

# **GA TING ("Family"):** *Tragedy in the Absence of Queer Sons*

*This paper is dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives during the Orlando nightclub shooting on June 12, 2016. Sending prayers to the many injured people and front line workers who were impacted by this event and deep condolences to the many families, friends and loved ones who are left grieving over this tragedy.*

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Minh Ly's *Ga Ting* ("Family"), is a new play developed by the Frank Theatre Company, in association with Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre. The professional Canadian premiere took place at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, March 8-19, 2016. The play features two Asian Canadian parents and their son's Caucasian boyfriend as they negotiate a family loss and the absence of Kevin, the couple's deceased son. The play revolves around three main characters: Hong, the father (BC Lee), Mai, the mother (Alannah Ong), and Matt, the deceased son's boyfriend (Brian Sutton), wrestling over the details of Kevin's life and the impacts of his untimely and unexpected death. This paper is inspired by the professional premiere of the play and two lingering questions: First of all, how does the tradition of western tragedy inform the reception of contemporary, Intercultural, Asian Canadian Theatre? Second, how would a queer-themed Canadian play, such as *Ga Ting*, expand definitions of the "tragedy of passion"? Minh Ly's play reveals how characters of seemingly different backgrounds work through the circuitous process of grief in order to create a community of interest founded upon larger goals such as healing and reconciliation. As such, I argue that *Ga Ting* ("Family") offers audiences an updated and highly relevant form of tragedy for contemporary society, one that explores same-sex love and the impacts of queer death on family, friends, and communities, writ large.

### **PART ONE: A *Brief Primer on Tragedies of Passion***

*Ga Ting* has been variously described as a Chinese-family-drama and an example of Queer theatre. This certainly makes sense: *Ga Ting* is the Cantonese word for "Family," and its themes of conflict, acceptance, and familial

death raise issues specific to the genre known as tragedy. Arguably, Minh Ly's debut script will likely be documented as part of both the growing body of Asian Canadian and Queer Theatre taking place in Canada. Yet, I would like to position the play as part of the genre known as the "tragedy of passion." In his book, *Fools of Time*, Northrop Frye delineates tragedy into three particular categories: *tragedy of order*, *tragedy of passion*, and *tragedy of isolation*:

There is, first, a social tragedy, with its roots in history, concerned with the fall of princes. There is, second, a tragedy that deals with the separation of lovers, the conflict of duty and passion, or the conflict of social and personal (sexual or family) interests. And there is, third, a tragedy in which the hero is removed from his social context, and is compelled to search for a purely individual identity." (16)

Elaborating further, Frye finds precedents for these categories in the Western theatrical tradition. He deftly observes: "In Greek drama, these tragic structures might be called the Agamemnon type, the Antigone type, and the Oedipus type." (16). Frye also connects the second, Antigone type tragedy with a subsequent, Elizabethan counterpart, known as "the tragedy of the sacrifice of the son." (16). It seems as if these recurring elements—such as the separation of lovers, conflict of duty, and the sacrifice of the son—are to be found in many renowned, works of tragedy, both classic and contemporary. For example, in an adapted version of *Antigone*, the "tragedy of the sacrifice of the son" unfolds as Creon speaks bluntly about the plight of Oedipus' two sons, and his warring nephews:

Eteocles fought for the city, and for it he died...  
As for his blood brother, Polyneices by name,  
He broke his exile, he came back hungry for our blood,  
He wanted to burn his fatherland and family gods...

No one in Thebes may bury him or mourn for him.  
He must be left unburied. May birds and dogs

Feed on his limbs, a spectacle of utter shame." (Sophocles 9)

While it remains beyond the scope of this paper to engage in a detailed, line-by-line comparison between *Antigone* and *Ga Ting*, I would like to draw attention to the fact that both plays embrace narratives that manifest Frye's criteria. In each play, there is a separation of lovers, a conflict of duty and passion, a conflict of social and personal, sexual and family interests, not to mention a sacrifice of the son. By positioning a contemporary theatre work such as *Ga Ting* within the constantly evolving tradition of tragedy (alongside its many classics), I hope to broaden the reading of Queer and Intercultural Theatre. Others seem to concur with broad attempts at contextualization, in so far as "the increasing significance of cross-cultural theatre both within the academy and the performing arts industries in the West demands that this practice be critically situated within a historicized and politicized configuration." (Lo/Gilbert 31) As any overview of tragedies of passion would reveal, such works are also marked by a common feature; namely, the death of a family member or lover. This recurring motif anchors the sub-genre with a sense of familiarity and gravitas.<sup>1</sup> I return to these motifs later in the paper, especially as they pertain to Minh Ly's play. In the meanwhile, I look to Nicholas Birns, who reflects on *Antigone's Claim*, a book written in 2003 by Judith Butler:

There is nothing explicitly "queer" in Butler's reading of *Antigone* in that nothing in the play relates literally to same-sex relations. But Butler's questioning of what it means to be an individual and a society partakes of the destabilizing effect of queerness, of its creative ability to imaging new relations (and give fresh readings of texts)." (269)

In response to my second question: How would a queer-themed Canadian play,

such as *Ga Ting*, expand definitions of the “tragedy of passion”? Arguably, queer theatre has the ability to act as a willing, practice-based companion to queer theory. Furthermore, *Ga Ting* uses a particular viewpoint to open up the tragedy of passion to new readings which extend well beyond the well-trodden, hetero-normative framing that has often characterized the genre.<sup>2</sup>



From left to right: Mai, the mother (Alannah Hong), Hong, the father (BC Lee), and Matt, the boyfriend (Brian Sutton). Courtesy of Frank Theatre. Photo by Raymond Shum.

## **PART TWO: *Staging Tragic Communitas Across Cultural Divides***

It is now 2pm on Saturday, March 19, 2016. Vancity Culture Lab's black box studio at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre is active with pre-show chatter. A careful scan of the stage offers insights to what will come to represent a stereotypical, “Asian-style” family home: rosewood coffee tables and chairs, bamboo stalks abound, porcelain dining ware with dragon motifs, and a kitchen area with rice-cooker and accoutrements stored within a shelving unit. This play features three principal characters, Hong the father (played by BC Lee), Mai the mother (played by Alannah Hong), and Matt (played by Brian Sutton). Over the

course of the play, a critical dialogue between the three characters drives the plot, with images of their shared past projected onto the back wall of the theatre. The mood appropriate lighting by Gerald King is enhanced by a carefully constructed blend of surtitles, photographs and videography by Ian Chan. In particular, images of the deceased son, Kevin, are projected high above the actors' playing space, and though audiences never meet this key figure, his likeness and continual references to his life give him an omnipresent status.

To understand how tragedy unfolds in the aftermath of Kevin's death, I observe two types of grieving in the play. First, I examine public grieving, which often manifests at the macro-level. Such kinds of commemoration take place in social settings and seen by members of the local community. Unique cultures around the world host events in the form of cremations, funerals, wakes, and/or celebrations of life. Though cultural practices differ, there seems to be a recurring congregation of family alongside friends in most grieving cultures. Even though this congregation is highly expected, the actual act of coming together is also strained by lingering contempt, blame or shame; in *Ga Ting*, the latter exacerbates the loss of the son. Early in the play, it becomes clear that Matt was not invited to Kevin's funeral, arguably, one of the most important events held in honour of the deceased. Thus, the boyfriend feels estranged.

MATTHEW: Just because I'm not blood, doesn't mean I didn't love him. I called and called... left messages... sent you a letter about Kevin I wanted to share at the funeral. I tried to find out what was going on, but no one got back to me.  
(Ly 14)

In this particular scene, the boyfriend pushes for an answer, expressing his own discontent and feelings over being excluded. The father, Hong, responds with an equal amount of frustration.

MATTHEW: Kevin's funeral was my chance to say goodbye to him, and you couldn't give me that...

HONG: You have no idea what we go through. You only think what you want. What you think is right. You give money for funeral? You organize everything? You raise Kevin from baby to big man? You know him 2, 3 years. That is all.  
(Ly 14)

Shortly afterwards, the mother responds:

MAI: If we know what we know now, we maybe meet before. But we not know you then Matt. Kevin not say much about you. And when he pass, we so busy with funeral, family visit, no time to answer your messages. When you call again a few weeks ago, everything settle down, so... we are here. Please understand.  
(Ly 17)

Mai, the mother, comes across as honest and empathetic, while simultaneously while expressing her unique opinion throughout the play. By contrast, the father often comes across as belligerent, offering a viewpoint that differs starkly from that of Matt's. Such verbal conflict does separate the individuals in the play, but it is also their shared differences that makes bonding possible. In her book, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, Edith Turner writes: "Communitas is thus a gift from liminality, the state of being betwixt and between. During this time, people find each other to be just ordinary people after all, not the anxious prestige-seeking holders of jobs and positions they often seem to be." (4) At one moment in the play, the mother is given an opportunity to express her growing grief as she literally smashes a bowl of fresh mango pudding on the ground; Mai stages a kinetic and aural metaphor to the phrase: "picking up broken pieces." This act of rage is felt by everybody: actors and audiences alike become suddenly quieted and shocked by this gesture. At times,

It is their shared grief that brings Hong, Mai and Matt together onstage, despite the fictionally-produced differences and value-systems between each of them.

In *Ga Ting*, the family funeral is never staged and audiences are made aware that many relatives were present, with the obvious exception of Matt. Having been excluded from this event, he proposes a second, macro-level commemoration in the form of a *celebration of life*. Matt wishes to obtain a letter from Hong and Mai, delivering these parental words of comfort and messages of condolence to Kevin's close circle of friends, some whom are members of the gay community:

MATTHEW: I'm planning to have a memorial for Kevin when I get back to Vancouver.

HONG: A memorial?

MATTHEW: We didn't really have a chance to say good-bye. It's an opportunity for everyone to say their farewells ... have a bit of closure.

MAI: Oh.

MATTHEW: Nothing big, at a local art studio. Just a bunch of his friends. Everyone would love to hear a bit about Kevin from his parents. I was hoping you could write a few words for me to share. *Beat*.

MAI: Yes.

HONG: **No.** (Ly 33-34)



Hong, the father (BC Lee) looking over a painting created by his son, Kevin. The landscape of Toronto and Vancouver are deftly integrated into the same image. Photo by Raymond Shum.

At this key moment, the father's deliberate "No" suggests his attempt to thwart Matt's event planning, an act which also seems to keep any healthy dialogue and continuous grieving process at bay. As such, *Ga Ting* expresses the tragic consequences of homophobia and its ability to keep community members "betwixt and between" the often painful process of private grieving and the public spheres of celebration and community formation during stressful events. If *Ga Ting* exposes what homophobia may look like within the family, such a representation must not be utilized to essentialize any cultural group (ie. Asian Canadian or Chinese Canadian). Instead, the representation gestures towards the broad but discernable exclusion and dismay of homosexuality within many families, groups and communities across the world. For example, Guy Hocquenghem has written about the manner of homophobia in post World War II, France: "The French penal code has referred to homosexuality , and homosexuality along, as a "crime against nature"... If the code retreats into obscurantism here it is because, when faced with homosexuality, it requires the backing of a universal authority on heterosexual normality." (62) In Hocquenghem's example, the authority is the penal system, church, or "nature", but in *Ga Ting*, it is simply the father, who comes to represent phallogocentric idealism.

Equally important, there is a private grieving process that results in what I have termed micro-level commemoration. This grieving remains, for the most part, unseen due to its immensely intimate nature. Private grieving occurs within the home, often restricted to close family members or significant others, and includes the myriad of exchanges that take place between those still living:

emotional glances, shared stories over family photographs, prayers, apologies or regrets, and small, meaningful acts of homage. It could be said that tragedy, as a theatrical genre, stages private grief and, in turn, makes an otherwise secret family process open to a wider gaze of public consumption. Even the simple act of sharing a meal in *Ga Ting*, especially in the absence of Kevin, becomes profoundly ritualistic and haunting when staged. To counter excessive sadness Minh Ly allows his characters the chance to remember more favourable times. In one scene, Matt says: "Kevin's love for his work was contagious... he inspired me to do more of what I loved." (Ly 25) Throughout the play Matt expresses his love for Kevin and the parents begin to feel and share in their collective loss. Such declarations, especially within same-sex contexts, offer a counterpoint to mass-mediated portrayals of love, which are often hegemonic and phallogocentric.<sup>3</sup> According to the latter representations, love is not a universally received emotion but the "preserve of the dominant racial group" (Rogers 429), further characterized by bourgeoisie tastes and desires. In her article, "Emotional Geographies of Method Acting in Asian American Theater" Amanda Rogers suggests that "love is also a whitened emotion in mainstream representation" (429), making Hong and Mai's accented English, and their son's intercultural and gay relationship symbolic of a broader social demographic not often portrayed onstage or onscreen as loving beings. Minh Ly's decision to position this intercultural love story in both Toronto and Vancouver respectively is not surprising, given the playwright's personal and professional connection to both cities.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the reception of the play's themes is framed by the demographic

reality of both cities, which boast large numbers of Asian Canadians alongside a thriving and robust gay and LGBT community. As such, *Ga Ting* stages a unique perspective on the grieving process; by contrast to classic tragedy, the immigrant family is shown working its way through an intimate and heightened suffering.

### **PART THREE: *A Terrible Kind of Shame***

In the play, the father treats the boyfriend as an outcast, reminding him that he is not part of the family. Hong seems full of shame; his accusations often come across as insensitive and belligerent.

HONG: So, can you blame me to want to give my son an easier life?

MATTHEW: No ... but you can't make a gay man straight.

HONG: You make my son gay.

MATTHEW: How?

HONG: How I know? I not gay.

MATTHEW: This is ridiculous. I can't - wow. (Ly 37)

Mai tries to reconcile this moment by saying, "Mr. Lee need time." (Ly 37).

Hong also blames his wife for their son's sexual orientation:

HONG: Two men should not be together like that. That song make him gay.

MAI: What are you talking about?

HONG: That rainbow song, that gay song you sing all the time is what made him gay. (Ly 35)

As the audience within the Vancouver East Cultural Centre share a collectively laugh at Hong's ignorance, the moment is discomfoting and awkward to watch.

The mention of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" gestures towards both the stereotypical, musical-loving gay man, and Judy Garland in her starring role as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. In these scenes Minh Ly addresses homophobia as it unfolds in an Asian Canadian context, while simultaneously poking fun at cultural stereotypes. However, the moment becomes serious, once again,

when the mother, Mai, reveals aloud to Matt why she worries about Kevin's sexuality, saying: "he will be hurt" and "that the world see him as not normal." The two reasons offered by the mother offer an altogether different reading of the parents' combined and complex fear coupled with familial abjection. In opposition to hetero-normative relations that characterize many classic tragedies of passion, *Ga Ting* reveals a queer model of tragedy. Julia Kristeva's insights on disability reveal how "the disabled person opens a narcissistic identity wound in the person who is not disabled; he inflicts a threat of physical or psychical death, fear of collapse, and, beyond that, the anxiety of seeing the very borders of the human species explode. And so the disabled person is inevitably exposed to a discrimination that cannot be shared." (29) At this time, I am reminded how anti-gay laws and social stigma has often disabled the rights and social mobility of queer and LGBT people. Kristeva's definition has interpretive value to *Ga Ting*, since the father's harsh behaviour represents his own "narcissistic identity wound" and how his son, his son's boyfriend and wife all become targets of a shared shame and blaming process. However, Kristeva seems to be writing specifically about physical and mental disability, and this also has application to *Ga Ting*. The characters reveal that Kevin had suffered from bi-polar mood swings and bouts of depression. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that he has died by the ocean yet it is never explained whether he committed suicide or was accidentally drowned. Regardless, Kevin's death—*Ga Ting's* version of the sacrificed son—remains key to the unfolding of tragedy between the characters of Mai, Hong and Matt.

## **CONCLUSION: *A Tragedy for Everyone***

Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari have suggested that “The culturalists invoke other triangles – maternal uncle-aunt-nephew, for example; but the oedipalists have no difficulty in demonstrating that these are imaginary variations of one and the same structural constant, different figures of one and the same symbolic triangulation.” (174) In *Ga Ting*, such a triangulation manifests as husband-wife-son and boyfriend (Hong, Mai, Kevin and Matt). As such, *Ga Ting* moves the tragedy of passion away from its classic roots while maintaining its most enduring features: "the separation of lovers, the conflict of duty and passion, or the conflict of social and personal (sexual or family) interests." (Frye 16) The sacrificed son in *Ga Ting* is homosexual, yet he is positioned as an asset, not a liability. This is clear as Kevin's family and boyfriend are seen grieving and wrestling over this significant loss. Additionally, the father's homophobia reveals itself not simply as *harmatia*, or character flaw, but as part of a larger, social phenomenon of homophobia that plagues the entire community.

As theatre critic Misha Berson asks:

Can modern drama ever rise to the vaunted level of tragedy, in the classical Aristotelian sense, in stories about mere peons rather than lofty kings and queens? Was there sufficient sorrow and pity to be gleaned from the short tumble from grace of a Willy Loman or a Blanche DuBois, as opposed to the steep fall of a King Lear or a Phaedra? (133)

With all due respect to the reigning kings and queens of the world, I extend a tempered yet hopeful — Yes, *Why not? But, of course!* Was it not Arthur Miller—creator of the salesman, Willy Loman—who suggested "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were" (3). Miller's "tragedy

of the common man" can be applied to *Ga Ting*, as the play features protagonists living across cultural divides, including people of various genders, orientations, ages, statuses and belief-systems. In the closing scene of the play, a surprising photo of Hong, Mai, Matt, and Kevin is projected on the back wall. While Kevin's face is blurred, the image represents a family that could have been. Perhaps the Yoruban proverb, "It takes a whole village to raise a child," could augment Miller's concept of contemporary tragedy, transformed to read: "It takes a whole community to mourn the death of a queer son or daughter." In closing, *Ga Ting* moves its characters and audiences through a slow and painful grieving process, marked by a decidedly intercultural and increasingly necessary, queer tragedy.



Clockwise from top left: Matt (Brian Sutton), Kevin (deceased), Mai (Alannah Ong), and Hong (BC Lee). Photo by Raymond Shum. Courtesy of Frank Theatre, Vancouver, BC.

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<sup>1</sup> In Sophocles' Theban plays, both the wives of Oedipus and Creon commit suicide; similarly, both "lovers-to-be" Antigone and Haimon commit suicide; in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, both title characters commit suicide at each other's death beds.

<sup>2</sup> Many classic tragedies from Greek to Elizabethan theatre position love relationships as hetero-normative, whether Oedipus and Jocasta; Creon and Eurydice; Antigone and Haimon; Claudius and Gertude; Macbeth and Lady Macbeth; and Romeo and Juliet, to name a few. Even contemporary plays, like *West Side Story*, feature young lovers within opposite-sex relationships.

Only a few productions featuring same-sex lovers and/or queer issues have broken into mainstream discourse. Three recent high-profile examples are: *The Laramie Project* (2000, theatre) by Moises Kaufman, based on verbatim interviews about the brutal killing of Matthew Shepard; *Brokeback Mountain* (2005, film) based on the short story by Annie Proulx, and *Milk* (2008, film), directed by Gus Van Sant. While it could be argued that such theatrical and cinematic productions are welcome and necessary, their representations are concerning as they feature gay protagonists as both "real-life" victims with subsequent, violent deaths. Arguably, *Ga Ting*, with the death of Kevin, reiterates this tragic death of a gay figure while simultaneously addressing pertinent issues of homophobia and its consequences for individuals and communities.

<sup>3</sup> Phallogocentric is a term first used by Jacques Derrida, and later explored by Jacques Lacan and Judith Butler. The term suggests a worldview that either favors the male body (parts) and/or positions the male perspective as the dominant ideology in society and personal relationships. Queer and feminist perspectives can counter extreme forms of phallogocentrism. See: Butler, p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> Minh Ly was raised in Toronto, but moved to Western Canada to study at the renowned Studio 58 Conservatory Actor Training Program at Langara College. The play was developed in Vancouver, through a number of dramaturgical programs and residencies, namely: QWest & Clean Sheets (Frank Theatre) and MSG Lab (Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre).