



---

2021

## The Power of Theatre in the Time of an American Nero

Marcia Eppich-Harris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/thenorthmeridianreview>

---

### Recommended Citation

Eppich-Harris, Marcia (2021) "The Power of Theatre in the Time of an American Nero," *The North Meridian Review*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

DOI: 10.7825/2769-5115.1043

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/thenorthmeridianreview/vol2/iss1/7>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The North Meridian Review by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

---

# The Power of Theatre in the Time of an American Nero

Marcia Eppich-Harris

---

After the inauguration of Joe Biden, I have been hesitant to think about, or write about, America's forty-fifth president. The years 2016–2020 mark an era I have no interest in reliving. But there is a certain amount of responsibility one must embrace as a citizen of a democracy, and within that responsibility is the obligation of remembrance. We are tasked with remembrance for a number of reasons, among them setting precedents or opposing them. I would argue that it would be best to temper the instinct to forget all about Donald Trump, post-inauguration, no matter how much we would like to, but only to ensure that Trumpian politicians are irradiated from American government through our electoral processes. If we fail to take seriously the insurrection of January 6, 2021, when Trump supporters raided the Capitol, some seeming intent on hanging Vice President Mike Pence,<sup>123</sup> and others smashing windows, beating police, and causing the deaths of five people and the injury and COVID-19 infections of dozens more,<sup>124</sup> then our democracy is utterly doomed.

There are plenty of ways our remembrance duties can be fulfilled, but I would argue that the freedom to examine politics and history exists in theatre in ways that cannot be replicated in nonfiction, journalism, social media, or everyday life. The Trump presidency inspired an incredible

---

<sup>123</sup> Martin Pengelly “‘Hang Mike Pence’: Twitter Stops Phrase Trending after Capitol Riot,” *Guardian*, Jan. 10, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/10/hang-mike-pence-twitter-stops-phrase-trending-capitol-breach>.

<sup>124</sup> Jack Healy, “These Are the Five People Who Died in the Capitol Riot” *New York Times*, Jan. 11, 2021, last modified Feb. 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/us/who-died-in-capitol-building-attack.html>.

amount of critical writing: speeches, biographies, tell-all books, and sociopolitical criticism.<sup>125</sup> However, as both a literary scholar whose specialization is Shakespeare and a creative writer, I am more prone to think about Trump in Shakespearean, theatrical, and metaphorical dimensions. Significantly in today's partisan landscape, we can sidestep partisan leanings in theatrical productions and be encouraged to consider a specific story or event that might resonate with our own moment without alienating members of either party. A famous case in point came in 2016, within weeks following the election. Then Vice-President-elect Mike Pence saw *Hamilton*—a pointedly progressive show—on Broadway. The crowd booed Pence,<sup>126</sup> and yet, even as those in his party were allegorically criticized by the rhetorical thrust of the play, Pence reportedly enjoyed the show. The fact that Pence listened to the *Hamilton* cast when they addressed him from the stage after the curtain call is so stunning and anomalous that it hardly seems possible that a similar, respectful action would be taken in response to say, John Bolton's book *The Room Where It Happened*, a title that recalls a pivotal song in *Hamilton*.

---

<sup>125</sup> See, for instance, David Frum, *Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018); David Cay Johnston, *It's Even Worse than You Think: What the Trump Administration is Doing to America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018); Omarosa Manigault Newman, *Unbinged: An Insider's Account of the Trump White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018); Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), Cliff Sims, *Team of Vipers: My 500 Extraordinary Days in the Trump White House* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019); Anonymous [A Senior Trump Administration Official], *A Warning* [New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019]; Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig, *A Very Stable Genius: Donald J. Trump's Testing of America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020); John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

<sup>126</sup> CNN reported that "Pence said he did notice the booing, but it didn't spoil the show. 'My daughter and I and her cousins really enjoyed the show. *Hamilton* is just an incredible production, incredibly talented people. It was a real joy to be there,' Pence said. 'When we arrived we heard a few boos, and we heard some cheers,' he said, 'I nudged my kids and reminded them that is what freedom sounds like.'" Eric Bradner, "Pence: 'I Wasn't Offended' by Message of 'Hamilton' Cast," Nov. 20, 2016, CNN, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/20/politics/mike-pence-hamilton-message-trump/index.html>.

I am certainly not the only person to think of Trump's presidency as a living literary metaphor and cautionary tale. Stephen Greenblatt's book *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics* (2018) makes oblique references to Trump as it works through Shakespeare's major and minor league ne'er-do-wells, although never naming the forty-fifth president explicitly. James Shapiro's *Shakespeare in a Divided America* (2020) discusses the controversial Public Theatre production of *Julius Caesar* (2017) in which the eponymous character is dressed like Trump, including a wig, and is assassinated by women and people of color. A more classical version of *Julius Caesar* was produced in the summer of 2017 by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in Stratford-upon-Avon. In fact, the RSC's season in 2017 consisted of entirely Roman subjects—a feat not attempted there since 1971. While the RSC productions did not attempt to connect with Trump in their staging, a full-page picture of Trump and Barack Obama in the program for *Julius Caesar* made clear that the season linked the political present to the theatrical past, as we are often prone to do. Famous twentieth-century examples include Orson Welles's *Caesar*, which commented on fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, and Laurence Olivier's 1944 film version of *Henry V*, aimed at bolstering British morale in the war.<sup>127</sup>

In 2017, I was preparing to teach an honors class about Shakespeare's Roman and history plays, so I was deeply engaged with Shakespeare's historic subjects, and of course, the major influences on his writing. It occurred to me after seeing their productions of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* that what was missing from the RSC Roman season was a tribute to the first-century Stoic philosopher and dramatist Seneca, whose work influenced Shakespeare's tragedies and histories. Seneca was an important political figure in ancient Rome, too. He had been the tutor and chief advisor to the emperor

---

<sup>127</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018); James Shapiro, *Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us about Our Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021). *Henry V*, dir. Laurence Olivier (Two Cities Films, 1944).

Nero in the hopes that his Stoic philosophy would rub off on him. Ultimately, Seneca's attempts to make a Stoic out of Nero failed.

I decided after that RSC season that I wanted to write about Seneca and Nero. I had taught Seneca's plays in my Humanities classes, and I knew some of the history behind his relationship with Nero. I started a leisurely bit of research on the pair, reading James Romm's book, *Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero* (2014), and reading all of Seneca's tragedies.<sup>128</sup> When the anonymous op-ed "I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration" was published in the *New York Times* (September 2018)<sup>129</sup> I could not stop thinking of how that senior official in the Trump administration seemed very much like Seneca—at least in the way they described themselves.<sup>130</sup> The germ of an idea was planted in my mind. But it wasn't until Tuesday, September 24, 2019, when Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi announced that an impeachment inquiry would commence against Trump, that I knew what I wanted to write. I opened a new file on my computer and started an allegorical play about modern America, starring Seneca and Nero. Thus, the writing of my play *Seneca and the Soul of Nero* began.

I don't always have such a clear path to inspiration when I write, but in my mind, Seneca and Nero were the perfect historical and allegorical characters to represent the presidency and ambivalent administration of Donald Trump. Trump's narcissism, and his Romanesque hedonism, strongly

---

<sup>128</sup> James Romm, *Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

<sup>129</sup> "I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration," *New York Times*, Sept. 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html>

<sup>130</sup> CNN later reported that Miles Taylor, chief of staff to Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, wrote the anonymous op-ed, as well as the book *A Warning* that included many more details about the behind-the-scenes stories within the administration. See Jake Tapper and Jeremy Herb, "Author of 2018 'Anonymous' Op-Ed Critical of Trump Revealed," Oct. 28, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/28/politics/anonymous-new-york-times-op-ed-writer/index.html>.

matched Nero's. The anonymous op-ed writer, later revealed to be Miles Taylor, described almost exactly the sort of position Seneca occupied in Nero's reign. Taylor stated, "We want the administration to succeed and think that many of its policies have already made America safer and more prosperous. But we believe our first duty is to this country, and the president continues to act in a manner that is detrimental to the health of the republic."<sup>131</sup> Taylor went on to describe Trump's leadership style as "impetuous, adversarial, petty and ineffective,"<sup>132</sup> a description that could certainly be applied to Nero. Seneca, like Taylor and his colleagues, constantly tried to temper his leader's worst instincts without success. Despite Taylor's reassurances that there were adults in the room who were virtuously fighting for America, Trump continued his erratic governance, with more cabinet member departures than any of the former five presidents, according to the Brookings Institute,<sup>133</sup> as well as attempts to defund the Postal Service—possibly to interfere with the 2020 election during the COVID-19 pandemic. With government officials from Rex Tillerson and John Kelly to more recently Dr. Anthony Fauci desperate to quell Trump's legally and ethically questionable moves over the past four years, I have been continually reminded of Seneca's failed attempts to stop Nero's worst instincts. Taylor's realization that his and his colleagues' approach to Trump was doomed to fail is a stunning parallel. In an interview with CNN, Taylor said, "The country cannot rely on well-intentioned, unelected bureaucrats around the President to steer him toward what's right. . . He has purged most of them anyway."<sup>134</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> "I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration," *New York Times*, Sept. 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html>

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, "Tracking Turnover in the Trump Administration," Aug. 14, 2020, Brookings Institute, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration/>

<sup>134</sup> Tapper and Herb, "Author of 2018 'Anonymous' Op-Ed Critical of Trump Revealed."

That said, I will admit that I am *far* more sympathetic to Seneca than I am to any Trump official, partly because of the distance of time and partly because Seneca had fewer choices in his political system than we have in America. Nero was only a teenager when he ascended to the imperial throne, aided by his mother, Agrippina, who assassinated her husband, Claudius, to put Nero in power. There was no democratic election; Nero ascended through murder, and he was not the first nor last to do so. Agrippina had recalled Seneca from exile<sup>135</sup> to be Nero's tutor when he was a young teen and made him Nero's chief advisor. Agrippina's recall and appointment meant Seneca owed the family, and with a family that killed its own, one needed to be carefully compliant. So, while Seneca's insider status in Nero's reign had similarities to Trump's insiders and cabinet members, the stakes were far higher for Seneca—a matter of life and death. For that, as I've said, I felt sympathy was warranted.

Meanwhile, I felt that Taylor's presentation of the alternative, virtuous Trump lackey was a pseudo-attempt at presenting his Stoic martyrdom to the world. Our pop psychology definition of "stoicism"—a repression of emotions—is a very shallow understanding of the philosophy. While it is true that in the Stoic tradition, according to the *Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy*, the "ideal agent has no emotions," it is also true that "The ideal agent has 'good feelings' of wishing (which replaces desire), caution (which replaces fear), and joy (which replaces pleasure)."<sup>136</sup> What Seneca shows in his writing, and I try to show in my representation of Seneca as a character, is that his utmost concerns are living ethically and using reason to improve himself so that he may become virtuous. My own introduction to Stoicism was through Shakespeare's complication of the philosophy in his Roman plays, particularly

---

<sup>135</sup> According to James Romm, Seneca was accused of adultery with Caligula's sister, Livilla, as a matter of political expediency. Claudius's wife, Messalina, wanted both Livilla and Agrippina to be removed from Rome so that she could consolidate her own power over the emperor. Seneca happened to be a convenient man to accuse of adultery with Livilla, as they had a close relationship. He was sentenced to death for his supposed crime. However, Claudius commuted the sentence to exile in Corsica. See Romm, *Dying Every Day*, 25–28.

<sup>136</sup> Katja Vogt, "Seneca. 3.3 The Therapy of Emotions," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/seneca/#SenSto>

in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.<sup>137</sup> But as I learned more about Stoicism from reading Seneca's philosophical works and dramas, I realized that my own philosophical leanings happen to coincide strongly with Seneca's, despite Shakespeare's caveats. It was through reading Seneca that I was inspired to think much more deeply about Stoicism.

However, when faced with Shakespeare's warnings that Stoic ethics cannot shield a person from an unethical tyrant, one wonders if it pays to be ethical. And yet, Stoics would say seeking virtue is its own reward. In other words, it matters that you *seek* to be virtuous, even if you do not always succeed. Compare this noble concept of virtue seeking with the flagrantly unethical Trump administration and the chaos that has resulted from Trump's tactics, and one can see the appeal of a philosophy that, as Ryan Holiday writes, advises its followers to "Take obstacles in your life and turn them into your advantage, control what you can and accept what you can't."<sup>138</sup> For the novice Stoic, Seneca's writings, both philosophical and dramatic, are an excellent gateway. He is often didactic in his approach and asks the reader to follow his example in using reflection and reason in the quest for self-improvement. In his treatise *On Anger*, Seneca gives a prescriptive example of how one should deal with personal shortcomings:

I pass the whole day in review before myself, and repeat all that I have said and done: I conceal nothing from myself, and omit nothing: for why should I be afraid of any of my shortcomings, when it is in my power to say, "I pardon you this time: see that you never do that anymore?"<sup>139</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> Shakespeare suggests in both *Brutus's* and *Antony's* failures and suicides in the two aforementioned plays that Stoicism fails to neutralize Machiavellian realpolitik, however attractive the tenants of Stoicism.

<sup>138</sup> Ryan Holiday, "Stoicism: Practical Philosophy You Can Actually Use," blog post, June 17, 2014, *Ryan Holiday: Meditations on Strategy and Life*, <https://ryanholiday.net/stoicism-a-practical-philosophy-you-can-actually-use/>

<sup>139</sup> Seneca, "The Fifth Book of the Dialogues of L. Annaeus Seneca, Addressed to Novatus. 'Of Anger,' Book III," sec. XXXII, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Of\\_Anger/Book\\_III#XXXVI](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Of_Anger/Book_III#XXXVI).



The idea that self-improvement is something that must be addressed routinely shows that emotional regulation and self-care were practices that Seneca struggled with himself, but one's failings are not something to dwell on, Seneca says—you can do better next time. Seneca's one-day-at-a-time mentality feels progressive and modern to me and suggests that failure is not the end of any given situation. And yet if we're to believe Tacitus, Suetonius, and others, Seneca failed to fashion Nero into a virtuous man. This failure ultimately led to Seneca's death. In my play, Seneca nevertheless persists — not only because he believes it is his Stoic duty to mentor Nero, but also because he cares for him, thinking of him as a son.

*Seneca and the Soul of Nero* opens on the day that Claudius dies and Nero, in effect, becomes emperor. Seneca and Nero have been interrupted in their studies of the Curse of the House of Atreus, a revenge myth that Seneca writes about in two of his tragedies—*Thyestes* and *Agamemnon*. Seneca's wife, Pompeia Paulina (nicknamed Poppy), opens the play, saying, “I thought you were teaching today, husband. Or has Nero claimed omnipotence already?”<sup>140</sup> Poppy is a far more important character in my play than history suggests. Her virtue and wit match her husband's, and she is a true partner to her philosopher husband. She knows that Nero is impetuous, but charming—as we see when friendly banter between the titular characters that tilts toward danger:

Nero: Philosophy, psh! You do not like to laugh, Master Seneca.

Seneca: I laugh at you every day!

Nero: (Joking) To your peril, my friend.<sup>141</sup>

While Seneca and Nero tease each other amiably, the purpose of the scene is to set up the tension in their relationship. From the beginning of the play, you see that while Seneca and Nero are close, as teachers and students sometimes are, the power balance between them is always askew, in this case

---

<sup>140</sup> Marcia Eppich-Harris, “Seneca and the Soul of Nero,” unpublished manuscript, act 1, scene 1, p. 1 (in Marcia Eppich Harris's possession).

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

with the student rather than the teacher having the political upper hand. I see this sort of tension play out in the Trump administration—from when Trump, a political novice, demanded loyalty from James Comey to his infamous telephone call with Volodymyr Zelensky, the president of Ukraine. Nero’s murders of his support system, including his mother, Agrippina, his first wife, Octavia, his second wife, Poppaea Sabina,<sup>142</sup> and the ordered suicide of Seneca mirror Trump’s dismissal of members of his administration who were once avid supporters, such as Jeff Sessions, Reince Priebus, and John Bolton, among many others—not to mention Trump’s stoking of violence in the Capitol insurrection by telling domestic terrorist supporters that he loved them in a video statement on January 6, 2021.

In writing historical fiction, a writer frequently takes liberties with causation and timing of events to tell a good story. Shakespeare, for instance, telescoped time constantly in his history plays, collapsing several years into one play and only portraying events that illuminate specific themes. In most cases, Shakespeare used the politically correct version of a character (politically correct for his time) and illustrated them in a way that would please the reigning monarch and the censors, whether that portrayal was true to historic fact or not. Both Prince Hal and Richard III are good examples of Shakespeare towing a party line, regardless of the historical accuracy (or inaccuracy) of his sources. In my play, I collapsed several years into two hours, and in doing so, I had to make choices about what to portray, using episodes that showed causal relationships between events to make a point. I selected scenarios that I felt would show a strong connection between current events and Nero’s reign, as well as juxtapose Stoic virtue and narcissistic villainy. For instance, Tacitus reports that Nero killed his then-pregnant second wife, Poppaea Sabina, by kicking her to death during a tantrum.<sup>143</sup> This event

---

<sup>142</sup> Poppaea Sabina is the historical name for Nero’s second wife. I use the name Sabina to distinguish her from Seneca’s wife, Pompeia Paulina. In the theater, the names might easily be confused.

<sup>143</sup> Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (Pantianos Classics, 2017), 245.

happened in 65 CE, after the great fire of Rome and Seneca's forced suicide. However, I changed the order of these events for the sake of social commentary. In my play, Nero kills Poppaea Sabina, then in revenge for his *own* mistake, he punishes Rome by setting it on fire, destroying the city while he mourns in Antium, keeping Seneca, who had asked to retire and was denied, at his side. In the next scene, a conspiracy to overthrow Nero is unveiled, and Nero condemns Seneca to suicide. In Tacitus's account, the conspiracy was to put Gaius Calpurnius Piso, an aristocrat, on the imperial throne, but Romm notes that it might have been the desire of the Praetorians, led by Subrius Flavus, to put Seneca himself on the throne.<sup>144</sup> For a streamlined dramatic effect, I edit Piso out of the picture to focus on the conflict between Nero's and Seneca's points of view. The chain of events in the play allegorically represents Trump's first impeachment. His own misbehavior caused Trump an incredible number of personal and political headaches, including impeachment, but more significantly, his actions punished America for electing him. After the Capitol insurrection, Trump was impeached again, and yet, the Senate's acquittals in each impeachment trial suggest to me that the America I had believed in—where politics could be set aside to address clear wrongdoings—had been unequivocally lost, or perhaps never existed in the first place. What virtue, if any, is extant in America? Perhaps a Stoic such as Seneca can inspire us to seek it out in ourselves.

I am not the only person to equate Trump with Nero or to bemoan a lost sense of virtue. Although I started writing my play long before it was published, a book titled *American Nero: The History of the Destruction of the Rule of Law, and Why Trump Is the Worst Offender* was published just before Trump's impeachment trial.<sup>145</sup> As the *Washington Post* reported, the book centers around the "icy, granular detail, of what has happened to constitutional democracy in three short years, and all that we have absorbed,

---

<sup>144</sup> Romm, *Dying Every Day*, 181.

<sup>145</sup> Richard Painter and Peter Golenbock, *American Nero: The History of the Destruction of the Rule of Law, and Why Trump Is the Worst Offender* (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2020).

integrated and somehow moved beyond. In some sense, then, it stands less as a unified argument than as a scrapbook of things that no longer horrify us.”<sup>146</sup> In retrospect, several months later, no one could have predicted Trump’s impending failures—not containing the COVID-19 pandemic and inciting insurrection. Ironically, a month after the first impeachment trial concluded, on March 9, 2020, #NeroTrump was trending on Twitter after Trump retweeted a meme of himself playing a violin with a fire burning in the background, captioned, “My next piece is called. . . Nothing can stop what’s coming.”<sup>147</sup> Trump wrote in his tweet, “I don’t know what this means, but it sounds good to me.” Critics jumped on Trump, as former Federal Bureau of Investigation Assistant Director and NBC News contributor Frank Figliuzzi did: “It means that playing golf while Americans die during an uncontained epidemic makes you look like the Emperor Nero fiddling while Rome burned. The fact that neither you nor your social media director understand this meme and retweeted it makes you even more oblivious than Nero.”<sup>148</sup> Continuing the analogy, Bernie Sanders, in his speech at the Democratic National Convention, said regarding Trump’s handling of the pandemic, “Nero fiddled while Rome burned; Trump golfs. His actions fanned this pandemic, resulting in over 170,000 deaths and a nation still unprepared to protect its people.”<sup>149</sup>

---

<sup>146</sup> Dahlia Lithwick, “Defending the Rule of Law in the Trump Era,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/defending-the-rule-of-law-in-the-trump-era/2020/03/19/7dfac5d0-618a-11ea-845d-e35b0234b136\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/defending-the-rule-of-law-in-the-trump-era/2020/03/19/7dfac5d0-618a-11ea-845d-e35b0234b136_story.html)

<sup>147</sup> According to *The Hill*, the tweet was originally posted by White House social media director Dan Scavino on March 8, 2020.

<sup>148</sup> Frank Figliuzzi (@FrankFigliuzzi1), “playing golf while Americans die during an uncontained epidemic makes you look like the Emperor Nero fiddling while Rome burned,” March 8, 2020, <https://twitter.com/FrankFigliuzzi1/status/1236793534964883456>

<sup>149</sup> Bernie Sanders, transcript of speech to Democratic National Convention, Aug. 18, 2020, National Public Radio, [https://www.npr.org/2020/08/18/903398536/watch-bernie-sanders-speech-to-the-democratic-national-convention?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=politics&utm\\_term=nprnews&utm\\_source=facebook.com&fbclid=IwAR2Zj084P\\_-bX\\_XP4O448VwvNUK-mc943sI8zK3Un5E-JJLFAW3Ta6Bcr1g](https://www.npr.org/2020/08/18/903398536/watch-bernie-sanders-speech-to-the-democratic-national-convention?utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=politics&utm_term=nprnews&utm_source=facebook.com&fbclid=IwAR2Zj084P_-bX_XP4O448VwvNUK-mc943sI8zK3Un5E-JJLFAW3Ta6Bcr1g). As of June 19, 2021, there have been almost 600,000 deaths from COVID-19 in the United States according to the CDC Covid Data Tracker. See <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#demographics>.

In all, it took about seven months to complete *Seneca and the Soul of Nero*, although I had been mulling over the idea for some time. For me, writing about Seneca was cathartic, especially knowing that his position in Nero's court must have felt like climbing a mudslide. But writing this play also reminded me that the arts, especially theatre, have a crucial place at the political and historical table. In *Seneca and the Soul of Nero*, every major character dies with no Horatio left to tell their stories or mourn them. To me, it was important that every character died, not because I'm morbid but because I wanted to show the totality of the destruction wrought by Nero's pathology. If we had been forced to endure another four years of Trump in the White House, I believe the American republic would also have suffered a similar calamity. This is why writers must document the cycles of political history in the arts to remind ourselves of what we're capable of as human beings, both for good and ill.

As a demonstration of this belief, I wrote two different scenes in my play in which Seneca is writing tragedies to teach Nero. In writing both scenes, I felt an intimate connection to Seneca that collapsed the 2000 years between our historical moments. At heart, both Seneca and I are teachers, and we both believe in trying to do the right thing, working toward self-improvement despite inevitable failures, and honoring reason and virtue. I can relate to Seneca's desire not to give up on Nero, as a teacher so often does not want to give up on her wayward students. Nor do I want to give up on America. While it's true that Trump was not elected to a second term, with voters admonishing his administration—unlike the craven Republican Senators who voted twice not to convict Trump of high crimes and misdemeanors—in the greater scope of history, we often do not learn the lessons that we should. Playwrights, therefore, must not cease to engage creatively with history, politics, and philosophy. It is our duty to cut through the grind of endless partisan chatter. The art that we create in this era can last longer than the tell-all books of fired cabinet members. And as with Shakespeare's and Seneca's works, our contemporary plays will have something to tell future generations about our past and their present simultaneously.

That said, if *Seneca and the Soul of Nero* is *only* about the Trump administration, then it's not a very good play. The larger questions in the play about leadership, Stoicism, ethics, duty, and virtue are themes that have been around for a long time. Shakespeare thought about them; Seneca thought about them. If past is prologue, there's a good chance that we will always have to think about these themes. What we will conclude is anyone's guess, but I think it's the playwright's duty to encourage audiences to refine our sense of what our obligations are as citizens, and the first, and perhaps most important, obligation is to remember.