* [London: Oxford UP, 1990] and David Wiles in *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997]) most either use the dramatic text to prove theories about dramatic space or use these explorations to illuminate the dramatic text. Thus, the focus on drama and the center of the theatrical event is still intact.

6. duBois 19.

7. David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 10.

8. Peter Burian, "Myth into *Muthos*: The Shaping of Tragic Plot," *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 179.

9. 179.

10. Wiles 5.

11. 5.

12. 10.

13. 11.

14. Kevin J. Wetmore, *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2002) 19.

15. Roland Barthes, "Putting on the Greeks," *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1972) 59.

16. David Harvey, "Postmodernism," *The Blackwell Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Anthony Elliot (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 304.

17. *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill*, eds. Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 350.

18. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920) 2.

19. Richard Schechner, *Public Domain* (New York: Avon, 1969) 227.

20. Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992) 37.

21. Auslander 37.

22. Todd Gitlin, "Postmodernism: Roots and Politics," *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, eds. Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (New York: Routledge, 1989) 349.

23. 349.

24. Charles Mee, "The Theater of History," *Conversations on Art and Performance*, eds. Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999) 189.

25. 187.

26. 189.

27. Patrice Pavis, "The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre," *Modern Drama* 29.1 (1986): 5.

28. Elin Diamond, *Writing Performances* (London: Routledge, 1995) 2.

29. Jacques Derrida's discussion in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (*Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981]) of the center as being only a function (271) is perhaps a good way to summarize this perspective, as it opens up the general critical stance of deconstruction and poststructuralism, and consequently serves as the foundation (ironically, of course) for most postmodern ideas of structure, language, and narrative.

30. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 77.

31. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto, 1995) 115–6.

32. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 4.
33. 6.
34. Margaret Rose, in *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), takes issue with Hutcheon's use of the term parody as modern and incomplete, and claims that parody must contain both the comic and the ironized critical (31). For Rose, postmodern parody must have the critical perspective coming from inside the culture, as Hutcheon discusses, but also the comic. Modern definitions of parody tend to either neglect the comic and focus only on the critical, or use the term to describe "burlesque" (54), which lacks the "ambivalence" that parody should maintain for its "target" (51). Rose then critiques Hutcheon for using the term parody to refer to works that merely recognize or problematize their own critical stances; for Rose, this is not parody but a form of ironic (and often metafictional) criticism.
35. Auslander 23.
36. 23.
37. Christopher Sharrett, "Afterword: Sacrificial Violence and Postmodern Ideology," *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1999) 421.
38. Pavis 1.
39. 2.
40. The Wooster Group, certainly the most-cited example of "postmodern" theatre amongst theatre scholars, for example, has used the plays of Jean Racine, Anton Chekhov, Arthur Miller, Gertrude Stein, and Thornton Wilder as material for their own work, which also includes extratheatrical material and various media, images, and texts.
41. Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" 71.
42. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001) 14.
43. Simon Doyle and Gavin Quinn, *Oedipus Loves You* (Pan Pan: Dublin, 2007) 45.
44. Shoshana Currier and The Shalimar, *La Femme est Morte, or Why I Should Not Fuck My Son* (unpublished manuscript, 2008) 1.
45. Hutcheon 126.
46. Richard Foreman, "Notes on My Next Project—ZOMBOID!," *Hotreview.org – Hunter Online Theater Review*, <<http://hotreview.org/articles/foremanonzomboid>>.
47. David Barnett, "When is a Play not a Drama?: Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts," *New Theatre Quarterly* 24.1 (February 2008): 21.
48. Stegemann 16.
49. 16.
50. 19.
51. Heiner Müller, *Germania*, ed. Sylvie Lotringer, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schütze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990) 52.
52. Sabine Wilke, "The Role of Art in a Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism: The Theatre of Heiner Müller," *Paragraph* 14.3 (1999): 285.
53. 285.
54. Jay Scheib, "Program Note for *The Medea*," (New York: La Mama E.T.C., 2005).
55. Lehmann 34.
56. 34.
57. 69.
58. *medEia* (Dood Paard: Amsterdam, 1998) 1.
59. 44.
60. Jacob Gallagher-Ross, "Postdramatic Stress Syndrome: Dood Paard's *MedEia* at P.S. 122," *TDR: The Drama Review* 53.1 (Spring 2009): 135.
61. Lehmann 22.
62. 27.
63. Stegemann 19.