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CALL FOR PAPERS

6th International Conference on American Drama and Theater

“Game Over!”: U.S. Drama and Theater and the End(s) of an American Idea(l)”

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain)

1–3 June 2022

Abstracts due 15 October 2021

The Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, co-sponsored by the Spanish universities of Cádiz and Sevilla and the University of Lorraine in France, and working in partnership with the American Theater and Drama Society (ATDS), the International Susan Glaspell Society, the Arthur Miller Society, the Eugene O’Neill Society, and RADAC (Recherches sur les arts dramatiques anglophones contemporains), is announcing a call for papers for the conference “**Game Over!”: U.S. Drama and Theater and the End(s) of an American Idea(l)**” to be held from 1 to 3 June 2022 at La Cristalera, located in the accessible northern mountains of Madrid.

This 6th International Conference on American Drama and Theater will be dedicated to the study of ends and new beginnings, games and gaming, players and playing, especially during, but not limited to, the current coronavirus pandemic. The five previous conferences were held in Málaga, 2000; Málaga, 2004; Cádiz, 2009; Sevilla, 2012; and Nancy (France), 2018; topics included violence, plays and players, politics, romance and migrations in and of the theater.

The following **keynote speakers** have accepted to join us:

Linda Ben-Zvi (Professor Emerita, Colorado State University and Tel-Aviv University)

Christopher Bigsby (Emeritus Professor, University of East Anglia)

Lauren Gunderson (Playwright and screenwriter)

Stephen Scott-Bottoms (Professor, University of Manchester)

Harvey Young (Professor, Boston University)

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, Intellivision, 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 is a trope that lies at the heart of American optimism and, to a certain extent, U.S. 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 U.S. 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 in 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* to Lin-Manuel Miranda in *Hamilton*, have warned against the inevitable solvency of warring political ideologies. Regardless of which position is most tenable over time, our conference title 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 its semantic variants) and, as such, experimenting, discovering, trying out new things. How, exactly, is U.S. theater and drama renewing itself, especially at a time when theater culture has been 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 U.S. stage, despite its avant-gardist fascination with multimedia? Is the present pandemic forcing 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 U.S. 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(1) 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?

Answers to these and other questions await us in Miraflores de la Sierra, Madrid, in June 2022. Individual papers or collective panels are invited to respond directly to them, or to suggest other avenues of discussion and debate linked to the study of games and gaming, players and playing, ends and new beginnings in U.S. drama and theater from any watershed period in the nation’s history.

To submit a paper, a roundtable discussion, or an already organized panel, please send abstracts of 300 words and a brief CV to gameoverconferencemadrid@gmail.com by 15 October 2021.

Please check the conference website for updated information on conference venue, accommodation, travel and registration (<https://sites.google.com/view/american-drama-conf-madrid-2022>)

Organizing committee

John S. Bak, Université de Lorraine
Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz, Universidad de Cádiz
Ramón Espejo Romero, Universidad de Sevilla
Josefa Fernández Martín, Universidad de Sevilla
Noelia Hernando Real, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid