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## Introduction: Stages of mortality

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### In memoriam

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It is Saturday afternoon on 1 April 2017. I am in a private performance and exhibition space in Exeter called ‘The Cart Shed’, a small brick building in a courtyard tucked off a quiet, residential road.<sup>1</sup> The building has no signage. You would not know it is used for art events unless you were told about it. I have been invited to attend a performance created by a colleague, Pam Woods, who has called the piece a ‘short little something’ in memory of her partner’s mother, Helen, who died two years ago on this date. I briefly reflect on the slightly comical circumstance of dying on Fool’s Day. I decide not to make this a topic of conversation.

The audience comprises six people. We all know one another. The performance area has been simply arranged, creating the impression of a living room – possibly an older person’s living room. There is an old-fashioned standing lamp, which is lit; some flowers; a hot-water bottle; a half-full bottle of brandy and a brandy glass on a side-table; a small electric fire that looks toasty warm; and several large, knitted jumpers (sweaters) that are variously wrapped around a low chair, suspended from the ceiling on a hanger, and hung on a wall. Pam welcomes us, thanks us for coming, and begins the piece. An audio track is played on

a laptop. From a speaker on a wall comes a surprisingly deep, resonant voice of an older woman with a Northumbrian accent. This, I presume, is Helen.

I know virtually nothing about Helen. Prior to being invited to this event several days ago, I had been unaware of her existence. Now, sitting in the Cart Shed and listening to the recording, I am captivated by her vocalisations. She is 'chuntering'. Pam has taught me this word. It's a British colloquialism, meaning to mutter or mumble to oneself. I look it up in the dictionary afterward. To 'chunter' can also mean to 'grumble' and 'find fault', but that isn't what Helen is doing. On the contrary, she sounds completely cheerful and content. She's making a kind of 'mouth music' – nonsense sounds, syncopated rhythms – effortlessly and fluidly. She appears to be keeping herself happy by making these sounds, and they are delightful to hear. (You can listen to an excerpt of Helen's vocalisations on SoundCloud.)<sup>2</sup> Her voice fills the space. I later learn she was unaware she was being recorded. She was not self-consciously performing at the time, but she is figuratively performing for us now. I think of Winnie, from Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days*, chattering away, despite being half-buried (and then nearly fully buried), grave-like, in a mound of earth. 'Oh this is going to be another happy day!' Winnie exclaims (1963: 14).

Pam shares the space with Helen's voice. She listens to it along with us, reacts to it, moves in sympathy with it. She unfolds jumpers that Helen knitted for her son, Ian (Pam's partner), who is also in attendance. Pam holds the jumpers close and puts them on, somehow managing to wear several of them at once. The mood is playful. We laugh at a funny sound or sentence Helen has uttered and smile along with Pam. A bird warbles, but I can't tell if the sound is on the recording or from outside. A clock ticks. My sense of time and place blurs slightly. Ian's voice is heard on the recording, asking Helen if she is content; he encourages her to have another drink. Helen accepts, and gently drifts along a stream of consciousness. *'Lovely boy ... Oh, get off my bloody toe! ... Oh dear, that's nice, isn't it? Very nice. Sitting on the grass and then waiting for the flowers to bloom. ... Y'see, I can't see now. Oh, well. It doesn't matter. You can put the eyes in my eyes. ... Fair enough, fair enough. And I'm goin' home now. So, good night, good night ...'* Pam drinks some brandy and raises a glass to Helen, who keeps chuntering to herself, merrily.

I find all this quite moving. I notice my breathing has become shallow and more rapid. This surprises me. I am not usually emotionally affected by performance so readily. Why should I be feeling sad about Helen? I didn't know her. And she sounds like she lived to a



**0.1** The setting for *In Memory of Helen* – a private performance piece devised by Pam Woods in memory of Helen Cumming (1916–2015)

good age. This must be the result of tiredness, I tell myself. I hadn't sleep well the night before, and it's the end of what has felt like a long academic term. But there's more to it than that. I am specially primed to be affected by this performance, I reason. After all, I've been thinking about death and theatre for a while now, and have recently begun work on a new chapter of this book. Moreover, it has not been long since my father died, and it occurs to me I might be having a ripple effect of grieving – one of those sudden emotional swells that can overwhelm, though I had thought such disturbances had passed. Yes, this must be it. I had, to some extent, swapped Helen for my father – Helen, whom Pam is *not* performing, but whose voice is resounding in the space, and whose empty garments are laid out on the floor, with no body inside them, as though the owner had been raptured (see Figure 0.1). I had effected 'surrogation', Joseph Roach's term for the process through which culture reproduces and re-creates itself. 'In the life of a community', Roach writes, 'the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitute the social fabric' (1996: 2). Surrogation also works on an individual level. After my father's death, lines from Patrick Kavanagh's poem 'Memory of My Father', which I had studied at school, had rattled around my brain:

Every old man I see  
 In October-coloured weather  
 Seems to say to me:  
 'I was once your father.'

(Martin, 1969: 194)

Additionally, several weeks prior to attending the performance in memory of Helen, I had heard, for the first time, an old reel-to-reel recording of my father in which he converses with my siblings and me when we were children. Perhaps, during the performance in memory of Helen, I had subconsciously been thinking about this other recording, which I had listened to closely, repeatedly, for several days, captivated by this sonic record of my distant, personal past. In my acts of listening I resembled Beckett's Krapp, playing back old tape recordings of himself and saying 'Spoooool!' with a '[happy] smile' (1957: 12).

After the performance, we talked about Helen, and then, sipping prosecco, delicately discussed the topic of death, sharing our thoughts and concerns. Pam said she was 'holding the space' for Helen during the performance. Technically, of course, Helen was not present. She was not there. However, in a way, she was also 'not not there', to riff on Richard Schechner's formulation of the liminal, double-negative state of the actor in performance ('not me ... not not me'). Actors performing characters are 'not themselves', Schechner writes, 'nor are they the characters they impersonate' (2002: 64). Instead, they are something (or someone?) in-between. Similarly, this piece had – in a manner of speaking – conjured Helen (back) into being through a combination of factors: the recording of her voice; the inclusion of items of clothing she had made; the arrangement of the performance space; Pam's sensitive playing of that space as she responded to her invisible 'scene partner'; and a small audience of sympathetic, engaged attendants. *This is what theatre can do*, I reminded myself, *and this is why you're writing this book*.

This piece, touching in its simplicity, illustrates how theatre allows us to memorialise the dead and make them feel present to us, even if we are generating this feeling ourselves.<sup>3</sup> Theatre can help us to fulfil a psychological – and maybe a spiritual – need to connect to the dead, and, by extension, to contemplate death and ponder our mortality. This may seem like a grand or even pretentious-sounding pronouncement to make, especially in the context of a short, simple piece performed once for a small audience of invited guests. Nonetheless, obscure, 'poor theatre'-style work can be noteworthy and revealing (see Grotowski, 1969). The small-scale, semi-ritualistic, and bare-bones aesthetic of

the performance in memory of Helen resembles this type of theatre. Moreover, this piece achieved in miniature what many dramatists and theatre-makers strive to effect through more compositionally dense and intricate means – namely, to evoke the dead and provoke reconsideration of personal mortality. There is a nexus between theatre and death: an interchange of absence and presence, ‘ghosting’ from the past in the present, conjuring of the inanimate through the animate, and reminder of our mortality in moments of experiencing live performance with people who are with us – and sometimes remembering people who have ‘passed’ – as time slips by. Some people appreciate this about the art form; others shy away from it. Notably, there is a long list of dramatists and theatre-makers from the late nineteenth century onward – artists who have been called ‘modern’ or ‘modernist’ – who have experimented with the ‘deathly’ dynamics and potential of the live theatrical event.

This book addresses the topic of how the dead are memorialised in theatre, but this is not its sole focus. Rather, it investigates how a range of Western dramatists and theatre-makers from the late nineteenth century onward have explored historically informed ideas about death and dying in their work, often by way of formal invention, symbolism, and fantasy. My goal is to analyse representation of death and dying in drama and theatre from this period by finding salient points of connection between plays, productions, and sociohistorical contexts. I consider how modern dramatists, theatre-makers, and audience members use theatre to meditate on the end of life, querying how this functions and what it means. First, though, the theoretical nexus between theatre and death, adumbrated above, must be fleshed out.

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## Theatre: a deathly art?

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Theatre is more commonly associated with liveliness than with death or dying. If one were playing a word association game, and one person said ‘theatre’, the other person would probably not say ‘death’ or anything like it (unless one were morbidly inclined, or writing a book on the subject!). And yet, the language of death is part of the performance vernacular. An actor who breaks character is said to have ‘corpsed’ (in British slang). A performer may be encouraged to ‘knock ’em dead’. An actor or stand-up comedian who performs badly may be said to have ‘died’ onstage. If they perform well, they might claim to have ‘killed it’. A remounting of a production is called a ‘revival’.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, on the

level of content, death and dying feature throughout world drama, both as theme and plot point, but then death may be thought to underlie lots of culture in one way or other, so can one say it has a unique association with theatre?<sup>5</sup>

There is a long-standing tradition in Western theatre of presenting death in character form as part of a *dramatis personae*. (*Alceste*, by Euripides, is an early example.) Granted, personification of death – as a skeleton, or a shrouded figure with a scythe, for instance – features in other art-forms too, including film.<sup>6</sup> However, in theatre one can be in a shared space with an embodiment of death. It is qualitatively different to encounter a personification of death by a human performer in theatre than in a piece of visual art or in a literary work. In the latter cases, ‘Death’ does not have real flesh and blood. ‘Death’ does not breathe. ‘Death’ cannot literally return your gaze if you look at her or him. When ‘Death’ appears before us in theatre, we encounter an uncanny spectacle: a corporealisation of an abstraction – a living, breathing *memento mori*. This can provide a special thrill (see Figure 0.2). When an actor portrays Death, their sex and gender are typically mapped on to the character,



0.2 Orpheus (Conor Lovett) beholds Death (Bernadette Cronin) in Steeple Theatre Company's 2000 production of *Orpheus* (after Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*) at the Granary Theatre, Cork, directed by Regina Crowley

or otherwise inform how the character is interpreted, thus potentially making the idea of death seem (more) human and familiar. Acting the role of Death invariably involves using social conventions, cultural associations, performative actions, and ideological formations relating to sex and gender – reinforcing or subverting them.<sup>7</sup> Characterising death in drama as a sexed or gendered entity is not incidental and should not simply be dismissed as an inevitable feature of using human actors. Embodying death does ‘cultural work’ and may be ideologically loaded. One might expect that the act of personifying death in character form would have permanently fallen out of fashion at some point, given its ostensible preposterousness and association with fairy-tales and superstition, but death continues to appear in personified form in theatre into the twenty-first century. This device has – quite literally – got legs.

Nevertheless, presenting death and dying onstage can be contentious and difficult to achieve satisfactorily. In some quarters, representations of death and dying in theatre are regarded dubiously or wryly. In a treatise on drama published in 1668, John Dryden advises against representing dying onstage, because such efforts invariably miss the mark and prompt unwanted laughter:

I have observ'd that in all our Tragedies, the Audience cannot forbear laughing when the Actors are to die; 'tis the most Comick part of the whole Play. All *passions* may be lively represented on the Stage ... but there are many *actions* which can never be imitated to a just height: dying especially is a thing which none but a *Roman* Gladiator could naturally perform upon the Stage when he did not imitate or represent, but naturally do it; and therefore it is better to omit the representation of it. (1971: 39–40)

*Hearing* a verbal report of death works better, Dryden suggests, so long as the report does not offend one's sensibilities (presumably by its length or content). He continues: ‘When we see death represented we are convinc'd it is but Fiction; but when we hear it related, our eyes (the strongest witnesses) are wanting, which might have undeceiv'd us; and we are all willing to favour the sleight when the Poet does not too grossly impose upon us’ (*ibid.*: 40).

Dryden's comments about the difficulty of performing dying onstage, and the adverse reactions it may provoke, still have purchase centuries later, especially in the context of realist theatre, in which mimetic failure may diminish or suspend the reality effect.<sup>8</sup> It can indeed be amusing, and even fascinating, to observe an actor play dead by appearing not to breathe, or by visibly breathing despite their character's death, then perhaps surreptitiously rising and exiting during a blackout, or

otherwise being dragged off by an actor or stagehand.<sup>9</sup> In his spoof book on amateur acting, Michael Green advises actors to be sure to die in a comfortable position and avoid being shown 'dead' onstage for too long (see Figure 0.3): 'My advice to the aspiring body is to die behind something and then have a good sleep. If one is in view there is always the danger of heavy breathing or even a sneeze, apart from the strain of having to lie still' (1964: 56).

Tom Stoppard makes the actor's craft of dying part of the comic fodder and philosophical exploration of death in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966). The character of the Player says '[there's] nothing more unconvincing than an unconvincing death', but claims dying is what actors do best; it is their 'talent' (1967: 55, 60).<sup>10</sup> Guildenstern dismisses the idea that actors know anything meaningful about the 'real' nature of death, which he conceptualises in terms of non-appearance:

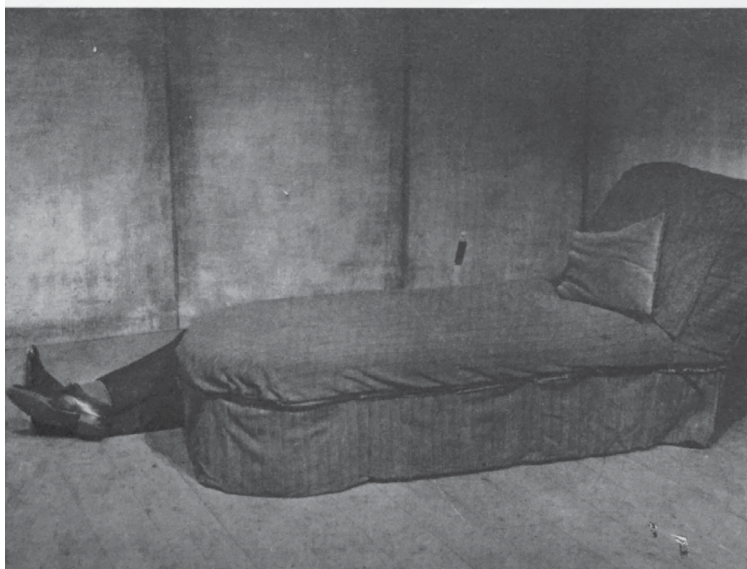
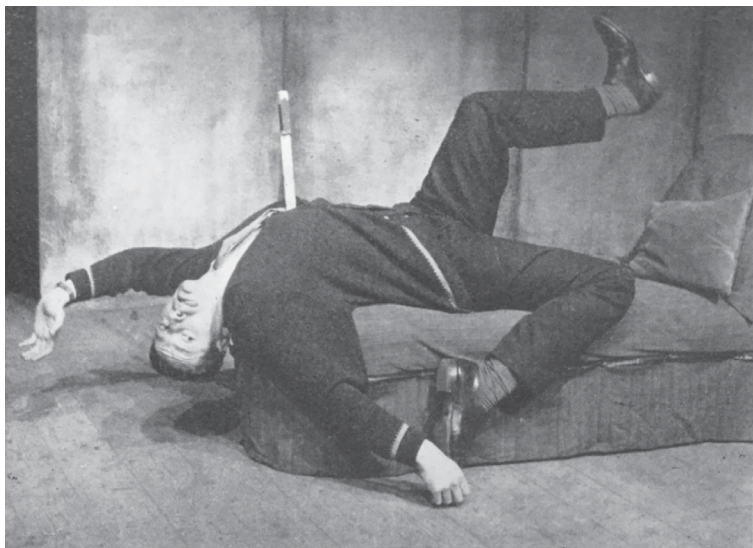
... you can't act death. The fact of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen – it's not gasps and blood and falling about – that isn't what makes it death. It's just a man failing to reappear, that's all – now you see him, now you don't, that's the only thing that's real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back – an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death. (*ibid.*: 61–2)

Guildenstern decries the actors' efforts at portraying death, but he still falls for the Player's performance of dying after Guildenstern stabs him with what turns out to be a prop knife. In this play, Stoppard celebrates theatrical conventions of dying while broaching a conceptual understanding of death as a state of non-existence, which is more difficult to grasp and thus harder to represent.

Aesthetic considerations (*vis-à-vis* taste) and practical challenges have not prevented dramatists from scripting scenes involving dying characters and dead bodies, or from treating the topic of death. Some have taken this to an extreme: for example, in Eugène Ionesco's *Jeux de massacre* (*Killing Game*, 1970), characters drop dead in huge numbers over the course of the play because of an epidemic. The stage is rife with corpses.<sup>11</sup> But even in genres where onstage death is rare, such as Ancient Greek tragedy, verbal reports of death are delivered. Death is still 'present' in these plays even if a character's final moments are not shown (see Macintosh, 1994).

Theorists writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have noted theatre's 'deathly' aspects. Herbert Blau was a major proponent of the idea that theatre is intimately and profoundly connected





*Above:*

Wrong way to die. This pose is impossible to hold. Also the knife will slowly teeter to the floor.

*Below:*

Right way to die. All is ease and comfort.

**0.3** Extract from *The Art of Coarse Acting* (1964) by Michael Green

with death and dying. He makes numerous observations of this kind in his writings, repeatedly returning to the idea that, as a living being, the actor in performance is metaphorically 'dying' – is subject to the passage of time – in front of one's eyes, thereby affecting one's perception of the art-form. He considers the spectator's awareness of the actor's mortality a 'universal' of performance, despite 'the myriad of ways in which the history of performance has been able to disguise or displace that elemental fact' (1990b: 267). Blau suggests one may be captivated by the act of witnessing the (mortal) human actor in theatre, even if this is not thematically foregrounded in the performance. 'When we speak of what Stanislavski called Presence in acting', writes Blau, 'we must also speak of Absence, the dimensionality of time through the actor, the fact that he who is performing can die there in front of your eyes; is in fact doing so. Of all the performing arts, the theater stinks most of mortality' (1982: 83). Arguably, circus, with its 'death-defying' (and, sometimes, death-causing) aerial feats, or high-risk performance art, where a performer can literally die in front of your eyes, might more readily be considered the performing art most redolent of mortality, but Blau is referring to theatre's ability to connote mortality ideationally and sensorially in its basic apparatus. Per Blau's proposition, theatre does not have to feature death-defying feats for it to evoke mortality powerfully; theoretically, it can do so if participants are suitably mindful of it.<sup>12</sup>

Blau highlights the bodily reality of a performance event where people are co-present in a shared physical space. 'In the theater, if we think about it, we breathe each other, giving and taking life', Blau muses (*ibid.*: 86). Blau worked with actors from the experimental group KRAKEN on psychophysiological exercises that aimed to heighten consciousness of their biology and mortality, instructing them: 'You are living in your breathing. Stop. Think. You are dying in your breathing. Stop. Think. You are living in your breathing. You are dying in your breathing. You are living in your dying, dying in your living' (*ibid.*). For this to count as theatre, an actor had to *show* these ostensibly oppositional states 'through the radiance of inner conviction' (*ibid.*). Elsewhere, Blau writes about (imaginatively) seeing the famous Italian actor Eleonora Duse (who died in 1924, two years before Blau was born) convey 'dying' in performance via facial expression and conscious intent. Blau does not say Duse, in his imagining, was performing a character who was dying; Duse ostensibly conveyed the *idea* of her own dying, in passing, through her self-awareness and technical skill:

I have always retained (from I know not where) an image of [Duse] in perfect stillness, then something passing over her face like the faintest show

of thought, not the play of a nerve, *only thought*, and you would suddenly know she was dying. I mean dying right there, *actually*, articulating the dying, with a radiance of apprehension so breathtaking that, in the rhythm of your breathing, you could hardly escape your own death. (1990b: 267)

Blau appears to be writing speculatively here.<sup>13</sup> This is closer to performance fiction than performance analysis, and it might be thought to indicate how meaning is *projected on to* a performer, in line with one's own ideas and fancies, rather than what a performer might aim to communicate. Yet, this does not invalidate the impression that theatre can evoke intimations of mortality through imaginative encounters between performers and audience members.

Blau says there is something in the 'Imaginary' of theatre that 'makes death *present*', if only notionally, and it is the actor's 'vocation' to make this happen (1990a: 137, 138). Interestingly, he believes the 'smell of mortality' (a phrase he borrows from *King Lear*) may be detected in theatre even in the absence of an onstage performer: 'you can smell it in the wings, that smell of mortality' (2011: 100). Apparently, the mere suggestion of bodily presence in theatre is enough to prompt consideration of mortality. For Blau, mortality functions as a type of theatrical dark matter. He calls it 'the unseeable substance of theater, there, not there, which in the consciousness of its vanishing endows it [theatre] with Life' (*ibid.*). This is a curious, seemingly contradictory proposition, recalling Peggy Phelan's (1992) much-debated ontology of performance based on ephemerality and disappearance.

The connections Blau makes between theatre, death, and mortality also involve consideration of theatrical '*ghostliness*': an uncanny impression on the part of spectators that '*we are seeing what we saw before*', even if attending a production for the first time (1990b: 259, 260). Blau posits '*ghostliness*' as another universal of performance. Scholars have since queried the significance of 'ghosts' (both supernatural and metaphorical) in theatre using various theoretical lenses (see Luckhurst and Morin, 2014). Marvin Carlson has analysed how theatre is figuratively haunted by the 'ghosts' of previous characters, plot points, gestures, scenographic items, spaces, performer personae, and so forth. (I experienced the 'ghosting' of Beckett characters in the performance piece discussed at the beginning of this chapter.) In his study of theatre as a 'memory machine', Carlson examines how 'ghosting' – the return of something one has encountered before in a subsequently altered context – operates distinctively in theatre. He affirms Blau's proposal that '*ghostliness*' (or ghosting) is a universal aspect of theatrical performance, saying: 'Everything in the theatre, the

bodies, the materials utilized, the language, the space itself, is now and has always been haunted, and that haunting has been an essential part of the theatre's meaning to and reception by its audiences in all times and all places' (2001: 15).

Alice Rayner has a different take on theatre's ghosts. In a book that conceptualises ghosts as 'death's double', Rayner argues for preserving a non-rational understanding of a ghost as something that originates in a 'realm of uncertainty': '[A] ghost appears only from an oblique perspective and emerges only from the side-ways glance at the void of death or the blanks in memory. ... Theatre's ghosts, when they are present, induce ... something close to the fearful astonishment or even vertigo in the radical unknowing and lack of explanation for what appears' (2006: xxii–xxiii). In her study, Rayner explores how theatre makes familiar elements (e.g., curtains, lighting) uncanny and is haunted by disappearance and the presence of loss.

In a paper given at Northwestern University in 2008, Rayner spoke about attending a production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* decades earlier and having an existential realisation at the end of the play when the protagonists disappeared onstage, signifying their death.<sup>14</sup> At this moment, Rayner remarked, she recognised herself as a being who was aware of death – as someone who, in the future, would be gone. Rayner is not alone in describing theatre as 'a human space where we humans encounter not only the dead who have gone before but also the images of our own mortality' (2006: xii). Hélène Cixous defines theatre as 'the stage where the living meet and confront the dead, the forgotten and the forgetters, the buried and the ghosts, the present, the passing, the present past and the passed past' (2004: 28–9). Howard Barker envisions theatre as being 'situated on the bank of the Styx (the side of the living). The actually dead cluster at the opposite side, begging to be recognized. What is it they have to tell? Their mouths gape ...' (2005: 20). In their study of opera as an 'art of dying', Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon hypothesise that 'when people go to the theater, at times and in part, they find themselves participating in a ritual of grieving or experiencing their own mortality by proxy through an operatic narrative. ... [They] can feel both identification and distance as they – safely – rehearse their own (or a loved one's) demise through the highly artificial, conventionalized form of opera' (2004: 10–11). Admittedly, one does not need to attend theatre to have an existential experience of this sort, but it is still significant that theatre can facilitate contemplation of mortality and consideration of the dead in various ways through its *modus operandi*. Theatrical *deathliness* may be thought to shadow theatrical *liveliness*.<sup>15</sup>

Scholars have probed theatre's deathly connections – its capacity to make death and dying uniquely apparent through performance. What they have not done in depth or at length is to examine how and why Western dramatists and theatre-makers from the late nineteenth century onward have used theatre's ability to 'make death present' (i.e., metaphorically, experientially, conceptually, etc.) to engage thematically with death-related historical events, social practices, and cultural phenomena, as well as contemporaneous attitudes toward human mortality. That is what this book sets out to accomplish.

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## Death and dying: in context

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Death is a fact of life and dying is universal, but understanding of death and dying and the ways we respond to these phenomena are historically and culturally informed. They are largely – but not totally – period- and context-specific.

Take definitions of death. In the first *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in 1768, death was defined as the separation of the soul and the body (Dennis, 2014: 156). In contrast, the most recent online edition refers to multiple definitions of death, in line with modern scientific understanding of death as a process – with organs losing function at different rates due to lack of oxygen – and not as a single moment. Modern scientific definitions of death include clinical death (the cessation of heartbeat and respiration), which is not permanent and may be reversed; brain death (irreversible brain damage and permanent non-functionality), determined by unresponsiveness to external stimuli, no bodily movement or independent breathing, no automatic reflexes, and no recorded electrical activity in the brain (a.k.a. the Harvard criteria of 1968); and cellular death. The latter type of death results from one of three mechanisms: necrosis, where cells die due to being deprived of nutrients and energy (e.g., by the interruption of blood flow); autophagy, where a cell consumes all or part of itself in an effort to 'generate useful nutrients during times of scarcity'; and apoptosis, where a cell is directed to self-terminate because internal damage has been detected (Warraich, 2017: 13). Death is therefore a multiform phenomenon that can be framed and determined in different ways.<sup>16</sup> A doctor's pronouncement of a person's death ('calling' the time of death) may be considered a performative utterance. Determining the point at which the death of a human being has occurred can be a contestable issue: it relates to how

death is biologically understood, legally defined, and is also dependent on the cultural and spiritual beliefs of those involved. Dixie Dennis observes:

By and large, in the United States and other developed countries, brain death is accepted as the definition of death, even if the heart continues to beat by way of artificial means for some time afterward. Yet, in some countries, Japan, for example, brain death is not widely accepted. In the United Kingdom, it takes the independent judgement of two physicians before someone can be declared dead. In Islamic doctrine, death is not complete as long as the spirit continues in any part of the body. Among persons of the Hindu faith, birth, death, and rebirth (i.e., reincarnation) are cyclical, meaning persons are born to die but die to be reborn. (2014: 159)

Death and dying can mean different things to people, depending on their understanding of these phenomena and on the circumstances in question. This seems self-evident and uncontroversial, but it is easily overlooked or ignored, especially in large-scale theorisation and general studies of the subject.

Conceptions of death and dying in modernity, or in any sociohistorical or cultural context, are always potentially multiple and discrepant. Tony Walter, a sociologist, remarks: 'too many [sociological studies of death] refer to "modern society", as though they are all the same, which in the area of death they manifestly are not' (2008b: 327). He cautions against assuming an absolute distinction between modern ways of death and those of traditional societies, observing that 'there are in fact wide variations in how all kinds of societies deal with the deaths of their members. In the modern urbanised world, for example, Americans, Irish and Japanese regularly view human corpses at the wakes of colleagues and neighbours; the English do not' (*ibid.*: 326). Representatives from the US-based Association for Death Education and Counseling highlight individual variation in death, dying, and grieving practices: 'Individuals experience dramatic life events on their own terms ... within the "micro-culture" of themselves and their own understandings and assignments of meaning. We believe that it is not uncommon for one's own reactions and understandings to match imperfectly with whatever cultural norms one's group(s) may dictate' (Chapple *et al.*, 2017: 219).

Furthermore, our understanding of, and attitude toward, death and dying typically alters over the course of our lives as we gain life experience and endure loss; in this, we are united by awareness of our mortality (part of the 'human condition') and by the emotional and psychological difficulties of confronting death – both our own and that of others. In one way of thinking, we can experience death only by

proxy through witnessing other people's deaths. We can experience *our own dying*, but (probably) not *our own death*. Yet, there are forms of death other than biological death: for example, in the modern West, 'social death' has been recognised since the late 1960s. This refers to 'the process of marginalization and isolation experienced by the long-term sick and dying, whereby they are rendered socially dead even before actual physical death occurs' (Brennan, 2014: 386). Unfortunately, this type of death *can* be experienced, though, happily, it can also be reversed or ameliorated.

Recognising the variety of ways death has been conceived and rationalised (or not) throughout history means recognising its constructed nature. Death is a reality, of course, but, in a way, it is also a fiction, in that it is creatively (re)interpreted. Michael Neill, a literary scholar, calls death a 'fiction of a particularly fluid kind. For "death" is not something that can be imagined once and for all, but an idea that has to be constantly reimagined across cultures and through time; which is to say that, like most human experiences that we think of as "natural", it is culturally defined' (1997: 2). Sandra M. Gilbert, also a literary scholar, makes a similar observation in her study of modern dying and grieving practices. She writes: 'Each death changes the world even while each way of dying, each different imagination of death, has itself been changed by the world's changes. There's a sense, then, in which we might say history makes death, even while there's also a corresponding sense in which death makes history' (2006: 104–05). 'Death makes history' in the sense that accounts of the deaths of individuals and groups can form part of a historical study. This is fairly straightforward. 'History makes death' is a trickier formulation. It signals the way in which historical studies of death retrospectively construct (or retrieve?) its past meanings.

The French social historian Philippe Ariès is probably the most well-known historian of death. Ariès's short study *Western Attitudes Toward Death* (1976) and its much longer follow-up *L'homme devant la Mort* (1977, published in English translation as *The Hour of Our Death* in 1981) are landmark texts in the historiography of death, and have been the subject of much scholarly debate. As the title of his earlier book indicates, Ariès outlines Western attitudes to death from the 'Middle Ages' (his term) to the 'present day', identifying and explaining various '*mentalités*' – 'mental lives and attitudes that tacitly shaped the daily lives of particular groups or whole societies' – largely associated with historical periods (Bleyen, 2009: 66). Ariès identifies collective attitudes to death from the perspective of the *longue durée*, using a purposely wide field of vision to gain historical perspective. 'If [the historian] confines himself to too short a time span, although it may seem long according to

classical historical method, he runs the risk of attributing originality to phenomena that are really much older', he remarks (1981: xvi–xvii). In Ariès's estimation, changes in attitudes to death take place very slowly. They may appear almost static over long periods of time, unnoticed by contemporaries, and yet 'sometimes, as today, more rapid and perceptible [changes]' occur (1976: 1). Ariès suggests attitudes to death can be characteristic of certain epochs but can also be continuous between them (i.e., they may relate to the sensibility of an earlier age) (Dollimore, 2001: 121). He does not suppose attitudes collectively change all at once or are ever entirely uniform, which would, indeed, be unusual.

Ariès begins with 'tamed death' in Europe in the early 'Middle Ages'. Here, death, following early Christian teaching, was 'both familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe' (1976: 13). Death was a 'public ceremony' with 'no theatrics', a 'ritual organized by the dying person himself, at which parents, friends, neighbours, and children were present' (*ibid.*: 12, 13). There was harmonious 'coexistence of the living and the dead' (vis-à-vis burial sites) and felt connection – perceived oneness – between this world and the next (*ibid.*: 13, 14). Ariès detects a shift in the eleventh and twelfth centuries from the traditional 'familiarity' with death, which implied 'a collective notion of destiny', to a preoccupation with 'one's *own* death' and posthumous survival, in keeping with humanist individualism. 'In the mirror of his own death each man would discover the secret of his own individuality' (*ibid.*: 51–2). For members of the elite, death was imagined as a mortal enemy – something to be feared, resented, and rigorously prepared for via *ars moriendi* (art of dying), overseen by the priesthood. Accordingly, burial was relocated into the church itself.

By the end of the sixteenth century, death 'gradually began to be surreptitious, violent, and savage', arousing strange curiosities, fantasies, and eroticism, despite the age of Enlightenment (1981: 608). Ariès subsequently sketches a cultural preoccupation with 'the death of the other person', beginning in the eighteenth century, giving rise to a romantic, rhetorical treatment of death: 'Like the sexual act, death was henceforth increasingly thought of as a transgression which tears man from his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work, in order to make him undergo a paroxysm, plunging him into an irrational, violent, and beautiful world' (1976: 57). Attention was switched from the deceased to the mourners, prompting elaborate death rituals and mourning behaviour. Consequently, 'the fear of death ... was transferred from the self to the other, the loved one' (1981: 610).

Ariès's final outlined attitude to death in the West concerns the 'modern' era, in which death has become 'shameful and forbidden'



(1976: 85). It is to be avoided, if possible: made taboo, hushed up, euphemised, distanced, denied, made 'invisible', kept private but away from the home, yielded to the authority of medical and mortuary professionals. 'Death in the hospital is no longer the occasion of a ritual ceremony, over which the dying person presides amidst his assembled relatives and friends. Death is a technical phenomenon obtained by a cessation of care, a cessation determined in a more or less avowed way by a decision of the doctor and the hospital team' (*ibid.*: 88). Ariès's disapproval of the 'modern' Western attitude to death, and his preference for an earlier, simpler, less managed outlook and set of social practices, are plain in his writing.

Ariès's history of death in the West is intriguing and insightful, but problematic. It is too reliant on generalisation and speculation. It pays insufficient attention to cultural, geographic, and religious differences; economic factors; women's mortality; demographic trends; changes in medical science; mass persecutions throughout history; and other major historical events (such as the World Wars).<sup>17</sup> Understandably, Ariès had to be selective in his approach. His scholarship reveals, but it also obscures.

I have taught an undergraduate seminar on death in modern theatre on several occasions and have always included an excerpt from Ariès's work. Typically, some students will object to Ariès's 'blanket' pronouncements on modern society and find fault with his conclusions. They will say how, in their experience, death is not 'denied' or considered 'shameful' today (overlooking the fact that Ariès was writing in the 1970s, decades before they were born). Yet, other students will rush to defend his thesis, saying it articulates something they perceive to be true, and will relate feeling ostracised when they were grieving, linking this to social discomfort with bereavement, for example. Ariès's work is thus valuable as a provocation, and not just in a pedagogical context.

Ariès's scholarship demonstrates how 'history makes death', indicating the value of this enterprise, while also signalling the need to qualify and supplement it – or perhaps even to correct it. As Jan Bleyen remarks, 'death cannot be understood to have had one linear narrative of downfall', recalling Ariès's implicit valorisation of the 'familiar' death of the early medieval period and dismissal of the 'unfamiliar', 'hidden' death of the modern era. '[Death] does not have one history, but rather it has multiple histories' (2009: 68). Scholars working in various fields have attended to death's multiple histories in different contexts, including engagement with mortality in artistic work. This book contributes to this endeavour and takes inspiration from Ariès's work by outlining a

history of death in modern theatre – a history that, surprisingly, has not yet been told.

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## Connecting theatre studies and death studies

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This book connects theatre studies with ‘death studies’ – ‘an umbrella term for research spanning all aspects of death, dying and bereavement, including end-of-life care’ (Borgstrom and Ellis, 2017: 93). Death studies is a multidisciplinary field of study, including psychology, sociology, history, anthropology, philosophy, literary studies, clinical medicine, and palliative care (Brennan, 2014: xviii). It has flourished in the academy since its beginnings in the 1950s, and now has journals and research centres devoted to it.<sup>18</sup> The fact that scholars from a diverse range of disciplines are drawn to researching death is not surprising. As Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin observe, ‘death is not a topic like any other. For one thing, it is genuinely of universal interest. Every discipline is pertinent, every scholar has a body of reflections to draw on, every reader has experiences to bring to bear on the scholarship of death’ (1993: 3). Correspondingly, Walter believes death studies is not a discipline unto itself: ‘It has no distinctive theories or methods, that is to say, one’s mind does not have to be disciplined in a way specific to death studies in order to study death, hence, the social study of death is best conducted by scholars trained in one or more existing disciplines, whether history, sociology, religious studies, English literature, archaeology, or whatever’ (2008b: 329).

Theatre scholars have typically written about aspects of death tangentially rather than as a main objective. There are relatively few monographs specifically focused on death and dying in drama and theatre, and fewer still that consider the work of multiple dramatists or theatre-makers in a comparative manner.<sup>19</sup> Notable examples include Fiona Macintosh’s (1994) comparative analysis of death and dying in ancient Greek and modern (i.e., early twentieth-century) Irish tragic drama; Michael Neill’s (1997) study of mortality and identity in English Renaissance tragedy; and Mischa Twitchin’s (2016) theoretical investigation into ‘the uncanny in mimesis’ in Tadeusz Kantor’s ‘theatre of death’. Thérèse Malachy’s short study *La mort en situation dans le théâtre contemporain* (1982) is perhaps the closest antecedent to *Death in Modern Theatre*. Malachy treats the work of four dramatists who wrote in French – Michel de Ghelderode, Jean-Paul Sartre, Beckett, and

Ionesco – and provides literary analyses of their plays. For Malachy, ‘contemporary theatre’ is characterised by death as a morose state of being – an overarching, morbid disposition she traces to the aftermath of the Second World War. In her view, death ‘is no longer an end ... it is rather a category, or even a condition’ (1982: 30). Malachy’s morbid diagnosis of ‘the spirit of the age’ is instructive, but her study is limited in scope and presupposes a single, unifying mindset with respect to how death is conceived in ‘contemporary’ theatre.

Rather than propose a grand narrative about death in modern theatre, a narrative that would purport to encompass and explain the ways in which modern dramatists and theatre-makers have engaged with death and dying in their work (e.g., the ‘death of God’, or another concept of this sort), this book offers a series of micro-narratives, foregrounding death’s variable, historically contingent, and socioculturally inflected meanings in a broadly chronological series of investigations. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and ending in the early twenty-first century, I examine how dramatists and theatre-makers explore contemporaneous ideas about death and dying in their work, using theatre’s ability to ‘make death present’ in a unique manner. I do not aim to catalogue *all* the ways death and dying feature in drama and theatre from the late nineteenth century onward; such a task would be impossible. Instead, I adopt a period-specific approach, considering how and why death and dying are represented at certain historical moments using dramaturgy and aesthetics that challenge audiences’ conceptions, sensibilities, and sense-making faculties. In some chapters, I examine the work of artists who were part of a movement, or whose work has aesthetic affinity; in others, I analyse the work of artists who were (or are) contemporaneous but do not have a shared style. In all cases presented here, dramatists and theatre-makers engage with one or more aspects of death in modernity, exploring issues of social, cultural, historical, personal, and/or philosophical significance.

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## Chapter outlines

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We begin in the late nineteenth century. Chapter 1 explores the role death played in the cultural imaginary of the *fin de siècle*, when spiritualism and other death-related pursuits were in vogue, particularly in bohemian Paris. Spiritualists claimed to be able to contact the dead, thus proving that death did not mean the end of life but simply marked

a transformation from a corporeal to a non-corporeal state of being. I relate this to representations and evocations of death in symbolist drama and theatre, outlining how symbolist dramaturgy and *mise-en-scène* made it possible to 'admit' death as paradoxical presence in theatre – as something that could be sensed but not readily defined or contained. Short plays discussed in this chapter include Rachilde (a.k.a. Marguerite Vallette-Eymery)'s *Madame La Mort* (*Madame Death*, 1891), Charles van Lerberghe's *Les flaireurs* (*The Night-Comers*, 1889), Maurice Maeterlinck's *L'intruse* (*The Intruder*, 1890), and Leonid Andreyev's *Requiem* (1916). The chapter ends with an analysis of W.B. Yeats's symbolist-inspired play *Purgatory* (1938).

Chapter 2 swaps the cultural fascination with death in the *fin de siècle* for the reality – and 'unreality' – of death in the years surrounding the 'Great War' of 1914–18. The war made death seem newly strange, affecting how it was represented and understood. The devastation wrought by the war, the scale of the conflict, and the types of death it caused challenged conceptions of 'the real', inflecting it with perceptions of the 'unreal'. This chapter analyses plays written during and immediately after the First World War that represent death in a 'fantastical' manner and on a grand scale, abstracting it. I focus on three plays: Vernon Lee (a.k.a. Violet Paget)'s allegorical satire *Satan the Waster* (1920), Ernst Toller's expressionist drama *Die Wandlung* (*The Transfiguration*, 1919), and a section of Karl Kraus's monumental documentary drama *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* (*The Last Days of Mankind*, 1922). These dramatists strove to capture something of the 'shock' of the war – its disruption of the status quo and conventional understanding of mortality – through their depictions of death.

Chapter 3 confronts the phenomenon of death denial, which has been closely associated with Western societies in the twentieth century, despite global conflicts and repeated incidences of mass death. Death denial is a psychological impulse and a cultural attitude that banishes thoughts about death and disavows the reality of personal mortality. This chapter surveys theories of death denial and analyses examples of drama and theatre from the 1950s to the 1970s that expose its potentially damaging effects on the individual and society. My four case studies are Dino Buzzati's *Un caso clinico* (*A Clinical Case*, 1953), the Open Theater's *Terminal* (1969–1971, text by Susan Yankowitz), and two plays by Eugène Ionesco, *Le roi se meurt* (*Exit the King*, 1962) and *Amédée, ou Comment s'en débarrasser* (*Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*, 1953). I situate these examples in relation to the 'death awareness movement', which began in the 1950s and advocated for transparency about death and dying. I argue that these pieces offer mordant social commentary by

challenging prevailing orthodoxies through the presentation of absurd, theatrically arresting, and sometimes morbidly funny scenarios.

Chapter 4 sheds light on the shadows cast by the Holocaust, the dropping of the atomic bomb, and the prospect of future nuclear devastation in various ‘theatres of catastrophe’ from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first century, investigating how plays and performance pieces explore conceptions of death relating to these events and to possible futures stemming from them. The plays discussed in this chapter (some in passing, others at length) are Samuel Beckett’s *Fin de partie* (*Endgame*, 1957) and *Happy Days* (1961), Marguerite Duras’s *Yes, peut-être* (*Yes, Maybe*, 1968), Edward Bond’s *The Tin Can People* (1984), Józef Szajna’s *Replika* (*Replica*, 1971–88), and Howard Barker’s *Found in the Ground* (2001). These pieces approach the spectres of the Holocaust and/or death-by-nuclear-attack obliquely, only ever alluding to historical events or evoking them in fantasy.

Chapter 5 concerns the drama of dying in the early twenty-first century: a time of increased public awareness about issues relating to death and dying, but also of great private uncertainty and worry about the end of life – specifically, the form it will take, its duration, and the degree of agency one will have. Due to the interventions of modern medicine, which continually work to extend life, dying in the early twenty-first century can be a protracted process, and may be burdensome both for the dying person and for care-givers. Achieving a ‘good death’ (whatever that might be) is not guaranteed or always readily accomplished. This chapter surveys contemporary attitudes toward death and dying and investigates how they are dramatised and staged in Carol Ann Duffy’s *Everyman* (2015), Marina Carr’s *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006), Caryl Churchill’s *Here We Go* (2015), and Kaite O’Reilly’s *Cosy* (2016).

The Conclusion considers the future of death, which involves its possible elimination due to advances in medical science, and addresses the way in which resuscitation science is challenging death’s ostensible fixity and irreversibility. Examples of human longevity and immortality in modern drama are briefly discussed, and a short account is given of a piece of devised theatre by Unlimited Theatre, which premiered in 2014, entitled *Am I Dead Yet?* The chapter ends with a combination of performative writing and critical commentary that reflects on the whole study.

*Death in Modern Theatre* thus examines various ‘stages of mortality’ from the late nineteenth century onward, tracing contextualised ideas about death and dying across the ‘long’ twentieth century, as explored in examples of modern drama and theatre. I take a leaf out of Ariès’s book by surveying changing attitudes to death over an extended period

(though I fall far short of the millennia he covers!). I depart from Ariès (and from Malachy) in forgoing the use of a single, overarching *mentalité* of death in modernity, instead advancing a more complicated, plural, mosaic-like impression of how death and dying have been understood since the late nineteenth century. Ariès nonetheless allowed for the possibility of attitudes to death being continuous between epochs; on a smaller scale, this is borne out here too. There are lines of continuity and overlap between the various ‘stages of mortality’ outlined in this book; the aspects of death in modernity analysed here are not wholly discrete or compartmentalised.

The phrase ‘stages of mortality’ refers to theatrical presentation and exploration of death and dying. It also nods to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s famous theoretical model of the ‘five stages of grief’ (denial and isolation; anger; bargaining; depression; acceptance): in her view (and contrary to popular misconception), the stages ‘do not replace each other but can exist next to each other and overlap at times’ (1970: 236). The possibility of non-linear ways of comprehending mortality is less neat than one might prefer, but is possibly more true to life, which makes it an apt model for historiography. Relatedly, the five chapters following in this book have their own discursive frameworks, so can be read out of order, although the later chapters will be more resonant if one has read what has preceded them.

This study does not aim to be comprehensive: although it includes consideration of major topics and is intentionally wide-ranging, there are many other subjects that could be factored into this history (e.g., AIDS, 9/11), just as there are many other modern plays about death and dying that are not discussed here or are only briefly mentioned. Obviously, one can’t cover everything, and it’s an enormous topic. I invite other scholars to supplement or revise this history. Even still, readers may wonder why I have chosen to focus on one play over another, or one dramatist or theatre-maker over another. Why not discuss Sarah Kane’s play *4.48 Psychosis* (2000) in Chapter 5, for instance? My selection of case studies is driven by several factors: the extent to which a play or performance piece engages thematically with the subject of each chapter; the insight it offers into the chapter topic; the degree and type of provocation it provides; its resonance, or complementarity, with other examples I have chosen; the language in which a play is written or translated; the availability of relevant archival material; and the overall mix of examples chosen. To my mind, *4.48 Psychosis* does not engage with the specific end-of-life issues that are the subject of Chapter 5 as well as the four plays featured here. O’Reilly’s *Cosy* engages the topic of assisted suicide, but the topic of personally conducted suicide, which Kane’s play raises, is a distinct issue

and could form the basis of a different study altogether. Moreover, Kane's work has also already received a lot of critical attention.

I have tried to get a mix of well-known and lesser-known plays from an international range of dramatists and theatre-makers. I do not attend at length to certain modern theatre artists whose work often engages with the theme of death, such as Beckett and Kantor, as scholars have already written about them in depth (e.g., Barfield *et al.*, 2009; Twitchin, 2016). Regarding gender representation, the fact that the dramatists whose work is discussed in Chapter 5 are all female is largely coincidental. I did not intend to focus on female dramatists when planning this chapter. Rather, I became taken with each of the plays in question, detecting points of contact between them as well as potentially fruitful avenues for critical investigation. This is how I proceeded throughout: endeavouring to select plays that illuminate the topic under survey, especially when grouped in certain configurations. This approach has the advantage of creating novel combinations of artistic work, going off the 'beaten track', on occasion, and forging unexpected lines of connection between modern dramatists and theatre-makers.

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## On 'modern theatre'

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This book uses the term 'modern theatre' to refer to the work of dramatists and theatre-makers from the late nineteenth century onward that is self-reflexively 'modern', in that it responds – directly or indirectly – to 'current' events, phenomena, attitudes, concerns, etc., or those of the recent past. This framing is in line with recent scholarship.<sup>20</sup> Marshall Berman's conception of the destabilising quality of being modern informs my usage of this term. 'To be modern', he writes, 'is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air' (1988: 345). This conception of 'being modern' recurs throughout the chapters that follow in relation to death and dying.

Conceived in a flexible, relational manner, the term 'modern' is a perpetually moving target. The modernity of the late nineteenth century is obviously different from the historical situation of the early twenty-first century, but there are correspondences too, which a focus on mortality can bring to light.<sup>21</sup> '[Modernity] is a creative self-destruction', observes Décio Torres Cruz:

[Each] modern creation that appears destroys its preceding tradition, and generates a new one, which, in its turn, will be obliterated by another new tradition in an endless series of interruptions and returns. ... ['Modern'] is always dependent on a time reference: yesterday's modern is not the same as today's, and today's modern will not be the same tomorrow. ... Like the phoenix, the 'modern' resists death and always reappears, soaring over the ruins and the dust of time and chaos. (2014: 9–10)

The 'modern' may resist 'death' in the sense of continually being renewed, but artistic work, such drama and theatre, may be deemed 'modern', in part, because of the way it treats the subject of death, as this study shows.<sup>22</sup>

In this book, 'modern theatre' serves as an umbrella term for a variety of plays and performance pieces, but the emphasis is on work that is on, or near, the avant-garde side of the aesthetic spectrum. I am interested in work that seeks to challenge audiences' ideas about mortality through some combination of form, content, and presentational approach. This includes work that has been called 'modernist', but extends to examples from the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that are differently 'modern', but no less challenging in terms of the ideas and/or the aesthetic experiences they can provide. This accords with recent developments in modernist studies, in which modernism's temporal and cultural or geographic boundaries have been expanded, reaching forward and backward in time (see Friedman, 2015). Theorising multiple modernisms and multiple modernities has become a vital part of modernist scholarship, as has deconstructing the highbrow/lowbrow cultural divide. Plays that are not compositionally experimental or avant-garde can also provide valuable insight into culturally and historically located conceptions of death and dying; nonetheless, I have opted to focus more on work that has clear disruptive potential, complicates conceptions of death and dying, and can rattle readers and audience members by what it communicates and how it communicates it. This gives the study necessary coherence and facilitates lines of contact between the plays under consideration.

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## Methodology

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Scholars working in the multidisciplinary field of death studies use their own disciplinary methods and knowledge from other



disciplines to investigate a wide array of topics associated with death and dying. That is how I proceed in this book. I provide close readings of dramatic texts and performance analyses informed by scholarship from various fields – chiefly history, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. I use information and concepts from these sources to illuminate plays and productions, with the aim of advancing original interpretations of them. I also draw on non-scholarly historical texts, and refer to other examples of art or performance from a specific period or milieu to supplement my analyses. Close reading is therefore coupled with a commitment to historicise and theorise texts.<sup>23</sup> My production analyses are enriched by reference to archival documents, including reviews, audio-visual recordings, rehearsal notebooks, programmes, promotional material, and so forth. I include consideration of my own experience as an audience member, when relevant. In the cases of plays written in a language other than English, I primarily work with translations, either previously published or my own, and am alert to the semantic differences that can arise. I address the methodological challenge of interpreting phenomena that may be culturally discrepant in different national contexts (such as attitudes toward mortality) by foregrounding this fact, and not assuming transhistorical or trans-cultural universalism; instead, I situate cultural texts and performances in their sociohistorical contexts. When analysing plays in performance, I may refer to original production contexts and/or to later productions in a different cultural context, depending on what a production may ‘offer’ the investigation, and on the quantity and quality of information I have obtained. I use production analysis to assist interpretation of a play, gain insight into a specific example of its theatrical interpretation, and assess the significance of its ‘revival’. The last objective is a complicated but potentially instructive undertaking for death-themed drama, as stages of mortality (i.e., historical attitudes toward death and dying, and theatrical exploration of end-of-life) involve both continuity and change, as this study will show.

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## Envoy

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Static theatre –  
all is silent ... all is still ...  
*A noise.* Death steals in.

## Notes

- 1 Events at The Cart Shed are organised by Peter Hulton and Dorinda Hulton.
- 2 Listen to an excerpt of the recording by searching for 'Helen, chuntering' on SoundCloud or by using this link: <https://soundcloud.com/a-curtin/helen-chuntering/s-4kY2U>. I am grateful to Pam Woods and Ian Cumming for making this recording available.
- 3 Other examples of autobiographical, devised theatre about the death of a family member include Complicite's *A Minute Too Late*, which premiered in 1984 and was reperformed in 2005; *Have I No Mouth*, by the Dublin-based company Brokentalkers, which premiered in 2012; and *So It Goes*, by the British theatre company On The Run, which premiered in 2014.
- 4 'Drama is like palaeontology', writes Kirsten Shepherd-Barr. 'We study the fossils (play texts) that remain after the full dramatic experience (the performance) has *died*' (2016: 3, my emphasis).
- 5 As Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin remark: 'much of what we call culture comes together around the collective response to death': Bronfen and Goodwin (1993: 3).
- 6 Some famous filmic examples: *Der müde Tod* (*Weary Death*, a.k.a. *Destiny*, 1921, directed by Fritz Lang); *Death Takes a Holiday* (1934, directed by Mitchell Leisen); *Orphée* (1950, directed by Jean Cocteau); and *Det sjunde inseglet* (*The Seventh Seal*, 1957, directed by Ingmar Bergman).
- 7 'Probably without exception, at least in Western culture, representations of death bring into play the binary tensions of gender constructs, as life/death engages permutations with masculinity/femininity and with fantasies of power' (Bronfen and Goodwin, 1993: 20). See also Guthke (1999).
- 8 Case in point, the subheading of a 2011 *Guardian* blog post on 'what makes a good stage death': 'A really convincing theatrical death is better left unseen' (Soloski, 2011).
- 9 Tim Etchells writes about watching a performer play dead in *A Cursed Place*, a production based on Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, directed by Pete Brooks in 1993: 'one of the performers/characters lay still and silent – "dead" on the floor. I lost the play for a moment then, only watching the contradictory breathing of the corpse, the rise and fall and sound of her breath. ... I liked to watch her then because her part in the play was finished and she had nothing whatever to tell me' (1999: 115–16).
- 10 Indeed, actors have been famed for their prowess at, or commitment to, dying (in character) onstage. The London-born actor J. Hudson Kirby (1810–1848) inspired the New York audience catchphrase 'wake me up when Kirby dies', which came to be applied to any supreme effort by an actor (Hendrickson, 2000: 684). One might also, in this context, think of Bottom's lengthy death throes when performing as Pyramus in the play-within-the-play in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

- 11 This play also features a personification of death in the guise of a very tall, black-robed, hooded monk who shadows the action – a possible allusion to the robed figure of death in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957).
- 12 The practice of actors literally dying during a performance might also be considered in this context. The Dublin-based 'Centre for Dying Onstage', a research project initiated by Krist Gruijthuijsen and developed by Kate Strain, has a website ([www.centrefordyingonstage.com](http://www.centrefordyingonstage.com)) that catalogues 'unexpected deaths that have occurred during moments of performance in the public domain'. See also Dent (2001) and Ward (2010). David Barnett (2017) surveys the phenomenon of the 'last-gasp monologue' that intimates the imminent death or unconsciousness of the performer. Jody Enders writes about the medieval legend of a performance of the biblical drama of Judith and Holofernes that took place in Tournai, France, in 1549, in which 'the "actor" playing Judith actually beheaded a convicted murderer who had briefly assumed the "role" of Holofernes' (1999: 203). The veracity of this legend is unclear.
- 13 Might Blau have seen Duse in the 1916 silent film *Cenere*, directed by Febo Mari, or did he just imagine seeing her perform? Rosalia, the character Duse plays in this film, dies at the end.
- 14 Alice Rayner, 'Now You See Me. Now You ...', *Theatre: Crossroads of the Humanities*, Northwestern University, 11–12 April 2008.
- 15 One could make a parallel here between the ways in which theatre and history, or theatre and the past, are connected. Rebecca Schneider remarks: '[Just] as theatre may not be entirely real, so too may it not be entirely, or only, live. A repeated gesture, an aged object, a clichéd phrase, an old letter, a footprint, a way of walking – all of these things, material and immaterial, might drag something of the no longer now, the no longer live, into the present, or drag the present into the no longer now' (2014: 45). Schneider uses the term 'inter(in)animate' to refer to passageways between 'then' and 'now' (*ibid.*).
- 16 '[There] is no uniform way to define irreversible brain death', writes Sam Parnia, who notes that one of the biggest differences is between the United Kingdom, where a person is classified as dead if their brain stem is dead, and the United States, where brain death refers to the death of the whole brain (2014: 267–8).
- 17 For a discussion of Ariès's work in relation to that of another French historian of death, Michel Vovelle, see Kselman (1987).
- 18 *Mortality*, *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying*, and *Death Studies*. The Centre for Death and Society, founded in 2005, is located at the University of Bath.
- 19 There are edited book collections on death in theatre: e.g., Gritzner (2010) and Perdigao and Pizzato (2010). The Fall 1997 issue of the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* was devoted to the theme of representing death in theatre. *Performance Research* 15 (1) (2010) has the theme of 'memento mori'. Modernist literary scholars writing about death have either

- mentioned theatre in passing, as in the case of Friedman (1995), or not at all, as in the case of Sherman (2014). For examples of books focused on themes of death and dying in the work of a single author (in these cases, Beckett), see Barfield *et al.* (2009); White (2009).
- 20 Karoline Gritzner's *Adorno and Modern Theatre* (2015) analyses the work of Edward Bond, David Rudkin, Howard Barker, and Sarah Kane. Kirsten Shepherd-Barr's *Modern Drama: A Very Short Introduction* '[spans] a period from roughly 1880 to the present' (2016: 2). The journal *Modern Drama* treats literature of the past two centuries, according to the current description on the journal's website. In his *History of Modern Drama*, volume two, David Krasner proposes that 'modern drama circa 1960–2000 was co-constituted by modernism past (pre-1960) and postmodernism' – but he still uses 'modern drama' as an overall descriptor (2016: 31).
  - 21 The term 'modern' is admittedly problematic, as Graham Ley observes: 'That modern drama might begin with Ibsen, yet somehow antedates the motor car, the aeroplane, and the telephone is more than a little perverse in terms of an effective nomenclature, but the tradition persists, even into the hyper-reality of a new millennium' (2014: 157).
  - 22 And what of postmodernism? Julia A. Walker and Glenn Odom note that this concept has 'fallen into critical disuse since the new modernist studies (NMS) found evidence of its stylistic traits within works traditionally identified with classic high modernism' (Walker and Odom, 2016: 131). Additionally, Jean-Michel Rabaté remarks: 'It seems today that modernism has absorbed most of the twentieth century, that it goes back deep into the nineteenth century and that it has moreover swallowed postmodernism. This notion [postmodernism], which emerged in the 1980s, has surprisingly lost all of its purchase, in a sudden disaffection that some have found disappointing' (2013: 11).
  - 23 As Alan Ackerman notes: 'Close reading is entirely compatible with the drive to historicize' (2012: 15).