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September 2001 to September 2002 in
Theatre

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**Shifting Perception in Tragedy:
September 2001 to September 2002 in Theatre**

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Introduction

The night of September 11, 2001, Director Diana Ivey told her actors, “This is what we do. We are not doctors. We are not firemen. Putting on plays, taking the stage is our contribution to the world. This is what we do. This is what we can do. This is what we must do” (Cameron 6). The attacks of that morning brought about a change in U.S. foreign policy that for many signaled the true beginning of the 21st century. The attacks had an immediately profound effect on theatre in the country and no where was that felt stronger than in New York City and Washington, DC. The grounding of planes after the attacks slammed the breaks on the nation’s tourism industry that theatres are heavily dependent on for their audiences. Along with diminished audiences, the industry also had to deal with the problems of funding from donors being rerouted from the arts to organizations devoted to helping rescue workers and families of the victims of the tragedy.

The industry responded in a variety of ways. The day of the attacks, theaters needed to decide whether or not they were going to perform that night. Theatres in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and beyond including the Laguna Playhouse, the Mark Taper Forum and the Geffen Playhouse decided to close their doors for the evening (S.D. 17). Other theaters decided that they were providing an essential service and went on with their performances. Emily Atkinson, the communications director at the Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island defended their performance of the comedy *Noises Off* by saying, “People have a strong need to come together for shared experiences in the midst of tragedy. A comedy like *Noises Off* gives welcome diversion and escape” (S.D. 17). In Washington, DC, all theatre companies ceased performances (S.D. 17).

In the weeks that followed, companies continued to struggle filling their houses. Theatre companies in New York were seeing audiences twenty percent of what they had been previously and companies in DC were reporting a thirty percent dip in attendance (S.D. 17). The economic impact is estimated to have cost theaters in New York as much as five million dollars. While larger companies were able to shoulder the burden, smaller companies reported as much as a forty percent drop in income (“9/11 Polls Assess the Impact” 10). New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani famously urged Broadway to get back to business and for audiences to return, "If you really want to help New York City, go see a play" (S.D. 16). But what kind of plays would audiences be seeing in the wake of such tragedy once the doors of the theaters reopened? What impact does a real life tragedy have on our understanding of tragedy on stage at the beginning of the 21st century?

More than 2000 years after Aristotle wrote *Poetics*, the word tragedy has transformed from a term to describe a genre of theatre to a standby of newspaper headlines and television pundits. Aristotle told us that tragedy is “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions” (Aristotle 61). Aristotle believed a tragic play to be one that brings about the elements of theatre with a plot that evokes an emotional release in the audience from the actions in the plot. While Aristotle’s *Poetics* helps academics look at tragedy, there is something unsatisfying about it from a contemporary perspective. Aristotle’s theory of tragedy is simple, but it is almost

simple to the point of being reductionist. Dealing with the events of 9/11 would require a more complex and comprehensive theory of tragedy.

After 9/11, David Roman, editor of *The Journal of American Theatre* brought together several scholars of theatre to discuss the changing implications of tragedy in the 21st century in “A Forum on Theatre and Tragedy.” Diana Taylor of New York University argued that Aristotle’s definition focuses on containment. She said, “Tragedy cuts catastrophe down to size. It orders events into comprehensible scenarios” (Taylor 95). Similarly, Una Chaudhuri argued that this classical definition of tragedy offers a “god’s eye view of human suffering” (Chaudhuri 98). What Taylor and Chaudhuri identify is that a classical definition of tragedy makes the events simple. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy leads us to believe that it is easy to understand all the parts that make up tragedy and to find sense in what happened. Hamlet’s failure in his tragic quest can be traced back to his constant struggle between action and inaction. Oedipus’ thirst for knowledge leads to him to discover the terrible truth that makes up his tragedy. The Aristotelian definition of tragedy also gives us the impression that there is something to blame for the unfortunate events. This works because of the fictional nature of plays where it is possible to find every detail in the script. The events are confined to the script and a chain of cause and effect can be identified. As Taylor argues, “Ultimately, tragedy assures us, the crisis will be resolved and balanced restored” (Taylor 95). Tragedy has an ending. The audience is allowed this catharsis because they can reflect on what they have just seen. The ending of the play wraps up the action and allows the audience to take in and consider what they have just witnessed. Witnesses to tragedy in reality have no such luxury as the tragedy of reality can not be so easily contained and analyzed.

Non-fictional events that are labeled tragic are much harder to understand because it is not possible to take in the full picture. Taylor described this by saying, “Talk of ‘tragedy,’ like ‘war,’ gives the events a sense of directionality, containability, and moral purpose that they do not have” (Taylor 96). With all of human history and the stories of billions of individuals to take into account, it is much harder to narrow down a simple cause and effect chain that has led to tragedy. Chaudhuri contrasts the ‘gods-eye view’ that an audience gains from classical tragedy with the ‘bird’s eye view’ of modern tragedy. She says, “modern tragedy offers... a ‘bird’s eye view,’ contingent, unstable, flighty” (Chaudhuri 97). This view lacks the all knowing omnipotence that is possible in classical scholarship on tragedy and causes us to consider that there may not always be answers to the questions that we want to ask. Chaudhuri reminds us that “Artaud believed that the function of theatre was to teach us that ‘the sky can still fall on our heads” (Chaudhuri 98) and rejects his argument as both utopian and hysterical. While Chaudhuri doesn’t completely buy into Artaud’s Chicken Littleesque view of theatre, she does see the utility of his argument in a post 9/11 world. “Artaud’s mad vision of theatre as a place to encounter the unknown and the unimaginable, a place that teaches the necessary humility of not knowing” (Chaudhuri 98). Attempts to find a clear cut explanation for the events of 9/11 are impractical, but searching for these answers opens up a space that allows for exploration.

Contemporary sensibilities about tragedy bring up questions that have no certain answers. This is similar to real life events which are equally difficult to definitely explain. Before moving on to look at how plays from the year after the September 11th terrorist attacks are representative of this new realization of tragedy, it helpful to examine the theories of Kenneth Burke and Francis Ferguson on the origin of tragedy. Burke and Ferguson’s scholarship provides a

structural look at tragedy that is useful because it attempts to explain how tragedy operates. They break tragedy into three pieces, one of which is *mathemata*, the Greek word for experience or perception. ‘Perception’ is relevant when discussing post 9/11 theatre because the events of 9/11 have caused a change in perception for audiences and authors alike. This shift is a key aspect of the plays discussed in this paper.

Instead of drawing upon Aristotle for a definition of tragedy, Kenneth Burke instead seeks to answer what separates a tragedy from an unfortunate event. Burke attempts to unravel the conundrum in his 1945 work *A Grammar of Motives*. Burke doesn’t believe that all misfortunes are tragedies and that saying such buys into the concept of victimization. Burke defines tragedy as when “the fatal accidents are felt to bear fully upon the act, while the act itself is felt to have summed up the character of the agent” and “in seeing the self in terms of the situation which the act has brought about, the agent transcends the self” (Burke 39). Unraveling Burke’s argument tells us that the important components are the act, the situation, and the agent. The act is the tragic event that happens. The situation is the new world that has been created by the act occurring, a transformation of the previous world. The nature of the agent, or the character that is acting in the story, is a bit more hazy. Burke admits that using the term “agent” creates a paradox as Burke argues that the term “agent” implies that the character is acting, not being acted upon. Burke describes this paradox by writing, “the concept of activation implies a kind of passive-behind-the-passive; for an agent who is ‘motivated by his passions’ would be ‘moved by his being-movedness,’ or ‘acted upon by his state of being acted upon” (Burke 40). This paradox is solved by thinking of the agent as malleable. The agent is acted upon, ‘is moved’ by something and that changes the agent into something else, or as Burke said in his

definition, ‘transcends the self.’ To put it simply, a tragic event changes the situation and forces the character to also change. This change is a change in perception. This assertion is more apparent when the origin of Burke’s theory is explored.

Burke’s inspiration for his theory was an ancient Greek proverb. The proverb, “*pathemata mathemata*” can be translated as “one learns from experience” or more directly, “the suffered is the learned,” or simply, suffering leads to knowledge (Burke 39). This echoes back to Burke’s earlier comments that allude to the transformative nature of tragedy. A tragic event leads to a transformation in perception. Believing that action is also necessary for tragedy, Burke adds the term *poiemata*, meaning a “deed or action” (Burke 39). Taking the concepts of *poiemata*, *pathemata*, and *mathemata*, in mind, Burke clarifies and finesses his definition of tragedy into, “The agent thus suffers this opposition, and as he learns to take the oppositional motives into account, widening his terminology accordingly, he has arrived at a higher order of understanding” (Burke 40). This implies that *pathemata*, or suffering, leads to understanding, but Burke asserts that temporal order is not important and that “the three distinctions can be collapsed into a single ‘moment,’ so we can proceed from one to the others in any order” (Burke 40). This tells us that while action is necessary to set off a tragedy, action, suffering and knowledge can all be used to inform each other. Burke tells us that, “the three distinctions can be collapsed into a single ‘moment’” (Burke 40). Thinking of *poiemata*, *pathemata*, and *mathemata* as all occurring simultaneously is key to resolving the paradox mentioned above about Burke’s active but passive agent. There is the being acted upon of the *poiemata* while the transforming of the *mathemata* occurs.

A few years later Francis Ferguson transformed Burke's theory on tragedy itself. While Burke gives the translation of his terms *poeima*, *pathemata*, and *mathemata* as "the act, the suffering or state, [and] the thing learned" (Burke 41), Ferguson presents a slightly different and more user friendly interpretation. In his analysis of *Oedipus Rex*, Ferguson takes Burke's words and reimagines them as a "tragic rhythm of action" (Ferguson 18). The interpretations of *poeima*, *pathemata*, and *mathemata* that Ferguson selects are "purpose, passion (or suffering) and perception," respectively (Ferguson 18). Ferguson argues that each episode of *Oedipus Rex* follows this tragic rhythm, "[Characters] shake the purpose as it was first understood; and so the characters suffer the piteous and terrible sense of the mystery of the human situation. From this suffering or passion, with its shifting visions, a new perception of the situation emerges; and on that basis the purpose of the action is redefined and a new movement starts" (Ferguson 18). Ferguson's interpretation builds on much of the arguments for transformation in tragedy from Burke but he seems to disregard Burke's belief that the process can take place in any order in favor of a more linear progression. Ferguson's linear progression simplifies Burke's argument, but it is perhaps a bit too reductionist in its rejection of all three elements of the tragic rhythm existing in a single moment. This is not to reject Ferguson's cooptation of Burke's terms entirely, as Ferguson's analysis does provide some additional insight of its own such as his focus on each of the terms being malleable.

For the purpose of this paper I will be drawing upon both Burke and Ferguson's interpretation of Burke in the analysis of tragedy. I will be using some of Ferguson's simplified terminology while keeping in mind the nonlinear nature of the progression of how purpose, passion, and perception are all related. I will also be paying special attention to the third term,

mathemata, or perception as Ferguson calls it. Going back to Burke's original Greek roots, perception refers to the knowledge that exists, and I am most interested in seeing how perception interacts with tragedy in the plays that were produced shortly after 9/11. I would advocate that 9/11 did not as much change the world as it changed our perception of the world. While 9/11 caused a large number of civilian deaths, the United States as a country was virtually the same as it was the day before, the most powerful state in the International System (Goh 78). The real change was a change in perception that would influence the future actions of the United States and its citizens, including its artists.

Evidence shows that there was a clear change in the perception of theatre makers and audiences immediately following the terrorists attacks. This change in perception can be seen in the radical change in the theatre community in terms of what was appropriate to put on stage.

Several planned productions were scrapped soon after the attacks. The most high profile example was the postponement of the revival of Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins* at the Round About Theatre Company (S.D. 17). The cast of characters of *Assassins* is made up of assassins who have succeeded or attempted to assassinate the president of The United States, a subject matter that was deemed inappropriate at the time. The show finally saw its revival in 2004 and was met with great praise and won five Tony Awards ("2004 Tony Award Winners" 49). In September 2001, Princeton's McCarter Theatre did away with its plans to produce Richard Nelson's *The Vienna Notes*, a political play about a politician that acts indifferent after a terrorist attack (Simonson). McCarter Theatre's Artistic Director Emily Mann gave the reason for the cancellation as follows, "*The Vienna Notes* is a brilliant and timely political drama, but the context in which we would receive the play has changed drastically, and it would be insensitive

of us to present the play at this moment in our history” (Simonson). The cancellation of *Assassins* and *The Vienna Notes* highlights the change in perception that came sharply after September 11th. What had been considered appropriate days before was thrown out for suddenly becoming taboo.

This post-9/11 change in perspective didn't just affect the cancellation of shows, it also affected the interpretation of shows written years before. Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses* originally premiered in 1996 at Northwestern University as *Six Myths*. *Metamorphoses* is an anthology of various Greek myths from Ovid focusing on love and transformation. When the show opened at The Lookingglass Theatre in Chicago in 1998, reviews such as those found in *The Daily Variety* or *The Chicago Sun-Times* focused on the literal transformative elements of the show (*Daily Variety*)(Weiss 51). After opening off Broadway in October 2001, the work gained new resonance.

Erik Lochtefeld who played Orpheus, the tragic musician who journeys to the underworld to bring back his lost love, said, “you felt the sudden immediacy of Orpheus and Eurydice, for instance. There were people living in New York at that very moment who were hoping and waiting for their loved ones to come home” (McGee 38). Critics were looking at the show and seeing a reflection of the grief and hope that the city was facing. Joseph Leonardo, professor of theater at Temple University noted the power that the timing of the performance had created, “The most interesting aspect for me was that after 9/11 you looked at things with a different eye. I found the last part of *Metamorphoses* very moving in a way that I wouldn't have before. And it wasn't just me. You could feel the same reaction in the audience” (Ryan H01). Ben Brantely in the *New York Times* wrote, “*Metamorphoses* seems to have arrived at the exact moment when

Manhattan can best appreciate it. In another context, it might have registered as too precious, perhaps, too arts-and-crafts for Eastern urbanites. But for now it is speaking with a dreamlike hush directly to New Yorkers' souls” and “For New Yorkers today who encounter the same recorded visions of terrorist destruction whenever they turn on their televisions, Ms.

Zimmerman's portrayal of tragic scenes repeated has an anxious and immediate familiarity” (Brantely E1). The consensus from the actors and critics was that they were looking at the show in a new light. The events of 9/11 caused a shift in perception that was now drawing the attention of audiences and theatre makers alike to the tragic elements of the script. This demonstrates that 9/11 had a noticeable impact on the world of theatre. I will now move on from discussing how the perception of older works changed after 9/11 to discussing the works that were created after this change in perception.

For the purpose of this paper I will be looking at three plays which are the result of the sudden change in perception brought about by the terrorist attacks of September 11th. This analysis will take into consideration the trend in contemporary scholarship, such as that brought about in David Roman's “Forum on Theatre and Tragedy,” to present tragedy as a complex series of events in which it is impossible to find a satisfying answer to the tragic events that have played out. It will also draw from Burke and Ferguson's theories to show that transformation in the face of tragedy is an important part of post 9/11 theatre. The transformation that I will be exploring is how the characters attempt to find their role in the world after having their perception radically changed overnight. In an effort to best capture the theatrical world's immediate response to the events, I will be analyzing plays that were first produced for audiences less than a year after September 11th and that directly deal with the subject matter of the terrorist

attacks. *The Journal of American Theatre* identified eleven plays that meet this criteria in their September 2002 issue (Brown 24). These eleven plays cover a wide range of performance genres from drama to comedy to devised theatre and tackle a variety of thematic subjects from justice to determinism to grief. While it is doubtful that anyone would classify the genre of any of the plays examined in this paper as pure tragedies, the tragic model is still useful for looking at these works because they were born out of a real tragic event and deal with characters that are attempting to make sense of the tragic events they have witnessed.

The three pieces I have selected not only meet the criteria of having been written less than a year after the attacks, but also provide some geographic variation in their settings. Anne Nelson's *The Guys* takes place in New York, Craig Wright's *Recent Tragic Events* takes place in Minneapolis, and Richard Montoya's *Anthems: Culture Clash in the District* takes place in Washington, DC. The most compelling connection between the three pieces explored in this paper is that they all feature characters that are attempting to make sense of a world that has seemingly changed over night. Each play demonstrates the malleability of perception in the face of tragedy through characters that are dealing with the fallout of 9/11. This change in perception is typically accompanied with a search for answers to explain why the tragedy had to occur and an attempt to find their purpose in the aftermath.

***The Guys* by Anne Nelson**

The Guys opened at the Flea Theatre, a small off-off Broadway theater in New York City on December 4th, 2001. The script was hastily written by Anne Nelson, whose real life experience writing eulogies for a New York fire captain inspired her to write the play. The Flea

Theatre was getting ready to close its doors for good when *The Guys* began its run (Nelson, *Flying Blind* 26). The show was an instant success and went on to sell out houses for 13 months. The Flea Theatre had the help of celebrities Bill Murray and Sigourney Weaver who originated the characters of Nick and Joan, respectively (Nelson, *The Guys* 17).

Nelson wrote in the *Journal of American Theatre* about her process for writing the play. She met Jim Simpson, then artistic director of The Flea Theatre, at a dinner party and told him about her experience helping a New York fire captain prepare speeches for funerals (Nelson, *Flying Blind* 26). Simpson was looking for a new play that would be relevant to contemporary audiences and thought that Nelson's experience would be perfect material for creating theatre. Though an experienced writer and editor, *The Guys* was Nelson's first attempt at writing a play. On her process, Nelson said, "My motivations were to release what was in my head onto the page, and to create a small, quiet space that reflected our actual experience as opposed to the traumatizing images and manufactured emotions dominating our pop culture" (Nelson, *Flying Blind* 26). Nelson's work succeeds in its attempt to personalize the tragedy by rooting the story firmly within the characters so that the audience may see how the character's perceptions of the world have changed. The change in perception for the characters in *The Guy* is caused by their sudden need to rediscover their role in the world.

The action of the play takes place entirely in the living room of Joan's New York apartment. Joan is a writer and journalist who hears about Nick, a captain in the New York Fire Department who lost eight of his men in the World Trade Center attacks. Nick is in need of a writer to help him compose eulogies for his lost comrades and through a masseuse meets Joan. Joan begins the play in soliloquy by describing her love for New York City, a place that has

captivated her since she was a little girl in Oklahoma. Nick arrives at Joan's apartment and the two begin work on the eulogies. Nick tells stories about his men — “the guys” — and Joan crafts his words into moving sentiments. The action of the play is interrupted when Joan breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly to express her inner turmoil. Her internal struggle is contrasted with Nick's overall calm, if somber, demeanor.

Joan's primary challenge throughout the play is dealing with the change in perception that the tragic events of 9/11 have brought about. Going back to Burke's formula for tragedy, this change in perception has led to Joan realize that she needs to find a new purpose. Nelson gives us a direct view on Joan's perception by having her address the audience directly in fourth wall breaking monologues. Nick and his stories serve to provide an additional look at a New Yorker who has a different perception of the world.

The search for answers in the face of a tragedy also permeates every page of the script. Joan demands explanation for the attacks and the suffering that followed. The questions come direct and explicit. Joan tells the audience that she first heard about a plane crashing into the World Trade Center from a phone call with her father that morning. Joan ponders if it could have been a terrorist attack leading her father to ask the question, “Why would someone do that?” (Nelson, *The Guys* 19). The play makes no mention of Osama Bin Laden, Al Qaeda, or any of the possible political goals that the attacks could have had. Without trying to provide political context for the attack, the question becomes one that searches for an explanation of why so many had to die that day, why so much human suffering had to occur. Part of this search involves finding a place in this changed world where someone can find their niche, or as Burke and Ferguson would see it, their purpose.

The desire to be useful, to have a purpose, when faced with tragedy is another reoccurring theme in the work. Joan makes it clear that she feels utterly useless in the aftermath of the attack. Joan describes her feelings as a “crisis of marginality.” She has a clear desire to try to find a way to help out, but the events have shifted her perception and made her believe that she is useless. Joan tells the audience about a friend she had that tried to volunteer at ground zero and was turned away. “Everyone wanted to help. But we couldn’t,” Joan says, “Intellectuals to the back of the line” (Nelson, *The Guys* 20). The only people that they were looking for were people with practical skills like carpenters and plumbers. There was no need for a writer like Joan.

All of this changes when Joan hears about Nick who is unable to bring himself to write the eulogies for his lost comrades. She clears her schedule and invites him over to help him find the words he needs. Immediately upon arriving Nick reconsiders and tells Joan that he doesn’t want to waste her time. Joan assures him that helping him is what she wants to do. As Joan describes it to Nick towards the end of the play, “I want to do something. But this is all I know how to do. Words. I can’t think of anything else” (Nelson, *The Guys* 40). While Joan may not have much in the way of practical skills she can use to contribute, she has the exact skill set that she needs to help make up for Nick’s shortcomings. Nick’s need has given Joan a purpose and she wants to hold on to that.

While Joan is feeling useless because of her lack of practical skills, Nick is feeling useless because of his inability to express himself. Nick’s insecurities can be summed up in his statement, “I [sic] been sitting down in front of a piece of paper all day, and I haven’t been able to write one sentence... What can I tell the families? What am I going to say?” (Nelson, *The Guys*

21). Nick sees attempting to find the words that will satisfy the families that are grieving as an insurmountable challenge. As a veteran firefighter, he is a very different character than Joan. He is a man of action, but is suddenly helpless in the new world that has emerged over night. Nick's task is no easy one. Beyond trying to figure out what he needs to say about each of the men to capture their personalities, he also struggles with rationalizing what happened the morning of the attacks.

Nick asks Joan, "How can I explain it?" (Nelson, *The Guys* 22) when they first sit down to write. Nick feels hesitant to write because he does not feel that he can provide a satisfying explanation to the families that have lost so much. His problem, as seen by Burke and Ferguson, would be that his change in perception caused by the attacks has cost him his ability to understand his purpose. Joan recognizes the enormity of Nick's attempt to try to provide a rationale to the events that have happened and helps him focus. She tells him, "You're doing this for the families. You'll comfort them. It's for them. It won't be about what happened that day" (Nelson, *The Guys* 22). Joan's words help Nick find his role and begin to help him start working. Nick realizing that he doesn't have to provide an answer to the tragedy allows him to focus on what his actual purpose is, comforting the grieving families. While Joan helps Nick find the right words to tell the families, she herself still struggles with her role in the new world.

Even though Joan has found a use for herself post tragedy her purpose still is not completely clear because she still is having trouble coming to terms with what exactly she should be feeling. Joan's existential crisis is fueled by her trouble deciding where the line between personal suffering and greater tragedy lies. Joan seems to be asking the audience if she has the right to feel grief about the great loss of life. The question becomes how directly involved with a

tragedy does a person need to be for them to be one of its victims. Joan seems to perceive herself as a victim, but she is having difficulty validating this perception.

Joan's second monologue to the audience occurs after she has helped Nick write the first eulogy. After Nick affirms to her that she did a great job with the first monologue, Joan slumps back into her chair and closes her eyes. Nick, noticing that she is obviously troubled, asks her, "You OK?" (Nelson, *The Guys* 26) Instead of answering Nick's question, Joan breaks from the scene and addresses the audience. In an attempt to answer the question, she uses the analogy of a pebble dropped into a pool of water. This monologue addresses suffering, the part of the tragic rhythm that Ferguson describes as passion.

Joan describes the pebble's point of entry as "you." If you were not at ground zero at the time of the attacks, then by that standard you are "OK." The first ring of ripples around the impact refer to the people that you know. If you didn't know someone who was directly killed in the attacks, then you are OK. The next outer ring refers to the suffering of the people you know. If you didn't know someone who knew someone who was killed in the attacks then you are OK. The final ring she addresses is refers to being a witness to the tragedy. She describes it by asking, "If you look at a flyer of a missing person in the subway and you start to lose it, are you OK?" (Nelson, *The Guys* 26) Joan never mentions knowing someone who died on September 11th nor does she mention knowing someone close to her who is dealing with the grief leaving the audience to assume that she is part of the final group. Joan is far removed from the tragedy, the epicenter of the ripples, but she still is on a ripple. She is still feeling the effects of the tragedy even though she wasn't involved directly or indirectly. This can be rationalized by Joan's perception.

Joan wasn't directly harmed by the events of September 11th, but she was affected by it enough to change her perception of the world. Whether it was her passion that led her to change her perception or perception that led her to change her passion can be debated. Keeping in mind that passion and suffering are linked in the tragic rhythm, the question becomes whether she suffered and that brought about new knowledge that led to her new perception or whether her new knowledge led to her to a kind of suffering. I would advocate that her change in perception came first. Perception is based in knowledge. Being a witness to the attacks gave her knowledge of them. This knowledge influenced her perception and that is what made her feel like she is suffering. Keeping in mind Burke's belief that all the parts of the tragic rhythm can be collapsed into a single moment, the other alternative is that perception and passion are occurring simultaneously. In that case, perception and passion are acting on each other over and over again with the shift caused by both of them constantly hitting against each other like two gears forcing each other to change. While it is likely that both passion and perception influence each other, Joan's perception started the process. Being a witness, gaining the knowledge of the attacks from a distance, is what changed her perception.

Joan's distance from the events contrasts with Nick who was more closely involved as he has lost many of his comrades. After writing the eulogy for Nick's best friend, Joan becomes very distraught and begins to cry. Nick begins to feel guilty for making Joan a medium for his grief, but Joan insists that she wants to continue working with Nick.

Nick: I come along and unload all this stuff on you, and now you're wrecked, too. I had no right to do that.

Joan: No, you don't understand.

Nick: You're hurting. This hurts you.

Joan: This is nothing, less than nothing, compared to what's happened to you.

Nick: That doesn't mean you should suffer.

(Nelson, *The Guys* 39)

Nick doesn't want to make Joan a part of his suffering because he doesn't want her to have to face the same pain that he is dealing with. Joan doesn't see it the same way. She wants to be involved. She doesn't want to be pushed out of the tragedy because she is feeling the effects of it. Nick apologizes for dragging her into the sorrow of the event. Her response is, "Was I outside of it? I don't want to be — not so far" (Nelson, *The Guys* 40). Her response does two things. It first asks the question if Joan is really removed from the situation at all. This brings back up the issue of whether or not Joan should be perceiving herself as a victim or not. Joan is a New Yorker and she sees this as an attack on her city and therefore an attack on her. The second thing her response does is tell the audience that she wants to be involved. Being involved may make her suffer, but suffering can be its own purpose. Beyond making her feel useful, being involved also means acknowledging the events that happened.

Both the concept of the tragedy being tied to the city and the need for acknowledging the events are elaborated on further when Joan recollects on her time as a journalist in South America to the audience. Being a writer who has met many different people informs her perception of the tragedy. Joan mentions that she met with Argentine writers some time after the attacks. There was one woman, whose son was one of the disappeared in the the Dirty War, who told Joan that she was glad that America had been attacked. She said that the Americans "had it

coming” (Nelson, *The Guys* 40.) Joan was shocked at the woman’s words and didn’t know how to respond. She wanted to tell the woman that the attacks were a terrible massacre and that it was a serious violation of human rights. Joan tells the audience, “I couldn’t wait to get back to New York. Where everyone understood” (Nelson, *The Guys* 41). To reference back to Joan’s ripple analogy, this Argentine woman is very far away from the epicenter, even further than Joan. She is so far removed from the tragedy that her perception is completely different than Joan’s. The Argentine woman isn’t troubled by the events on September 11th, but Joan is troubled by her indifference and offended by what Joan sees as disrespect for the victims. Joan wants to return home to New York where she knows that people will recognize the true nature of the tragedy as she perceives it.

Joan tells the audience that “People need to tell their stories” (Nelson, *The Guys* 40). This is true even in cases where sharing stories can be painful. She goes on to reference victims of torture in Chile who were unable to bring themselves to tell their families about what had happened to them. The victims did not want to cause the listeners pain by sharing their stories. The solution was to have the victims record their stories on tape recorders. This way, they were able to tell their stories without worrying about disturbing a listener with the grim details. This is prime example of the interactions of the tragic rhythm. The story tellers don’t want to make their listeners have to suffer from the knowledge gained from the stories. Still, there is a need for these stories to be told because it is cathartic for the victim. It can be inferred that this is the reason that she is sharing her story. She is looking for that catharsis.

Perhaps catharsis can be seen as a reason for why Nelson herself wrote the play, but her words seem to suggest that she has a larger purpose for it. On the effect of 9/11 on theatre,

Nelson said, “it may have deepened our writing culture, one that asks more questions, that demands more emotional authenticity, that takes a little less for granted” (Nelson, “Flying Blind, 26). This matches up with the ideas that expressed in Roman’s “Forum on Theatre and Tragedy.” There is a demand for work that has more questions than answers. *The Guys* succeeds on this front largely because it attempts to be a mirror for its audience. The New Yorkers that the show opened for are able to empathize with Joan’s questions about victimization and are likely to be asking the same questions. Relating to the audience and writing on a real event helps to create authentic emotions and provides a springboard for questioning how far tragedy reaches. The question shifts from what is the cause of the tragedy to who are the victims of the tragedy? There is no simple answer to that question when anyone can see themselves as a victim.

The next play I will be looking at moves far from the center of attack, but still the ripples can be felt.

***Recent Tragic Events* By Craig Wright**

While it is not without its gloomy moments, *Recent Tragic Events* is a comedic piece. The play does not take place in New York City or Washington, DC, instead taking place over a thousand miles away in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Recent Tragic Events was first produced in August 2002, almost an entire year after the play’s subject matter, by the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, DC. Wright’s fourth wall breaking comedy takes place on September 12th as a group of people come together to reflect on the previous day’s events while constantly being bombarded by images and sounds of the attacks on the television. The action takes place in Waverly’s apartment on the night of her

blind date with book store owner Andrew. The occasion is dampened by Waverly's inability to contact her twin sister Wendy who was in New York and may have just started a new job at the World Trade Center. The group is rounded out by Ron, Waverly's next door neighbor and aspiring rock star, Nancy, Ron's mute, pantless, would-be girlfriend, and author Joyce Carol Oates, portrayed by a sock puppet on Nancy's hand. A stage manager acts as observer and interpreter, interacting directly with the audience and calling the show as any stage manager would do.

Like *The Guys*, Wright's play lends itself to being analyzed through the lens of Burke and Ferguson's tragic rhythm and contemporary views on tragedy such as those brought up by Roman's "Forum of Theatre and Tragedy." The characters in the play are dealing with the change in perception brought about from the attacks and their attempts to find their purpose is shown in their ruminations where they try to make sense of the world.

The primary topic of discussion in *Recent Tragic Events* is inevitability. Wright tackles the theme rather bluntly in the conversations the characters have and by playing with the conventions of theatre. The characters spend much of the play playing drinking games while awaiting the ordained phone call that will reveal the fate of Waverly's sister. These friendly games turn hostile when an argument breaks out between Ron and Joyce over the nature of free will. Ron passionately argues that there is no such thing as free will. For him, the attacks on the World Trade Center were tragic, but in no way shocking.

Take a nation with the most hyperthyroid self-concept in the history of the world; kick everybody's ass for a hundred and fifty years; help plant a bunch of people on the other side of the world in the middle of a land

where nobody likes them, because you feel bad you didn't do anything about the Holocaust until it was too late, and then piss all over anyone in the Middle East who complains about it; build a pair of ultrafucking tall buildings in the most prominent city in the world, taller than almost like fucking anything, and do NOTHING to protect them from the air, in a world of billions of assholes; and then act surprised when something bad happens.

(Wright, *Tragic Events* 49)

Ron is attempting to come up with a chain of cause and effect to explain why September 11th happened. He cites examples of the United States' behavior across the 20th century and says that these aggressive acts made it obvious that one day someone would attack it. He is claiming that his knowledge is proof that the attacks were inevitable. What he is not regarding is everything that he does not know. Ron's knowledge takes into account a many things, but it is not entirely omniscient.

Joyce counters Ron's assertions and provides the opposite perspective in which she argues for free will. Joyce, a character portrayed by a performer using a sock puppet, memorably calls Ron a "puppet" (Wright, *Tragic Events* 50) for his overconfidence in determinism. Ron is offended that Joyce called him a puppet leading him to claim to be a human being. Joyce tells him that "human beings are free... They're free to make choices, free to say this or that, free to do this or that, free to fly planes into buildings, and free to help people who are hurt when it happens... Without freedom, Ron, there's no such thing as human nature" (Wright, *Tragic Events* 50-51). Joyce has clearly developed a very different perception than Ron. While Ron's

perception that the world must be deterministic is fueled by how history has played out, Joyce's perception that the world isn't deterministic is rooted in her belief in human nature. While history has made major decisions for people, it doesn't necessarily mean that individuals are not capable of controlling their own fate. Ron sees the attack as the inevitable consequence of decades of United States indulgence, but Joyce sees the terrorist's decision to attack the United States as yet another example of free will in action. The conflict between free will and determinism is also played with in the structure of the play.

The play opens with the stage manager walking on stage and selecting an audience member to flip a coin. The audience is told that the results of this coin flip will effect certain events that happen in the course of the show. A tone is sounded at times during the first act to indicate that an action that just happened was effected by the coin toss. Act two begins with the stage manager coming on stage once again to reveal the truth. The stage manager clarifies that she is a character and that the results of the coin toss were actually irrelevant. The audience is told that the play is prewritten, the actors are merely following a script, and that everything that happens in it has already been preplanned. The stage manager makes one final appearance at the close of the show. Whereas her other monologues are to the audience without the other characters present, the finale puts her in the action. The other guests have gone home leaving only Waverly and Andrew present. The stage manager begins calling sound and light cues to unseen board operators while narrating the action on stage. The stage manager cues the forlorn sound effect for the phone to ring and orders it to be played. She narrates every action the characters take before they make them. Waverly takes the phone to her room and Andrew

reluctantly enters when he hears Waverly begin to cry. The stage manager calls for a black out and the play comes to a close.

Wright's finale marks a powerful shift in perspective for the play. While the earlier appearances of the stage manager had her speaking directly to the audience, the closing of the show throws in some curve balls. The stage manager's monologue is for the benefit of the audience, but it is almost addressed to the characters. She is telling them what is going to happen before it happens, locking in their fate as characters fixed in a script.

Despite *Recent Tragic Events* being a fixed script without dynamic scenes and alternate endings and a stage manager that runs the world of the play, the play leaves plenty of room for the possibility of free will. The script's final moments are left up to interpretation without a definitive answer given to the audience whether Waverly's sister is alive or not. The audience in the end is left to decide whether Waverly's cries are tears of sadness from learning of her sister's death or tears of joys from finally hearing she is safe.

The Journal of American Theatre published a short article by Craig Wright called "The Question With No Answer." Wright reflects on his work and its central question of whether or not the world is deterministic by saying that the answer to that question does not exist. Wright tells us that the play is about the change perception that many Americans faced after 9/11, "As one of my characters says: 'Yesterday, I woke up and thought, 'What am I going to *do* with my life?' Today I woke up and thought, 'What's going to *happen* to me?'" That shift in perspective was what I wanted to dramatize" (Wright, "No Answer" 95). Wright recognizes 9/11 as a turning point in how people view the world and thus created the play to demonstrate this change. Wright

also recognizes that the new world that the characters live in isn't so much an entirely new world but one in which their perception has been altered.

Wright tells us that tragedy makes us reconsider our place in the world, it gives us a new perception. Wright says, "As a nation, we're still as addicted as ever to the cult of freedom and autonomy; witness our efforts to place even a portion of the blame for 9/11 within our own security systems, as if knowing that it was partly our fault would be somehow comforting—and it would be comforting to many, because it would shore up the illusion that we're in a system we can control" (Wright, "No Answer" 95). Wright argues that knowing that 9/11 was at least partially America's fault provides comfort to people because taking responsibility also means allowing the possibility of free will. If there was a specific reason for why it happened that means that it is possible that it could have been avoided. Of course, control is something that the characters in the play don't have. This doesn't mean that they can't have free will. The characters may not be able to control the world they live in, but they do have the power to find their own purpose.

The final play I will be looking at deals with a man who has a very specific purpose in a world whose shifting perception may have changed how he is seen.

***Anthems: Culture Clash in the District* by Richard Montoya**

The devised theatre group Culture Clash was already planning on doing a play about the nation's capital when the events of September 11th occurred (Montoya, "Tangled Patriotism"). Six days after the attacks Richard Montoya was in the city gathering material for the piece. Typically Montoya writes with his partners in the group, but the wives of the other members of

the Los Angeles based group would not let their husbands travel so close to the attacks that had left not just New York but also Washington, DC scarred. The scenarios present in the play are from research that Montoya conducted by meeting with people in the city as he became what he calls a “forensic poet” (Montoya, *Anthems* 186). *Anthems: Culture Clash in the District* opened on September 2nd, 2002 at the Arena Stage in Washington, DC (Montoya, *Anthems* 156).

Anthems opens at the National Zoo with a chain smoking gay panda by the name of Tian Tian ranting to the audience about his lack of desire to mate with his female companion. Tian Tian sees himself as a metaphor for DC, a patchwork bear of black and white for a black and white city. After Tian Tian’s prologue the focus of the play shifts to The Writer, a stand in for Montoya. The Writer’s journey begins in Los Angeles at LAX where he meets Ben Bull, a grief counselor from Arlington, Texas. Ben Bull hears about The Writer’s mission and advises him to find an “anthem,” some kind of encompassing call to solidarity for “the regular guys” (Montoya, *Anthems* 162). In DC, The Writer meets with a large variety of locals including an Arab cab driver named Mohammed, members of Congress, and jazz singers. His search for this “anthem” causes him to examine in depth the citizens of Washington, DC while simultaneously exploring his own identity.

The Writer’s search for an anthem makes up the throughline of the play. The search is a difficult one and composing it is no simple task. As a grief counselor, Ben Bull wants an anthem that can follow all the requiems and dirges that are going to be made to memorialize the victims. Ben Bull asks him to, “make sure there is an anthem for us. Not just a call to war but an anthem, and I am not talking about a ‘National Anthem’ necessarily or an anthem for the government or kings and queens, you understand. But an anthem for the regular guys. And make it

continuous” (Montoya, *Anthems* 162). The Writer is not sure how to respond to this because it is asking for so much. Essentially, Ben Bull is asking The Writer to come up with something to say after the dust has settled on the tragic events of September 11th. This is similar but different than the way that contemporary plays portray tragedy. This isn’t exactly the same as the inability to find a direct cause of the tragedy as The Writer isn’t trying to explain why the terrorist attacks happened, but it does have the same problems of trying to narrow down what is important. The residents of DC have a new perception of the world after the attacks and The Writer is tasked with identifying that new city character. This quickly becomes problematic as the question is so open ended. There are many different perceptions in the city so it is difficult to narrow it down to a single perspective.

What Ben Bull is asking of The Writer is to create an anthem that has universality for the people of DC. When The Writer asks Ben Bull what he means by “continuous,” Ben Bull responds, “You are me and I am you. You have to be me, you must be me. I must be you. There have been a thousand deaths a thousand times this week... a thousand faces we will never know, yet we know who they are because they are us and we are them” (Montoya, *Anthems* 162). Ben Bull’s answer speaks to the compassion that people have for each other and the universality of humanity. When Ben Bull evokes the victims, he is reminding the audience that we feel empathy for them because they are not so different from us. A continuous anthem must speak for everyone.

After meeting dozens of characters in DC, The Writer begins to realize that creating an anthem is an exhaustingly difficult process, if not completely impossible. On a visit to the Vietnam War Memorial, The Writer bring an old war veteran who attempts to rise out of his

wheelchair and breaks down crying. Not knowing what to do, The Writer slowly wheels the vet away while remembering Ben Bull's words, "Give us that anthem, son. Make it continuous" (Montoya, *Anthems* 183). From here, The Writer goes into a series of short scenes where he struggles to find the words for the anthem he needs.

The Writer appears on stage with a bag of shredded documents and The Writer looks through the shredded documents he has, destroyed documents from federal sources, and muses that perhaps "our anthem may lay somewhere in this pile of shredded documents" (Montoya, *Anthems* 184). In the documents, The Writer finds an interview he conducted with a Panamanian man who was took great pleasure in the attacks on The United States. The Panamanian's interview ends with him saying, "Muerte a los Americanos," meaning 'death to Americans' (Montoya, *Anthems* 184). The Writer immediately responds by rather satirically by saying that he couldn't put that on stage because it is so blatantly hateful. The next document The Writer reads from includes an excerpt from an interview he had with a Hard Hat Guy. The Hard Hat Guy's monologue contrasts strongly with the Panamanian's and emphasizes that it is not alright to talk badly about America because it is disrespectful to the victims. Putting these two sharply dichotomous accounts right next to each other showcases how difficult creating a 'continuous' or 'universal' anthem really is. This is a problem caused by opposing perceptions. The knowledge that is informing the Panamanian is different than the knowledge that is informing the Hard Hat Guy.

The Writer has to find a way to include the voices of everyone, including those who see the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon as being justifiable while also including the voices of those who feel deep compassion for the victims of the tragedy. The next interview the

writer finds is one he had with a mother who immigrated from West Africa in hopes of finding a better life but still struggles financially. The Writer reminisces on this and says, “Some people need jobs more than they need anthems, Ben” (Montoya, *Anthems* 186). The woman’s story combined with The Writer’s disillusioned line goes beyond the search for a universal anthem and questions what good having one would really do. The Writer describes what he’s done up to this point as not comprehensive. He tells the audience, “I’m just picking up little bits here, like a Forensic poet, but it’s not adding up to anything close to an anthem” (Montoya, *Anthems* 186). The Writer sees what he’s been doing as almost insignificant. He has talked to many people and done a lot of research, but he still doesn’t think he is anywhere near putting together a complete anthem.

When the time comes to give the anthem, The Writer feels he has failed. In a five page lyrical speech, The Writer attempts to bring about a continuous anthem. This anthem bounces through topics of history, pop culture, current events, politics, and The Writer’s own personal ancestry. Near the beginning of his speech, The Writer says the words he is about to say “won’t be enough” (Montoya, *Anthems* 207) and later in the speech admits, “I cannot find it” and “I have failed you badly” (Montoya, *Anthems* 211). The reasons for his failure is exactly because of the attempt to make the ‘anthem’ continuous. The lyrics that The Writer has picked out are full of contradictions and paradoxes and therefore it doesn’t have the universal qualities that The Writer believed Ben Bull was requesting. After delivering his imperfect anthem, The Writer tries to call Ben Bull and asks him, “Did you mean an anthem for the entire nation, an anthem for New York City, an anthem for Flight 93 or an anthem just for the District? That would be helpful with the continuous thing” (Montoya, *Anthems* 213). The Writer here has identified the problem of scope.

The reason he is having difficulty is because he is attempting to create a statement that is true for everyone. While he did initially begin his journey with the intent of trying to characterize DC, the recent political climate has challenged him to potentially go beyond that. The broader he tries to cast his net, the less his ability to accurately represent everyone and be ‘continuous.’ Ben Bull never returns The Writer’s call and leaves him without an answer. What The Writer does get to experience after leaving Ben Bull a message is a series of panda-masked court room attendants who demand to know where the voices of the unrepresented are in his anthem. After a baby panda uses sign language to ask him why deaf people weren’t represented, The Writer responds, “I don’t understand you. I don’t understand this place at all...” (Montoya, *Anthems* 214). The Writer’s need to encompass everything in his search for an anthem has left him unable to formulate any ideas at all. He has opened up his mind so wide that he has lost the ability to say anything because he realizes that nothing he says can be all encompassing.

In the end, The Writer considers that perhaps the anthem he is looking for doesn’t have words. Perhaps it is just the sounds of the city. Author Richard Montoya told the *Journal of American Theatre* in his article, “Tangled Patriotism” that, “despite our eagerness as artists and playwrights to console and articulate, Culture Clash must remain a somewhat detached chronicler of these strange and dangerous times. we may find that anthem, but it may not be a song—it might just be the sound of the metro train or Billie or Miles’s horn” (Montoya, *Tangled Patriotism* 25). Montoya’s view here is that even though artists and writers like Culture Clash are tempted to come up with words to describe what they see, they need to make sure that they are being observant and not putting too much of themselves into their writing. This is quite an ironic statement for Montoya to make as he has literally written himself into his play. Montoya deals

with the issue of identity in *Anthem*s by showing the audience how the perception of Middle Eastern Americans like himself changed after September 11th.

The tragedy of 9/11 brought about a shift in perception of people who looked Middle Eastern. The knowledge that the terrorists were of Arab descent led to an outbreak of negative attitudes towards people who appeared to be Middle Eastern. This shift in perception is dramatized in *Anthem*s by the character Mohammed and The Writer himself. The Writer gets into Mohammed's cab at the airport after arriving in DC and right after he gets into the cab Mohammed says, "I will not be an apologist for my people. I do not speak officially for my people" (Montoya, *Anthem*s 168). Mohammed immediately comes off as defensive and brings up the race issue. All of a sudden, the attacks have made being Middle Eastern topical and Mohammed springs right into a conversation about it. Mohammed barely lets The Writer get in a word edgewise and tells him a story about how a man accosted him with questions about his relationship to Osama bin Laden. Mohammed tells The Writer, "He look at me very strange, I could feel his anger to me. I feel less than a human being. I not blame him. Never. Fear him yes, blame him no. Was he going to hurt me? I don't know. He ask again. At that moment, I was so scared, I pray... I finally say to him no, no sir, I not related to bin Laden" (Montoya, *Anthem*s 169). Mohammed's story both shows the sudden negative change in perception towards Middle Easterners in America and shows Mohammed's take on the man's perception. Mohammed tells The Writer that he did not blame the man for asking his question even though it made him feel very uncomfortable. Mohammed does not clarify why he doesn't blame the man, but it is possible that Mohammed isn't being judgemental towards the man because he understands where he is coming from. While Mohammed doesn't think it is right that he should be accosted for his

racial background, he still acknowledges that this man's perception has been altered to see him as a potential threat. Later on, both Mohammed and The Writer experience exaggerated scenarios that satirize the persecution of Middle Easterners in America.

In the scene "Mohammed goes to the MCI Center" Mohammed experiences racial profiling that is quite different from the racial profiling that the United States has been more known for. When Mohammed arrives at the football game he is immediately called over by a security guard who gives him a thorough frisking and strip search. During this process the security guard waves past a white man with a shotgun, a black man waving a pistol, and a "Homeboy" in a bandanna with a knife (Montoya, *Anthem* 204-205). This scene simultaneously satirizes the change in perception of Middle Eastern Americans and highlights the gross indignities that they are being put through. Whereas before people brandishing weapons along with black Americans were prone to discrimination, the tragedy of 9/11 changed the perception of Middle Easterners to be a bigger threat. This is parodied to the laughable extreme that a Middle Eastern man dressed in Redskins apparel is more threatening than men wielding weapons. The scene in which The Writer is persecuted for his racial background is far less comic.

After The Writer fails to find the anthem that he has been searching for, the scene changes to The Writer on trial. The lawyers in the courtroom wear panda masks and The Writer shifts into a new character, Moussaoui. Moussaoui appears to be based on Zacarias Moussaoui, the man tried and eventually convicted by the United States for conspiring in the September 11th attacks. The Writer as Moussaoui tells the court, "I am a terrorist in your eyes. As terrorism is like beauty, it is in the eye of the beholder... I am a member of Al Qaeda, your honor, but that

does not put me on those planes” (Montoya, *Anthems* 212). The comparison to beauty shows how much perception has to do with labeling someone. The character Moussaoui confesses to being a member of Al Qaeda but draws the distinction that membership to the group does not make him responsible for the group’s crimes. This parallels Mohammed’s earlier point that just because he is Middle Eastern does not make him a terrorist. The actions of a few members of a group have changed the perception of that group as a whole.

Anthems succeeds in demonstrating the post 9/11 world because of its strong central question and its method of tackling identity. The problems of attempting to create a unifying anthem are in line with the goal of contemporary writers to create open ended questions and the change in perception to Middle Easterners demonstrates the way tragedy can reshape how people view the world even when the world itself has not actually changed significantly.

Conclusion

The three plays examined in this paper are reactions to the world at a very specific time in history. They carry with them a certain quality that allows us to look at how writers have tried to put not the tragic events of September 11th on stage, but the consequential aftermath of the events. Transformation is a key element of Kenneth Burke’s theory of tragedy and it is clear that September 11th was an event that shocked the country and called for a reexamination of the world that we live in. The plays looked at here are plays designed for their audiences. These plays, all having been written, produced, and first performed less than a year after September 11th, 2001 are far from perfect. Perhaps hastily thrown together, the plays here probably will not be going down in history as masterpieces.

In his *New York Times* review of *The Guys*, Bruce Weber said, “though no one, I think, would describe it as an artful or literary piece (though it has its moments, believe me), it has the impact -- half-relieving, half-agonizing -- of a chill salve on an open wound” (Weber E1). Weber criticizes the play for falling short as a literary piece but admits that it is able to overcome its shortcomings because of its subject matter. He goes on to say, “For the time being, the pull is considerable for a number of reasons. One is that Ms. Nelson is obviously a thoughtful and feeling citizen of the sort that most New Yorkers would count themselves among. Joan, the editor, is clearly the author's stand-in and, as a result, ours, too; she is someone whose circumstances virtually everyone in the audience intimately understands” (Weber E1). The relatability of the subject matter to the audience is what makes it a strong piece in the end. The character Joan asks the same questions and experiences the same emotions that those in the audience will be asking and feeling.

Likewise, Culture Clash's *Anthems* has also been met with criticism of its literary content while still being praised for its ability to happen just when the audience needed it most. Peter Marks of the *Washington Post* thought the play pulled too many punches and overall wasn't as edgy as it tried to be. Among the things that Marks didn't like was the framing of the story with the search for the anthem, a device he felt was weak compared to how well developed many of the characters were. While Marks found many of the monologues and skits to fall flat or be underdeveloped, he still described it overall as, “A well-written evening of vignettes about the quirky characters, changing demographics and contemporary folkways of the capital, the show is practically programmed to be a crowd-pleaser. It goes down very easily, a milkshake for the soul... *Anthems* is one for the home team” (Marks, “Home Crowd” C01). Once again, we see that

part of the reason the play is so well received is because it plays to its audience so well. It is a play that is tailor made for citizens of Washington, DC.

Craig Wright's *Recent Tragic Events* is a bit of an outlier in this case. While it asks relevant questions about the post 9/11 world like *The Guys* and *Anthem*s, it isn't as inherently tied to its setting as they are. *Recent Tragic Events* takes place in Minneapolis and premiered in Washington, DC while the other two shows premiered in the cities that they took place in. Minneapolis is not a character in the play the way New York and Washington, DC are in their respective plays. This arguably gives the play more universal appeal as it becomes more about the people who are disconnected from the events. As Peter Marks of the *Washington Post* said, "Experiencing the play... is like hearing a volcano erupting on the other side of an island, and feeling both utterly insulated and hopelessly vulnerable" (Marks, "Date with Destiny" C01). Marks praised the play for asking just the right questions and probing the audience to consider just what is controlling their lives.

None of the trio discussed here seeks to dramatize the events of that morning. *Recent Tragic Events* takes place the next day, *The Guys* takes place the next week, and *Anthem*s takes place in the weeks following the terrorist attacks. By putting some distance from the attacks, the authors are able to have their characters reflect on the change in perception that has happened since. Part of this is trying to discover what the new normal is. For Joan of *The Guys*, the search for normalcy involves the search for a role to play. Joan wants above all else to feel useful after the tragic events that have transpired. In *Recent Tragic Events*, the search for normalcy is linked directly to the play's central theme, determinism. So close to the attacks, the characters do not yet know what the new normal is going to be. It is clear that life has something planned, but what

exactly is yet to be fully revealed. *Anthems'* take on the change in normalcy is linked to questions of cultural identity. This is most clear with the characters of The Writer and Mohammed who as being Middle Eastern have suddenly become the national enemy overnight.

All of the plays also opt to ask questions that are open ended. In this way, they distinguish themselves from classical scholarship on tragedy which strives for simplicity in answers. Each of these plays tell us that the answers to the questions we are asking can't necessarily be found. *The Guys* asks open ended questions by simply looking at the events of that morning and asking, "why?" Never does Nelson attempt to provide an answer for why the events happened, only that they did happen and caused so much suffering is necessary. *Recent Tragic Events* uses discussions of determinism to make the audience question whether the attacks or anything else that has happened were truly inevitable. By leaving the ending up to interpretation, Wright reminds us that we can never know whether something was completely unpreventable. *Anthems* blatantly tells us that answers won't always be found with The Writer's quest for a universal anthem. In the end, he is unable to create a satisfying all encompassing answer.

Stepping away from Burke's definition of tragedy and the conception of tragedy today, all of the plays also deal heavily with the question of victimization. One of the issues that bothers Joan so much in *The Guys* is whether or not she has the right to feel victimized by the attacks. *Recent Tragic Events* distances itself from the locations of the plane crashes but still makes it clear that even in Minneapolis people are engaged in the emotional trauma of the attacks. *Anthems* reminds us that Washington, DC is the "forgotten ground zero." Each of them says, "you know, maybe this is about me, where do I fit in here?" It is likely that because the shows

are so open to the possibility that an event like 9/11 can create victims beyond those directly involved that the plays were so well received by their audiences.

In his book, *Performing History*, Freddie Rokem said, “theatre can seduce us to believe that it is possible for the actor to become a witness for the now dead witnesses” (Rokem xii). While there might not be enough time between us and 9/11 for it to be considered history, the question of the actor as a witness is still relevant. The actors in these plays do play characters who are witnesses to tragedy, but most importantly, the plays invite the audience to also acknowledge their own involvement as living witnesses to tragedy.

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