**Wes Williams:** Welcome everyone to 'Big Tent Live Events,' the lockdown live online event series brought to you by TORCH, the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, as part of the Humanities Cultural Programme, itself one of the founding stones for the future Stephen A. Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities, here in Oxford. My name is Wes Williams and I’m a Professor of French Literature, a fellow at St Edmund Hall and I’m also the Knowledge Exchange champion here at TORCH.

The 'Big Tent Live Events' series is our way of bringing together, once a week, researchers and students, performers, and practitioners from across the different humanities disciplines. We're bringing you this event program online while we're all keeping our distance and we hope that you're all safe and well during these difficult times. Our aim here as regular viewers will know, is to explore together important subjects and ask challenging questions about areas such as the environment, medical humanities, ethics and AI, the public, the private, and the common good, and we will celebrate storytelling and music, performance and poetry, identity and community. If you would like to put forward any questions to our speakers about the topic that we're discussing during the event tonight, please pop them in the comments box in YouTube.

We encourage you to submit these as early as possible, and I can then ensure that they inform and enrich the Q&A part of our discussion in about half an hour or so. Now on to our excellent speakers tonight. I can't tell you how excited and honoured I am to host and welcome, joining us for the final event of this phase of our online series, both Oliver Taplin, Emeritus Professor of Classics and Fellow of Merton College here in Oxford, and Fiona Shaw CBE, actor and director extraordinaire. Neither of our speakers really needs any introduction, but I'll embarrass them both by saying just a tiny bit about them, just really a sentence or two to clarify why we're bringing them together online this evening to address along with you this week's theme of tragedy and plague.

Oliver first. Oliver Taplin has a central concern throughout his work with the performance of Greek poetry, tragedy, and comedy both in ancient and in modern times. Some 25 years ago together with Edith Hall, Oliver set up the archive of performances for Greek and Roman drama here in Oxford and thereby revolutionised the study of this area, and in the last few decades he has worked both with the National Theatre on different productions of *The Oresteia'* and with the RSC on *The Thebans*, along with a whole range of other productions. An inspiration, then, to many generations of playmakers and playgoers alike, Oliver has, in his retirement, further explored the craft of translating.

Fiona Shaw is an actor and director, working on film and TV, in opera, and in the theatre. Like Oliver, albeit in different ways, she's works extensively with both the RSC and the National Theatre, as well as performing and directing in a huge and exciting range of spaces and places, exploring both contemporary work and the classical tragedies we'll be talking about this evening, from *Electra*, to massively and memorably, *Medea*. I trust you'll forgive me if I say that there are many watching here today who will feel that Fiona has done more to making classical tragedy engaging, urgent and powerfully present in contemporary culture than pretty much any other performer alive.

Welcome to you both then, Oliver and Fiona. Thank you again for joining us in our ‘Big Tent’, and without further ado, I'd like to hand over to you Oliver to start the real discussion going, thank you.

**Oliver Taplin:** Thank you, Wes, thank you. Well, I’m going to try and set the question rolling with a little mini professorial lecture and then throw the ball to Fiona, and then we can then throw it to and fro and see whether we catch it or drop it. The question I want to set rolling is this: *What is tragedy good for?* Does a tragedy do people any good? Why should people who have quite enough suffering in their outside world go to the theatre to witness and live through the terrible sufferings of others? And that question has been sharpened for me, about the pandemic that has struck us and the way that our theatres have had to close and it's made me ask a question which as far as I can see has hardly ever been asked before, which was – which is – did the Athenians, the ancient Athenians in the 5th century BC, did they call off their big annual theatre event when they were struck with their terrible plague?

And it was a much more terrible plague than ours, it came and went across the years between 430 and 425 BC or BCE, it had the most terrible symptoms, it seems to have been quite like Typhoid, but I think the experts think it's probably a pathogen that no longer exists, but it had a mortality rate of something like 25%. And we know quite a lot about the horrible symptoms and its effects because the great historian Thucydides actually caught this plague himself – he was there in Athens – suffered from the plague himself and survived and observed that people who survived didn't catch it again or didn't get it again, that they were in effect, immune. And he also observed that doctors and care workers were particularly vulnerable to getting the plague, but what doesn't seem to have arisen is the idea of contagion.

So that's the plague in Athens. The theatre in Athens was not a matter of daily entertainment as ours is or as ours was until recently, and as indeed as it was in Shakespeare's London, instead it was this big event in the spring and the preparations for it started the previous summer, and there were a lot of people involved in it and there was a big budget involved in it and rehearsals went on through the entire winter preparing for the spring festival of Dionysus, where thousands of people, literally thousands of people, gathered in the theatre to watch three days of tragedies: three competing tragedians each one putting on three tragedies and a satyr play.

Now the answer to the question ‘Did the theatre go on during those years of plague?’ is yes, it did. We know for sure that there were comedies put on during that year - those years, and we know of at least one tragedy, and maybe more, but one we actually know for sure we have good evidence was put on during those years, and thatwas the *Hippolytus* of Euripides, which was put on in 428. Now of course it's not - the *Hippolytus* isn't a play about plague it doesn't have plague in it any more than Shakespeare's plays had plagues in them, plays put on between 1603 and 1610, the years when plague came and went in Shakespeare's London. It’s a play about this beautiful, clean-living young man Hippolytus, who hates sex, and his passionate stepmother Phaedra, who simply cannot stop herself from becoming infatuated with him, cannot stop her desire for him. And you have actually four main people in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, all of them doing their best, it’s that there are no fools and there are no villains in this play, they're all of them doing their best to live as they can according to their own values, according to what they think is right, and all four of them come crashing down in disaster and the play ends with death and waste.

Now, why in 428 should people go on witnessing such suffering? Why in a time of such suffering? In 2020 it seems to me that with much less suffering we mostly – I speak myself anyway – turn to Netflix and turn to relatively lightweight television. So why did the Athenians think it was good for them to go on going to tragedies? And might the fact that they *did* have something to tell us about going to the theatre and something about tragedy? That's that's the question I want to set rolling. Now, I have got an idea that I'd like to try out later, about how they thought that tragedy might be good for them, but I think at this stage I really ought to hand over Fiona, and please Fiona go wherever you want, though there is a there is a question I’d quite like to start with, which is: when you perform tragedy do you have a sense of how your audience is receiving it and do you have a sense of what it's doing for them? Or is that not really a real question?

**Fiona Shaw:** I certainly don't perform tragedies for any medicinal reason, but I think that all theatre now is an attempt to get back to what must have been the stunning novelty of what it was to watch debates about the complexity of human life that the Greeks had. I suppose they went to the theatre didn't they because they wanted to learn the nuance of what it was to be human: what shall I do if this happens? What shall I do if my stepmother falls in love with me? What do I do if I've fallen in love with my stepson? These questions are the big questions and they're both engaging and distracting.

But I think in my case I've been stunned in my few experiences in Greek tragedy with the effect that Greek tragedy has on audiences. Particularly if you pull out the- if you try not to be too ritualistic with them but allow them to just *be*. But when you talk about plague the only time I ever performed anything in anything remotely like a time of plague was that when we first did *Electra* at the Barbican and then subsequently we remounted it, we took it to Derry in the North of Ireland in 1992 and in a week where there had been a terrible bomb in a local betting office and some people have been killed, so this was completely by accident, as was your *Hippolytus*, in the in the plague period. And we were there, we performed in a sports centre. And the audience came and we performed the play and as, you know, *Electra* is a strange little play because it's not really a play in which the protagonist has any flaw, particularly, I mean she may have flaws as a person, but they're not crucial to the action. She's a trapped observer of a terrible event and therefore wants the thing to be solved – resolved – by her brother killing her mother.

And John Lynch was from the North of Ireland – who played Orestes – and that was very powerful at the end of the play where he was able to stand and say to Aegisthus, you know, 'You killed my father, I’m going to kill you'. The play finishes quite quickly after that, there's no great grandeur in the play, Clytemnestra's dead and they just sort of – Aegisthus says 'All right I’m done for, then, and this is going to go on then,' and just leaves the stage, that's the end of the play. At that moment normally of course, we've been around the world by then, people applauded. There was complete silence in the auditorium. Complete silence. And I remember a sort of flame of panic going through me, I sort of thought we had offended, or we hadn't been good, or we hadn't done it well, though it had been the same as every other night. And the audience stood up, all of them stood up without communicating with each other in silence and they just stood. And the standing was clearly a compliment to return to the actors, the silence was they *couldn't* clap, because it was too near their recent experience.

So I suggested the audience that we would get washed, come out and talk – the actors to the audience. So we all came out, this 10 or 12 of us, and we all went around the auditorium, we stood, and I remember people berating us for putting on this play because they felt it encouraged vengeance. That the play was about vengeance. John's accent was local, quite by chance, and it seemed to have a kind of will for vengeance because we were halfway through the *Oresteia* – it could have kept going. And it was the most astonishing evenings of my life was that week, I'll never forget it – I realised that the plays were way beyond theatre, that they are, I don't know, spiritual 'bombs' is what they are.

**Oliver Taplin:** That's a – it's a very striking anecdote though, I mean, I thought it was going to go a different way, I remember Peter Stein saying that when he took *Three Sisters* to Moscow, at the end there was a long, long silence, he thought the thing had been a flop, and then there was the most terrific applause. But you had no applause. I’m fascinated with that because I've got a bit of a thing about curtain calls. It's always seemed to me that at the end of plays, but I’m thinking particularly of tragedy, that the transition of the curtain call between the world of the play and the world outside the play has a rather crucial place. That, particularly in a play where there's been death, and there've been – the dead have been there in the presence of the audience on stage and they've felt the presence of death, and then the dead person at the end stands up, smiles, takes the applause, it actually rather reminds me of Prospero at the end of *The Tempest* when- it's probably romantic to think that it's in some way Shakespeare giving up his art – but he says that by his so – 'By my so potent art' he's raised the dead from their graves. So I don't know whether, I mean, that's a really extraordinary story about a lack of curtain call.

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes. And it happened repeatedly, it happened the following day as well, by which time journalists began to turn up to write about this phenomenon because it seemed to happen quite un-self-consciously. But curtain calls are an interesting moment and when we finished *Medea* as you know, the children get killed, and even though sort of technically it was offstage, you saw one of the children running away from its mother and being caught, and of course the bodies are brought out which is a very important part of the play, and used to have a huge effect, particularly in New York. People used to faint, scream, lots of ambulances called. In fact, on one occasion we had to stop the play with the dead children under the arms. But at the end of the play, we would come out, the children dead, Medea back in some sort of circular nightmare with her husband Jason, and the audience would clap, clap and erupt and relieved that thing was over. And when the children came on they got the biggest clap of all. So the audience had imagined them dead and then were *so* relieved and, more than that, were complicit with their death. That's what I think.

**Oliver Taplin:** And then those children in *Medea* do actually speak and they actually sort of – I forget if they did in your play?

**Fiona Shaw:** They don't. I think they have a scene earlier with a with a man who's after them, there's a there's a fellow who – a tutor – who looks after them. But no they don't speak.

**Oliver Taplin:** At the time of the murder, they don't – you didn't have them sort of say, one says the other, 'Save me!' you know?

**Fiona Shaw:** I think we're all behind a glass thing so they just saw the child run and the mum go and grab the child.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes, that's the poor the child trying to escape. And yes, so intent on her revenge that-

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes, I mean at one point I just carried them I just call them, the Chorus knew that they were going to be killed and Medea just gathers the children and they come to her very happily and wander off with her and the audience are going 'No!' . But they have been collusive with the logic of the play up to that point and I mean, I think when you're talking about tragedy in the time of plague, I don't think the story has to be pertinent to the plague that is happening in the world, because of course we're all dealing with personal questions of ourselves, and I think the plays fundamentally deal with the domestic and the personal. That has huge political ramifications maybe. But I think that one of the biggest things I notice in plays and certainly *Medea* is that Medea herself is complicit with her past. She married a fellow she shouldn't have married, she left her home, she killed her brother, she ran off with this guy – the notion that she could start again in a new country free of any ramifications must be part of the reason she's furious when he leaves her. And in that way it's almost the beginning of subtext, a thing that we didn't think really came in until the 20th Century. But the Greeks, I think they understood that you're only telling the the iconic bit of the story but all the layers of the story as complex as we are, sit underneath, and you can find them.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes, I mean actually I can't resist trying out a little bit of classical scholarship on you on this matter because we know right back in the very early days of tragedy – and we're talking about the 490s, right at the beginning of the the fifth century – there was a very important city in Asia Minor called Miletus that was sacked by the Persians, horribly defeated by the Persians, and this city was very close to the Athenians, they had a lot of ties with it, so it was close to the Athenians' hearts. And a couple of years after that terrible event, a contemporary of Aeschylus called Phrynichus put on a play in which he dramatized the sack of Miletus. He dramatized this terrible event that happened two years earlier and the audience – the Athenians – were so distressed by – we know about this from Herodotus, so, you know, we have it from a source that is quite close to the thing happening, it's not just a later anecdote – he says the audience was so distressed at 'seeing their *own* troubles' that they fined him a very considerable fine and said that the play must never be put on again. And never again did Athenian tragedy directly dramatize what's going on just outside the theatre, the sufferings just outside the theatre and that in a way that's what happened in Derry, that you're just *too* close.

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes, I think that's right, that's very, very interesting. I think we're still like that, it's why people write very delicately shaded memoirs or rather call them fiction, I mean people call them fiction because we can't bear it if it's got the full glare of being actually ourselves. I think that's fair enough and I think also you know, performers, you're always performing a character but of course a huge part of it is performing yourself. It doesn't mean that you have to be the – all of us are potentially the protagonist of any play, that's the, that's the charm of it and the skill of it and the terror of it.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes, can I ask you because I know, Epidaurus, the wonderful theatre in Epidaurus, which I think when Callas sang *Medea* there rather - not Euripdes' *Medea* but Cherubini’s *Medea*, I think they managed to squeeze in 18,000 people. And you performed *Happy Days* what, about 10 years ago in that wonderful circle, that amazing performance space.And there you were in the Beckett, entirely by yourself with an audience of thousands, was that somehow different, a different kind of experience?

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes, and just before I say that, you know, it's interesting because I don't think the play *'Electra'* had been done very often in Derry before. So in a funny way it was a new play. In fact, going into the play in Derry, two boys were overheard one fellow saying ‘this play was performed first 400 years roughly BC, it took a long time to get to Derry. Well, when we went to Epidaurus, which is a fantastic thing to be allowed to do, we were one of the first new plays to be done in that space because it's been kept pretty sacredly since its finding hasn't it, as a a Greek tragedy spot.

And so we perform Beckett's *Happy Days* which is of course a modern tragedy and in that this woman, you know, goes on believing that she's high as a kite, every day being another lovely day, but in fact she's disintegrating fast, and time is sort of accelerating underneath her and therefore underneath the audience, and it was thrilling, all I remember is that I sat of course you know, in *Happy Days* the woman that sits with her first of all up to her waist, and in the next second half she's up to her neck in earth so she's – the visual image is just a picture but what she says is at odds with the picture, and there the drama sits, that's all it is, it's genius of Beckett. And the audience sat, and I had this vision as I looked out, I thought, I just have to take all these people in t-shirts and jeans and put them in togas or or gorgeous robes and I’m *there*, I am descended from those wonderful players who must have been here doing that. And I remember a bird singing and my voice – I didn't have any of course microphoning, you don't need it there – and just speaking and the silence, and the mountain, and the mountains beyond where the flames were lit to say that the Trojan War was over, and it was a moment where I stood, I felt between heaven and earth, you know, between eternity and you're both in the present and in imagination.

And you're in the play and it was absolutely mind-blowing, but the audience there come from Athens or from everywhere, some by boat, some by car, and some whatever way they can get there which is very like how they came before, that they would come together, so that the audience are coming in a slightly different way than the way they come when they buy their ticket in the West End, they're coming walk up a path, they have to arrive at the place, and they have to yield to the circular swirl of the magic that's going to be offered to them, and I think that's roughly the same.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes and it was a pilgrimage, I mean and when I first went there, a very long time ago there was no – the modern road that wasn't there – it took much longer to get to and as you say people come by boat and then from the harbour about 10 miles away, they get the bus up to the theatre, but most of the people came in buses.

**Fiona Shaw:**  And they went back to discuss the play all week presumably or all year until the next play, because they knew the play *was* about them even if it wasn't directly about them, it was about them and how they were going to proceed and I wonder whether your question at the beginning is, you know, should we be doing a trilogy or Greek tragedies on Netflix so that we're all dealing with those questions, or have the questions changed?

Or have the, you know, who are our who are our heroes or are who are our demons you know? Are the government, when they make these terrible mistakes, killing us, you know? These are the questions that we may want to ask but if we ask them too directly, we won't be able to answer them in the glare of political choice.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes, but also I mean watching them on a television screen is so different from this sense of pilgrimage, this sense of coming to a special place. I mean, I love it when the theatre is site-specific and people have to come to it as a pilgrimage and actually that's particularly relevant to Epidaurus because the town of Epidaurus was down on the coast and what you with the theatre is part of a place of healing, sacred to Asclepius, where people would come for cures and healing and every year there was a big, big festival and there used to be a procession coming up the hill from the town and so on, and so people would gather there and when they watched a play in ancient times they were in a place of healing and I think perhaps still there's something of a sense of a place of healing, there's a wonderful Seamus Heaney poem called ‘Out of the bag’, where he writes about Epidaurus as a place of healing and that brings us back to plague of course.

**Fiona Shaw:** I do think they're about healing, they lance a boil often, they dare to face into something and allow the action to unfold in front of them. But at their best you see I have this theory, but it really comes from playing Shakespeare, that because we tend to breathe with the actor if we are engaged with the play or the actor is so enthusiastic that your heart begins to race with the actor then you're sort of at one with the actor, so I’ve begun to think that the audience aren't just watching the play like *watching* *it*, they are *in it*, they are part of it, they also take out the sword at that moment. They – in their mind's eye they identify with it, because their blood is sort of pumping at the same rate as the actors – at, you know, that’s a good play, a bad day you're asleep.

**Oliver Taplin:** They're living with it, yes

**Fiona Shaw:** They're complicit with it, and they have enacted it themselves and ideally they should be tired too at the end of watching a play. But it does heal them because they have, you know, vicariously done that action or forgiven themselves that action or resolved that action or that family.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes that I think this is the opportunity for me to say the idea I had about tragedy with a kind of medical metaphor, because you said that they're tired at the end and that that reminds me though of what people usually say about the effect of Greek tragedy on the audience, which they've derived from Aristotle, which is catharsis. I mean Aristotle and his *Poetics* contributed the word catharsis to the languages of the world and it's a word that's used every day, but catharsis has something to do with cleaning, purifying. And most people think they know or perhaps we think we know what catharsis is because at the end we feel somehow washed out, and we feel we've been cleansed of something. But I’m not sure that is the right metaphor, and there's another semi-medical metaphor which I think might be better because I feel that at the end of the tragedy the audience doesn't leave something behind but take something with them, takes with them kind of antibodies.

And so I was very excited when I came across the metaphor in Friedrich Schiller – he's the the poet of the ‘Ode to Joy’, you know, which is now the European hymn, who in, I think it's 1792, coined the phrase, who said that tragedy was an ‘inoculation’, an ‘inoculation against the inevitable.’ And he meant, and it didn't mean that the inevitability that is the inevitability of suffering, the inevitability of mortality, of course it doesn't stop people *catching* suffering and *catching* mortality and that isn't I think what ‘inoculation’ quite meant to Schiller, but it protected them and made them better able to cope perhaps better able to understand their suffering. This is just four years before Jenner discovered vaccination and coined the word ‘vaccination’, so what I’d like to try out is the idea that tragedy, instead of being catharsis, instead of being a leaving behind, you take with you into your life afterwards, and inoculate-

**Fiona Shaw:** -And our ailment, what would you say our ailment – obviously in the big world is this is this virus, but our ailment is ignorance isn't it, and the plays can help you with ignorance, with our ignorance about family or bad action or the consequence of action, ignorance. And the Greeks are very good at dealing with it but they don't give you as you say a *knowledge*, so the inoculation doesn't mean that you will never participate, you will never do anything wrong, nothing will ever go wrong, but you are mildly defended against it, yeah.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yeah.

**Fiona Shaw:** Or you have a way of coping with it, or you won't go mad, at least you'll understand it. I’m obsessed with reading every day, you know, the amount of people who've died in this country and of course it's a completely useless number, but it does make me feel I have a sense of how present the virus is. I know how many people have died of it and it also goes on reminding me of how serious it is. So none of this cures us of the virus but it allows them to cope with it doesn't it

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes, and to have some understanding and not just to feel you're driven crazy by the complete meaninglessness and-

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes, well randomness, randomness is a terrible thing and I think, you know, the Greeks don't shirk from that, they say the gods are random, so they don't feel comforted that well ‘Oh the gods are random so anything can happen.’

**Oliver Taplin:** But also I think the other thing is that the artistry, the art form and the art and craft of the performance as well create a shape, they create a form, they can in some in some way they contain it. And so that instead of it's just being a meaningless kind of splurge of cacophony and of randomness, the suffering is given music, is given poetry, is given the voice.

**Fiona Shaw:** And when you say ‘vaccine’, you know, in a way each new generation of actors has to create a vaccine because playing the same old words the same old way or borrowing another style from another time doesn't have the effect on the audience that you're talking about, the inoculation. It has to be a new strain of vaccine so that's I think what the actors spend their time doing, trying to find a new way of doing it which replies usually to the moment that we're in, both vocally in terms of the psychology of the moment we're in and the way we are, because otherwise the thing doesn't have its magic.

**Oliver Taplin:** I’m very taken with what you say about the physical experience of the audience, that they have a somatic response that is somehow in in tune with either the heartbeat, the sweat, the fear-

**Fiona Shaw:**  They think now that the synapse in the mind – the synapses – are doing the similar thing both in the actor and in the audience, if the audience are attuned and the actor's job in a way is to – I won't use your inoculation – is to stun the audience into joining the story. Otherwise they're thinking ‘Oh gosh I must bake a cake when I get home’ or something.

**Oliver Taplin:** They have to been drawn right into the world.

**Fiona Shaw:**  Yes, come into the world and the mental energy of the actor is to will that to happen, and the director and the lighting and the event has to, has to sort of charge them and increase their energy to a much higher level than it was when they sat down. It's why Peter Brook says you know, the blackness of the theatre just before a play starts, that moment is the most important moment of silence because it is not the moment of the grave, it is the moment of expectation. And that's when the whole thing will suddenly – \*whoosh\* – reveal, it won't reveal in a moment, but you're drawn into a revelation and you will leave, ideally, the theatre just with that in your pocket or in your mind or yeah

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes, you've taken it in, that’s the point.

**Fiona Shaw:** And no it’s not there to cure you, because you can't be cured of life and soul!

**Oliver Taplin:** No, but it gives you gives you a kind of a protection of understanding, but then what you're saying – making films then must be very, very different.

**Fiona Shaw:** Making films – I’m sure the film editor and the film director have a great fun making the effects on people but to perform in a film is to perform in silence in a room, it's a bit like this time of Covid, it’s that you are performing with a group of people, you make the thing happen, it’s put in a box, it’s taken away and you never see it again, so you know, when I watch myself on a piece of film or television, I don't relate to it at all, it's not happening in that moment, it happened months ago.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yeah and then you have no curtain call and, you know, the dead stay dead, they don't stand up again.

**Fiona Shaw:**  Yeah, yes, I remember the end of *Hedda Gabler* which we filmed for the BBC, and at the very end we ran out of time and money, ran out of everything and Hedda Gabler had to die and so I went \*bang\* and I lay down and a lady ran in put some blood quickly on my brain, and they just froze it and they cut and they were able to extend that, you know, that dead shot of Hedda on the ground, but they had to extend it, they had to invent it, in fact I was only on the ground for a second because the whole thing-

**Oliver Taplin:** I love, I’m passionate about Chekhov, and you – I regard those as tragedies – and you did *The Seagull*, didn't you?

**Fiona Shaw:**  I did *The Seagull*, Peter Stein, for the Edinburgh festival, and he is very keen on Greek tragedy and he particularly likes that it should only be on once, he likes the thing happening on one night, he never watches it again he only watches the first night, he's not interested in previews and making it better, he thinks the group come together, an audience come, and it happens in that first performance. It's a very old-fashioned, you know, but maybe very profound relationship to it but we did *The Seagull* and he had, he had two wonderful ideas, one was that the silence that the group of people watching the play in Act One have when they look out of the – in the cliché Chekhovian situation of looking out of the forest – and somebody finally says, ‘Ah,’ you know. Something about that pause is written in as a pause, and the pause used to be about 10 seconds in English shows, or maybe 15, but with Peter it was two and a half minutes. And we sat for two and a half minutes, which sounds in the theatre like two and a half *hours*, and the audience began to first smile, then titter, then go silent and then weep. So that's the power of the emptiness of a non-event, of an event that is nothing in theatre and it just went silent and for two arguments at the end of the play – they're all playing a card game and contemplating committing suicide, \*phone dings\* – I’m so sorry this is not my machine – and at the end they play and replay a card game, so Konstantin’s shot, somebody says ‘What's that?’, you hear a gunshot, they say nothing and they go back to play the card game and they use exactly the same numbers as we used in the previous game. So it was as if time went forward and then went \*whoa\* back. It was utterly genius it felt like time had been held. \*phone dings\* Sorry, I don't know how to do this!

**Oliver Taplin:** That's all right. He did do a wonderful *Oresteia* and I didn't see it in Berlin the original production, I saw it in Russian in the theatre of Epidaurus, it finished at four o'clock in the morning. And everybody said that the Russian – the production in Russian – wasn't really as good as the production had been back in Berlin in 1980- 81. But it was still quite something, one of the great directors, yes.

**Fiona Shaw:** I did fly to Epidaurus for one night – the maddest thing I ever did – I flew to Greece for one night to watch *'Electra'* at Epidaurus that Peter Stein did. I did go one night.

**Oliver Taplin:** On yes, the 'Electra' yes.

**Fiona Shaw:** With a good bath with gold light coming out of it.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes, and I loved… there were cattle troughs weren’t there, and when Electra has succeeded in luring her mother to her death, and she was wearing these terrible black rags, and she would sweep the stage and then she plunged into one of these things and came out and was dressed in white. Yes, it was very memorable.

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes, he always does a bit of magic for somebody who's searingly for the truth, he finds it through the spin of magic.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes, but I remember you in black as *Electra* in the Barbican, it was something.

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes, yeah.

**Oliver Taplin:** And, yes, did I imagine it, or did you throw a pomegranate on the ground?

**Fiona Shaw:** I did, in fact it was quite by chance. Deborah the director brought in pomegranates one morning and they were being held, just we were just using them, and I threw these two pomegranates on the ground and they split open and the audience used to go mad as if they were, because of course they've been talking about dead heads and cutting heads open right up to that moment I mean, ‘Split his skull with a blood red axe’ is Electra's first lines, or one of her first lines, and so they split open and everybody just got stunned as if these two heads split open.

It's a marvellous play because it's a small play but in it all the pain of people in the play is explored and I think it's one of the great, great plays because it's very rarely done because it doesn't seem to have much going for it, but it's, because it's a side-long play, just a play about a girl who everybody’s forgotten. But it's not really about her, it's really about Orestes coming home. And it's full of dramatic irony the audience meet Orestes at the very beginning of the play and they see him. Then a door – he disappears, a girl comes on and says 'Oh my brother will never come home' and the audience go 'He is home, he is home!'. It's just the way in which the Greeks understood those necessities at the theatre so early is breathtaking.

**Oliver Taplin:** I would love to continue – we could continue this, obviously for the for the whole hour but we're also really good to – I don't know if Wes is there, whether it's a good time for us to start inviting some questions?

**Wes Williams:** I am indeed here. I could happily listen to more stories about pomegranates and what have you, for a while yet but, there are a whole bunch of questions that have come in so I'll pass some of them to you and see what you make of them. In particular, I guess we might start with the ones that are looking at where your discussion started, in other words, theatre in a time of plague, and the kind of correlation between then and now, and there's a number of questions that are all sort of similar in a way and they're asking so we knew, we know thanks to various historians and tragedians what the plague was like for them. Do you imagine that we ought to be somehow representing the plague for the future generations? What we're going through now, is it our job to sort of tell people thousands of years down the line what it's like for us?

**Oliver Taplin:** I think there's something, as Fiona said, you don't – to make a thing effective you don't put it straight on, it has to be, it has to be made real through other people, so I think if we're to do that, you know, it's not a matter of describing and it's not a matter of realistically portraying, but a matter of somehow conveying how it affects people, what it does to people. And I think rightly there's been quite a lot of emphasis on the mental health dimension of this lockdown which is has been pretty terrible I think for many, many families.

**Wes Williams:** It goes to the question of closeness and distance, that sort of ran through some of your discussion, whether it's in relation to the Derry performance or in relation to, you'll forgive me I hope Oliver, I can't remember the name of the playwright who was banned from ever writing a play so close to the events again. I mean I’m somebody who works on 16thand 17th century French writing and tragedy as well, where again, they're sort of, there's an agreement that you can't possibly write about the recent civil war in a tragedy directly. Whereas you might do it indirectly. I’m just inviting you to think a bit more about this whole sort of question of indirection or closeness and distance, because there's a number of questions in that in that sort of area.

**Fiona Shaw:** We don't know the stories yet do we? I mean, you know, they say that domestic violence has shot up, there'll be some extraordinary stories about people being locked in together and what that has done that was something into the area which is often the emergency area of Greek tragedy. And I think there was a very interesting moment which would be too personal to ever write about in a play, but the moment that the Prime Minister was at death's door is a very interesting moment, given his policies being perceived as cavalier until then. I mean they're the moments that would produce drama, but of course you'd have to change the names and change – but there was a moment when we were in a moment of potential change, which is what tragedies do portray, huge change. and that might have gone the other way you know and then it would have been an element of tragedy so tragedy hovers like a virus.

**Oliver Taplin:** And it has to be made particular, and almost all Greek tragedies are much, much concerned with the family. The family is at the core of this. There's a wonderful story of a French sage who was told in Mao's china that the Chinese had done away with the family and he said but 'This is terrible, it's the end of tragedy'. So if there's going to be a future way of bringing home what it's been like-

**Fiona Shaw:**  But the plays will be changed, won't they, by what's happened because we are much more in touch with things. Now *Antigone*, you know, people not being able to bury their families, we're already in act one of *Antigone*. Everybody is, who has a dead relative they're not being allowed to bury. What is the effect on the on the family or on the people mourning, to be not allowed buried your dead? I mean that's something very profound and will have a terrible effect on us that we haven't yet...

**Oliver Taplin:** That’s been one of the most terrible things. And we know in Athens at the time of the plague that there weren't proper funerals and they've excavated some mass burials because there was no time to have proper funerals.

**Wes Williams:** No, I think – I’m sure – that's a very strong recurrent theme both in, well, in a whole range of Greek plays about, the right to grieve and the right to bury one's dead and again there's been, I’m sure that's a thing that we'll return to. Another sort of contemporary/ancient question that's come up which actually speaks to your 'inoculation’ theory Oliver, which is: so, the Greeks carried on through their plague; we've stopped. Are we missing something important, therefore, by not having the inoculation of tragedy during the plague itself?

**Oliver Taplin:** I mean it seems to me the most obvious thing we're missing is the is the communal, the communality of going to the theatre. You go with all these other people and you gather close together in a way that we can't and experience what Fiona was talking about, that you enter into the world of the play, you become physically and psychologically part of that world for the duration of the play. And we're certainly missing, we're missing communality aren't we, and even there was a live stream from Epidaurus just the other evening of Aeschylus' *The Persians* which we watched on the tiny little iPad at home and I didn't see the audience gathering. I gather we started watching the beginning but I gathered that people saw the audience gathering and that they were all had to be socially distanced of course, did you see that Fiona?

**Fiona Shaw:** I saw them all coming in and there were some groups of two or three together and then suddenly a big empty, you know, it felt like a half empty theatre!

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes, and then at the end of Epidaurus, when you leave you leave in this great sort of wave of humanity and at the end they said ‘Now we'll have- we've got to get, we've got to go out row by row and please observe the distance between each person as you leave.’

**Wes Williams:** Again that speaks, if I may, that speaks to a number of questions where people have picked up on Fiona's use of the word ‘bond.’ You talked about a bond between the audience and the performers and so on and there's clearly a good few people worrying that somehow that bond is broken. kind of either, well it's clearly temporarily broken but there's people worrying as to whether it sort of irrevocably broken, or whether we can somehow get back to that, even in a socially distanced theatre space do we…

**Fiona Shaw:** Yeah maybe Oliver could talk about this in the Greek context because you know the theatre had to be invented obviously and it got better, it obviously hit some point in our communal life that we thought ‘This is a really good idea’, so they built these vast amphitheatres so cities could come and be together and I think it is broken, yes, I don't think – I certainly would want to be in a theatre, I wouldn't want to be in a half-filled theatre because my association is that you are shoulder to shoulder with somebody. It's something we didn't take much notice of until this Covid, we didn't notice how important the cram getting in matters, the cram of sitting next to strangers matters. I don't think we realized it until now, and that, it's broken, it's going to be quite broken for a long time, I don't know, young people might break through it and not mind but if it goes on being airborne and can be carried by asymptomatic young people then none of us want that to happen, right?

**Wes Williams:** And then in that sense then an Epidaurus type outdoor auditorium or space is not going to make any difference really.

**Oliver Taplin:** Better than nothing!

**Wes Williams:** Sorry?

**Oliver Taplin:** Better than nothing.

**Wes Williams:** Well yes.

**Oliver Taplin:** But I agree with Fiona, we won't be able to get back that sense of the shared experience until we're all crammed together again.

**Fiona Shaw:** Until we're not still suspicious of each other, you know, now we've turned each other into potential enemies you know, unwittingly, but unwitting enemies. That's not what theatre's about!

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes. Well, I do hope, Fiona, that once we can once again get audiences together that you will do another tragedy for us.

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes, I can feel one coming on!

**Wes Williams:** Another question that's come through is in a sense – it's funny because they're quite a few of the questions are somatic and to do with the bodily, the bodily experience of being there – and another one is actually directed to you as a performer, Fiona, in terms of character. So you talked about how, you know, a performer needs to find the character inside them and so on somebody's asking a sort of reverse question which is ‘Have you ever found it difficult to shrug off a character, and has a character's misery, feelings and so on leaked into your own personal feeling whether that's Medea or Winnie or you know has that gone on beyond the end of the show for you?

**Fiona Shaw:** I've always denied that they have anyeffect on me but Ithink given that I haven't performed on stage for a bit I can see the effectthey did have on me. When I did *Medea*on Broadway we were doing eight shows aweek and you know, at its best – I was saying this recently to Oliver – that at its best, when you're performing the play you're not doing the play at the audience, you're experiencing the thing as new and you're just as surprise when a messenger turns up as the audience is, you’re thinking ‘Oh my goodness!’ as he turns up, because you're so on the track of the play you're just following the track. It's like watching a movie whilst being in it. It's in, in that way also the actors are part of the communality of it so sorry I've forgotten your question now!

**Wes Williams:** Well so does…

**Fiona Shaw:** Well, taking it off, you know, I never had a problem shaking it off but I did takeabout a year to get over *Medea*.

**Wes Williams:** Right.

**Fiona Shaw:** So, something must have affected me! I think it made me depressed, I used to wake up on a Monday very depressed and I think it wasn't the sorrow of the story of the play, but the mental concentration on that sort of subject all week isn't good for you necessarily.

**Wes Williams:** One might ask a similar question of a scholar – Oliver has all this time spent with tragedies done you harm?

**Oliver Taplin:** Well, it may well have- I've always thought that actually a scholar who's going to work on tragedy needs to be – have some equanimity. I’m always reminded this wonderful- this is a tangent but you'll see where I’m coming from- a book I read many years ago by Alfred Harbage in which he made up two episodes from Shakespeare's life, and they're letters, and Shakespeare, in one of them Shakespeare says 'I’m absolutely utterly depressed at the moment’ that, I think, ‘the plague is absolutely terrible life is awful, and I’m composing *Twelfth Night*, and then another one, he says 'Everything's going so well, it's been a mighty success, the theatre is thriving, my family’s happy, and I’m writing *King Lear.*' I feel that in order to be a scholar of tragedy you have to have, you do have to have some resilience and some ability to make fun of it almost.

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes.

**Oliver Taplin:** And whether that's done me harm or good, I've seen an awful lot of tragedies in my life, an awful lot that were done well – some absolutely wonderful memorable ones – we've touched on a few of those this evening and some terrible ones.

**Wes Williams:** Fiona you said ‘yes’ to ‘fun’?

**Fiona Shaw:**  Well I think Oliver, you know, when he's taught brilliantly about tragedy has made a whole generation of all his students and generations of his students love the humanity within the plays, and in the end when he says ‘fun’ there's a huge amount of humour in *Medea* and it's not 'olde' Greek humour, it's the humour of people just being together and their sense of betrayal about each other, what women say about men what men say about women remains as true, you know, now as it was then and all the same problems arrive in a marriage and recognition of those problems makes people laugh a lot and that's a- that's a great, a huge pleasure. And when I did *Electra* I used to adore the kind of fights with Clytemnestra where she says 'I want to hit you' and she couldn't hit me and she was trying to hit me, you know, all of these things are very humorous but they're part of what happens when you add flesh to these brilliantly spare words.

**Oliver Taplin:** And there's a kind of bitterness and a sweetness, it makes me think of Keats on *King Lear* when he says he must ‘taste the bittersweet of this Shakespearean fruit'

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes.

**Oliver Taplin:** Thinking in *Medea* for example when she says to Jason, 'go off' you know, 'go off and enjoy your new bit of skirt. And it's bitter and sweet.

**Wes Williams:** As often happens on these events you're already answering some of the questions that are coming in, and in particular I think in a way you've already answered this question but you might want to take it on more straightforwardly which is what do you think, Fiona, that Euripedes and the other tragedians and the Greek audience would have made of your version of *Medea*? Is it – would they recognize in the way that you're talking about a kind of essential human or a set of human traits there or would you ever do this kind of plot transplanting of ‘what would they make of what I’m doing’ in the same way as ‘I’m making something of what they made’?

**Fiona Shaw:** It's very hard always isn’t it to talk about, I mean they probably wouldn't understand a thing we were doing but they would be shocked I suppose at the amount of violence that we now allow on the stage when they didn't need it. They were more innocent and therefore more shockable and I think they were all the better for that. That doesn't mean they were unsophisticated but they weren't -we've become very jaded by, you know, watching too many movies so I think we now are always trying to – not be more violent, but we have to somehow slip the violence in in a way that really arrests the audience. I think they didn't need that they needed to *hear* that somebody was being murdered and they were probably covering their faces, I think they were much more innocent. I hope I’m right.

**Oliver Taplin:** It is interesting that in *Hippolytus*, actually, Hippolytus is brought on having had this terrible – his chariot has smashed and he's been dragged along the ground, and he's brought on dying, mangled and dying, and does die just before the end of the play which is unusual for us.

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes, so they see him.

**Wes Williams:** Yes so that’s as it were dying ‘live on stage’, inside the play as opposed to in a messenger speech or off, offstage.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes, yes.

**Wes Williams:**  Okay yeah only because again as somebody who works on Racine he's busy dying off stage and it's the big long speech about *how* he's mangled and all the rest of it that affects the audience most. Where precisely what you're saying Fiona you know about *hearing* about it is also kind of physically affecting.

**Fiona Shaw:** Yeah and the messenger speeches are always very good in Greek tragedies they do tend – I mean you need a very, very good actor to be the messenger – to say ‘this is what happened.’ I mean the chariot race which is - it was a line in *Electra* ‘and then he hit the post and he came around again and he turned over and mangled’ and the audience – I mean if it's well written and well performed you see the race much more clearly than if you were trying to make the race happen in a flashback, you know, it's still the active imagination but when it's fused with good writing it's unmatchable

**Wes Williams:** Talking about well written and well performed a few questions, a few people have asked both of you actually: what are some of your favourite versions or productions of tragedies in the last few years? They're asking you to reminisce a bit, but to remember what worked for you?

**Fiona Shaw:** I adored *Iphigenia* *in Aulis* at Ariane Mnouchkine Theatre because I love seeing plays in other languages, I mean, my French is as awkward as it can be but I can *enjoy it*. I just thought that was superb. There's a section in it where the Chorus were dancing and Iphigenia has agreed to die and she's being taken by the Chorus which is, you know, the force, you don't have to know anything academic about the play to *feel* it they're just with, her pushing her towards her death, and the mother was trying to stop the Chorus by holding onto their legs. It was pitiful and they kept dancing she saw the force of Fate was so much greater than a mother just trying to stop any random person by their legs that's one of the greatest things I've ever seen.

**Oliver Taplin:** I would agree, I think Ariane Ruskin’s *Les Sylphides* is one of the greatest performances I've seen. If we're talking about Greek tragedy, I was personally involved in the Peter Hall/TonyHarrison*Oresteia*, you know,

**Wes Williams:** Ah! I went to see that as a young kid, so that tells you how old I am!

**Oliver Taplin:** I went to rehearsals, I mean, I just used to answer questions, but that had a huge effect on me in a very strong memory. *Electra* in the Barbican, the very strong– another *Medea*, Ninagawa– Yukio Ninagawa's *Medea*, I thought was absolutely wonderful and memorable. Katie Mitchell did a great *Trojan Women* didn't she?

**Wes Williams:** Yes, also did a great *Iphigenia*, didn’t she?

**Oliver Taplin:** Yes, and Peter Stein again, you know, I regard- so I mean we're naming the great directors of our day really.

**Wes Williams:** Yeah, we are- we should, yeah, we should have you all around a table one day. Sorry?

**Oliver Taplin:** We're going to add Deborah Warner as well for *Medea*, and *Electra*.

**Wes Williams:** Yes, okay we've got time fora few more questions and the next one has to do with a sort of, it's a variant on the ‘bond’ that you talked about Fiona. You also talked about complicity and at one point ‘collusion’, you had a lovely phrase, I wrote it down, that ‘The audience are collusive in the logic of revenge’ in the plays, and I just wondered if you might think, both of you, a bit more about that side of the ‘bond’ that performance creates between an audience and the performers. So it's not just a bond of community and if you like, feeling cramped in and close next to each other it's also somehow complicit in the terrible things that are happening in front of us.

**Fiona Shaw:** Yes, a play I played a very small part in well maybe I played – was on the radio, I was in *Oedipus* but, you know, *Oedipus*, his wife says to him, you know, he says ‘what was what was your husband like?’ and she says, 'He looked very like you?'. Now, you know, there is such – that was so daring like a matador the writing comes right up to Oedipus and says ‘dare you *not* notice that she says that the man you killed looked a bit like you and you were running away from the fate’. You know, he's colluding at some level and I think that sort of writing is genius because we all know when we get a funny feeling about something we're usually right, because the information has been given you just haven't wanted to take it. I think that the plays are full of that and in that way they're very sophisticated they're not just arguments, arguments, arguments , arguments. Electra hates her mother, why? Because she overly loves her father, you know, that's a fault.

**Oliver Taplin:** I liked your idea also that the audience is drawn in to collude with the characters and you don't only collude with the nice people you don't only collude with the sweet and innocent. And revenge is very, very important here and you know you understand revenge, you know you may not like it, it's horrifying, it can lead to terrible vendettas and so on, but you understand it. In fact, I jotted it down because Shylock's speech which- it starts, you know, ‘Has not a Jew hands?’ and which ends in, you know, ‘so shall we not have revenge’. And it includes in it, when he talks about the humanity that that Jews share with the Christians in the play: ‘Are we not subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means?’

It seemed to me that's so striking, that one of the things that's happened you know, to humanity now you know we're told that universalization is a very dangerous, a problematic idea, but with this COVID, it's shared by all humanity, we are subject to the same diseases and healed by the same means. So that's perhaps a bit of a ramble-

**Wes Williams:** Not at all Oliver, in fact, it precisely addresses another one of the questions which perhaps we can end with which is, so, looking back at the Greek plays there's the whole notion of hubris and other kind of tragic flaws and so on – might we think that Covid and this plague has revealed a number of flaws which are endemic in our society? One of them is precisely what you were talking about just now, the degree to which universality is or isn't accepted and the degree of humanity of others is or isn't accepted and, yeah can we believe that theatre will somehow remind us, restore us, give us back something of that collective humanity, or is that too romantic of us?

**Fiona Shaw:** The messenger in *Medea* says ‘Call no man happy for no man is.’ I’ve always though that’s one of the great, great lines of all time, but we *thought* we were happy.

**Oliver Taplin:** Yeah, I mean I don't think the plays are, they're not crime and punishment plays, none of the great tragedies are a simple crime and punishment, you know the people do wrong and then they get struck down for it it's not as simple as that. But I mean you're right that there are lessons aren't there. I mean people are learning lessons about our – particularly I think the environmental lessons that are coming out of this, that, you know, we've maltreated our world. And James Lovelock is now about 103 or something like that, saying with the ‘Gaia’ that, you know, we've maltreated the world and the world will maltreat humanity back if we don't look out.

**Fiona Shaw:** I think we know that isn't it, that's why there's a slight sort of embarrassment about this thing, we can't really blame it despite maybe America trying to blame China for it but actually we all know there's a sort of group responsibility for what's happened. Every plastic bag we jump into the sea every- you know, we we're all part of that.

**Wes Williams:** But again I think that takes us back to Oliver's theory of ‘inoculation’ in a way, which is that the plays, in some sense, tell us stuff we already know, but that we didn't want to acknowledge, or that didn't feel, you know – is that right or whatever or I mean am I misinterpreting your theory?

**Oliver Taplin:** No, I think that's actually developing- it's going *beyond* what I’d thought and I like it a lot. And then, you know, I hope we can salvage something from this bad time, this time when we haven't been able to gather together in theatres, we haven't been able to have close physical contact with people. And as I think you were saying, Fiona you know we distrust people, right? We were in the queue the other day in the supermarket and these people behind us kept on coming up to about a foot behind us, you know, and we got very angry about it. But this time it's- I do hope that you're right that we'll learn something from it and take something, like an inoculation, away from it.

**Wes Williams:** Fiona do you wish to add to that to have the last word?

**Fiona Shaw:** No I think you should have the last word! But you see, something about what Oliver says about it, it's about being hum- we have to be humble now in relation to this, and it's how you get to discover plays, actually, is to be humble in the knowledge as you try and discover what's in them, just be humble and maybe something comes in.

**Wes Williams:** Well one thing that we have gained fromthese times is this kind of event and it's now time I think to draw this particular one to a close but not before thanking both of you enormously for standing up to the challenge of doing this weird thing online and so on and so forth. But it's been an enormous pleasure, certainly for me, and I think for others out there, judging from the questions that have come in. You might like to know that we've had people in the UK, US, India, Brazil, Canada, Greece, and more here, so before I do a little spiel about the end of the series, once again enormous thanks, Oliver, and enormous thanks to you also, Fiona.

**Oliver Taplin:** Thank you it's been great fun.

**Wes Williams:** So that brings us sadly to an end this evening. Of course, once again thank you to our amazing speakers for this inspiring and enjoyable session. Thank you also to all the viewers at home for watching, and for your comments and questions. Thank you too to the others who will join us another time in other words who aren't watching live but will join later on YouTube. And I also want to thank again everyone at TORCH who's made this possible. We have, at TORCH, been effectively blown away by the phenomenal support and encouragement that we've received in this 'Big Tent' live series as we ventured into a new digital format. I think it's worth saying that over the course of the series we've been joined by over 20,000 viewers from 23 countries.

So the kinds of ‘bonds’ that we've been talking about this this evening or in the last hour or so, are clearly there and waiting to happen and indeed instantiated in this series amongst other things. Tonight's event was the last for this term, but we do hope you'll join us again when we come back in September – we're all taking a break for August – come back in September for more ‘Big Tent’ live events. If you would like to look back, all 17 events from the series are, as I say, available to watch again on our website via the YouTube channel ‘TORCH Oxford,’ and in fact if you have any thoughts or comments about any of the events you viewed as part of this series, please do take a moment to let us know.

You'll find a link in the event description and the live chat below: it'll help us as we kind of craft the next series because it looks like we might be in this mode for some time to come. We wish you all a relaxing and enjoyable August wherever you may be and look forward to welcoming you back to our Big Tent again in September.

Thank you, Oliver and Fiona, again and thank you all, and goodbye for now.