

## When Life Gives You Risk, Make Risk Theatre: Three Tragedies and Six Essays

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*When Life Gives You Risk, Make Risk Theatre is a fascinating analysis of classic dramatic texts.*

The performing arts study *When Life Gives You Risk, Make Risk Theatre* is Edwin Wong's original, provocative analysis of one of the oldest forms of theater.

Risk theory—an economic theory that examines what sort of chances people are willing to take when they're confronted with unprecedented events—is here applied as a criticism of tragic theater, from ancient to modern times. Wong posits that protagonists in stage tragedies also do risk analyses—considering their situations, making wagers, and sometimes losing catastrophically, due to unforeseen, unlikely events that undermine their calculations.

To further support its critical theory, the book includes tragic plays that were written from its own perspective. These consciously work risk theory into their dramas, with the intention of seeing if audiences might respond favorably. Three such plays (the results of an open contest with risk theory as its parameters) are included in their entirety—*In Bloom*, *The Value*, and *Children of Combs and Watch Chains*. The latter play most clearly acts as evidence for Wong's risk theater theory. In it, Jim and Della are married, childless, and desperate for a family. They go to extreme lengths to have a child, engaging in dangerous actions that they keep secret from each other. Each believes that they are doing what is right, and that the happiness that will result will make everything worthwhile—with calamitous results.

Throughout, Wong's argument is fleshed out in compelling terms, and is ably (if in the case of the new plays, sometimes circularly) supported with dramatic examples. The esoteric subject matter is made accessible via clear, concise language, and the included plays are compelling. Also invaluable is the book's decision to apply its risk theory to several famous tragedies, as with a discussion of *Oedipus the King* concerning extraordinary situations. Wong notes that a plague in Thebes "increase[s] the likelihood of black swan events" in the play:

*Such situations force you to act with abandon. You have to throw the Hail Mary. When you do you throw risk to the winds... There's a plague. Oedipus must continue the investigation or else all Thebes perishes. He has no choice. But, by continuing, he triggers the risk event ... [he is] a man who damns himself.*

The insights brought about by risk theater open new angles into the reading and producing of both classic and new plays in *When Life Gives You Risk, Make Risk Theatre*, a critical theory text that applies economic notions to performing arts criticism, resulting in a fascinating discussion of drama.

MATT BENZING (April 27, 2022)

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