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SPECIAL SECTION ON "GAME OVER!": US DRAMA AND THEATER AND THE END(S) OF AN AMERICAN IDEA(L)

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INTRODUCTION

Those of a certain age will no doubt remember the video games back in the 1970s and 80s, or even those today, which purveyed hours of fun and excitement, whether at a local arcade (*Space Invaders*, *Asteroids*, *Pac-Man*) or on a console in the family den (Atari, Nintendo, Intellivison, Gameboy, and more recently Xbox and PlayStation). Every time the screen displayed the legend "Game Over!," feelings of frustration and exhilaration conjoined: another quarter inserted, another reset button hit, and the promise of a new game and recording the highest score quickly erased all anxieties and fostered hope that, this time, the outcome would be better.

Repeated endings and renewed beginnings are tropes that lie at the heart of American optimism and, to a certain extent, US drama and theater. The nation is universally known for finding ways to spin a loss into a potential new victory. Over the centuries, just the simple grafting of the word "new" onto appropriated lands (New World, New England, New York, New Mexico) or exhausted ideologies (New Deal, New Journalism, New Left, New Right, New Green Deal) reinjected the promise of a different tomorrow. Reinvention is almost a constitutional right in America, and the US stage over the years has been a privileged site on which to explore, exhibit and exercise the limits of that presumed right.

In recent years, though, cracks in American optimism have extended, and the United States is once again confronting that nihilist legend, in bold type and in glaring letters, burdened, as it were, with the task of inserting another quarter (of a trillion dollars)

into the economy or again hitting reset on a (Presidential and Congressional) political agenda to right past wrongs, jibe from a deviated course, or blaze a new trail. In 2020 alone, not since the Civil War has the nation of *E pluribus unum* had to reckon with the reality of its more truthful motto, *E pluribus duo*. Lacking a coherent response to the coronavirus pandemic, watching its streets implode time and time again during the Black Lives Matter movement, tugging ceaselessly at the gossamer threads of an unraveling national fabric, the Disunited States of America—and, by extension, its drama and theater—has found itself at yet another crossroads, wondering once again if the game, this time, is really over.

But which game, and who are the players? On one level, eschatology has underwritten the American narrative since the nation's founding, and evangelical devotion has been proffered as the sole panacea to (re)save the nation from itself. On another level, several visionaries, from Royal Tyler in *The Contrast* (1787) to Lin-Manuel Miranda in *Hamilton* (2015), have warned against the inevitable solvency of warring political ideologies. Regardless of which position is most tenable over time, this special section of the *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* (*REN*) points to the fact that as soon as one "game" ends, another one begins. Games are, by definition, won and lost, played in solitaire or with/against another person. Can America keep resetting itself and start the game anew at each crossroads it encounters? And what role does/should art play in recording those conflicts or in influencing policy? Are the players themselves—playwrights, producers, actors, audiences alike—willing or even capable of continuing to play by the same rules? How have American playwrights reacted or risen to these challenges, today and in the past? Are they *still* optimistic, or is the fun over, a ghost of adolescent nostalgia?

The idea of a game also suggests *play* (in all of it semantic variants) and, as such, experimenting, discovering, trying out new things. How, exactly, is US theater and drama renewing itself, especially at a time when theater culture was put on hold due to the pandemic, and theaters and companies from Broadway to Main Street are struggling just to survive? Video games have evolved from the telos of *Pong* to the multiple endings of online games, where technological advances are only partly responsible for the renewed interest from one generation of players to the next. Is innovation a thing of the past on the US stage, despite its avant-gardist fascination with multimedia? Has the recent pandemic forced theater

in America—from Zoomed stage readings, through plays written online in collaboration, to holding masterclasses in playwriting and acting online—to reinvent itself, to become more immersive or at least participatory in something different from improv? Could the fourth wall definitively fall?

Historically, American playwrights have taught us the enduring nature of theater and drama, especially at times when the nation has hit the "pause" button. But can the game simply resume where we had left it suspended? The shuttered English theater surely survived its bouts with the plague, popish plots, and a civil war, but what emerged onstage afterwards had little in common with the drama that preceded it. Must the US theater explore new avenues, or should it rely on past modes of expression to insure its longevity? Is the fragile artistic market welcoming of new adventures and willing to give new playwrights and theater artists the space wherein to truly *play*? Did it ever in the past, or is nostalgia for a golden age merely revisionist in nature? All of these questions are closely linked to the idea(l) that America has somehow been endowed with many "ends," but are they limited in number and, if so, how many "lives" in the proverbial video game has the nation already used up, and how many still remain?

This special section of *REN* addresses some of these questions and others. Drawn from a selection of revised, expanded, and double-blind peer-reviewed papers read at the 6th International Conference on American Drama and Theater, held in Miraflores de la Sierra, Madrid, in June 2022 and sponsored by the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (among other partners),[1] the special section explores avenues of discussion and debate linked to the study of games and gaming, players and playing, ends and new beginnings in US drama and theater from any watershed period in the nation's history.

In this special section are articles that cover the expanse of US plays and theater from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century which address notions of American idealism and renewed optimism

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in the nation's recurrent struggle with self-doubt and division, where the game and gaming are understood as both real and metaphorical. **Sämi Ludwig** opens the discussion with an article on Major Robert Rogers's *Ponteach: Or the Savages of America, A Tragedy* (1766), one of the first published stage plays in the US about Native Americans and emerging colonial and cultural identities. Ludwig explores here how Rogers broke with literary conventions by dramatizing the survival of his play's tragic hero, the Ottawa chief Pontiac, in a brash effort to counter his own growing military and financial travails as a British officer and commander of the Rangers. By reinventing himself as a colonial entrepreneur and experienced frontiersman who personally knew Pontiac (who was still alive at the time the play's publication), Rogers used the play in part to curry favor with King George III, who subsequently rewarded Rogers with a royal governorship at Fort Michilimackinac, a fur-trading outpost.

Nearly two centuries later, indigenous people were not just populating but also contributing to the canon of pan-American theater. **Ludmila Martanovschi** looks at how First Nations playwright Tomson Highway uses the theme of game-playing in his three Rez Cycle plays (1986–1999) as a way to show how the Cree nation copes with life-altering challenges it faces on the reserve. The games played—bingo, ice hockey, and roulette—allow Highway, Martanovschi contends, to consolidate his use of Cree languages and storytelling techniques through which he not only expresses his views on contemporary Canadian theater and indigenous performance but also assuages the suffering of members of his own tribe through therapeutic stage humor.

Returning to below the 49th Parallel, **Charalampos Keivanidis** examines how the gay theatrical community in the US used nostalgia in their plays to recreate the sexual freedom of the 1970s in an effort to palliate the suffering brought on by the AIDS epidemic of the turbulent 1980s and 1990s, when engaging in unprotected sex was akin to playing the game of Russian roulette. Studying three AIDS plays—Robert Chesley's *Jerker* (1986), Victor Bumbalo's *Tell* (1993) and Michael Kearns's *intimacies* (1989)—Keivanidis suggests that these playwrights celebrate past sexual freedoms through collective memories, which they subsequently transcribe for the stage as "obituary plays," a paradigm of mourning not just for the specific people lost to the disease but also for the whole of a sexual culture that was coming to a close.

In a parallel study of collective cultural suffering represented in US plays at the end of the second millennium—here, issues of racial discrimination among others—**Sophie Maruéjouls-Koch** looks at *The America Play* (1993) and *Topdog/Underdog* (2001) by Suzan-Lori Parks and *The War Boys* (1993) and *The Breach* (2019) by Naomi Wallace. She demonstrates how both playwrights draw upon the game as a means to "explore the porous place where past and future coexist as traces or presages, a place as elusive and ungraspable as the here-and-now of the present." Drawing on Édouard Glissant's theory of Relation, where the power of imagination can recall the past and reconnect the self with the other, Maruéjouls-Koch examines how Parks's and Wallace's theater revive various "ghosts" on stage to deal with the "thorny" issues of America's "inglorious" past.

Closing this special section's discussion on twentieth-century US theater is **Araceli González Crespán**, whose article examines the thematic and structural ties between María Irene Fornés's first and last play for the American stage, *La Viuda* (1961) and *Letters from Cuba* (2000). The texts from both plays are based on found objects, here Fornés's own family correspondence, whose adaptations for the stage not only project a salient feature of her theatrical corpus, but which also encapsulate one of her dramatic concerns over dramatizing the stories of those who win and those who lose (as a metaphor for playing a game). In a separate theater review also published in this special section, Crespán provides a clear example of Fornés's signature style in adapting found objects for the stage. Fornés's *Evelyn Brown (A Diary)* recently played Off Off Broadway in the spring of 2023, forty-three years after its premiere, which Fornés herself had directed. The play, based on a handwritten diary that Fornés received as a gift, respects so well the role of Evelyn Brown as the script's authentic writer that Fornés referred to the original production as an adaptation, something which was maintained in this revival mounted at La MaMa as an homage to Fornés's expansive career in US theater.

Sequels, simulacra, parodies and pastiches have long marked the game-playing obsessions of several postmodern US playwrights and avant-garde theater companies since the 1960s. Not surprisingly, more recent postmodern US drama has turned to the internet and World Wide Web as sources for exploring the nexus of real versus virtual theatrical spaces. Mapping this frontier between real and virtual worlds on the stage, where mimeticism in both is separated only by different forms of technology, **Michael Hooper**

studies the geopathology of home in Jennifer Haley's *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom* (2008) and *The Nether* (2014), two plays that expose the confrontation between reality and cyberspace when depicting or deconstructing domesticity, be it a physical house or a larger sense of community, actual or online. In "simulat[ing] a simulation," Hooper contends, Haley uses virtual reality to "explore alternative spaces that [...] online domains can create" and to question the very nature of intimacy and privacy generated within that new space, be it an internet chat room or an online role-playing video game. Haley's theater thus questions "how the online space of social virtual worlds and computer games can be colonized and how the resulting homes permit new patterns of independence and security."

Bringing this special section to a close is **Julie Vatain-Corfdir**, whose article on contemporary US theater explores how Lucas Hnath's *A Doll's House, Part 2* (2017) re-ignites (but in a more playful way) a volatile gender debate that Ibsen's seminal play had first set alight over a century ago. Inspired by steaming TV serials with their endless parade of cliff hangers, meandering plotlines, and pithy duologues, Hnath's contemporary twist on this period play "provides neither ending, nor contradiction, nor complete vindication." Instead, Vatain-Corfdir argues, the "thematic, formal and symbolical resonance of Hnath's hypertext" lend the play its "conceptual aesthetics and its ironic metatextuality" that allow it to seamlessly address the domestic issues left unanswered at the end of Ibsen's original play, yet still make the debate fresh and relevant for contemporary audiences whose gendered codified societies are vastly different from those explored in "Part 1" of *A Doll's House*.

Each of the articles in this special section contributes a new perspective on how US plays and playwrights reproduce, challenge, or reconstruct the American idea/l of optimism in the face of repeated endings, resignations, terminations, and even losses. As the nation approaches the completion of the first quarter of the new century, those challenges to its optimism have shown no sign of abating. Deep into a cold Civil War that is increasingly dividing an already fractured nation, the US and its citizens would do well to heed the messages of its theater, which has held up a mirror to reflect these schisms as often as it has opened up a window from which to escape their seemingly ineluctable end.