

'Just a Word on a Page & there is the Drama': Sarah Kane's theatrical legacy

Article

Accepted Version

Saunders, G. (2003) 'Just a Word on a Page & there is the Drama': Sarah Kane's theatrical legacy. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 13 (1). pp. 97-110. ISSN 1477-2264 doi: 10.1080/1048680031000077816 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/31333/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1048680031000077816>

Publisher: Routledge

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

‘JUST A WORD ON A PAGE AND THERE IS THE DRAMA.’ SARAH KANE’S THEATRICAL LEGACY.

...Cleanse my heart,
give me the ability to rage
correctly.
(Joe Orton, *Head to Toe*)

Three students in a smoke-filled room
Three girls on holiday
A pregnancy on a Saturday night
I knew that
I knew that
I already knew that.
(Howard Barker, First Prologue to *The Bite of the Night*)

Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle: she di'd young
(John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*)

Sarah Kane's career in theatre has defined itself by extremes. From the brouhaha that surrounded *Blasted* in January 1995, to her suicide in February 1999, followed by the posthumous production of *4.48 Psychosis* in June 2000 - audiences and critics alike have constantly been forced to reevaluate the plays. By the time of *Crave* (1998), Kane's *oeuvre* was no longer considered a 'nauseating dog's breakfast'¹ but had shifted to, 'a uniquely experimental voice.'² When *Blasted* returned to the Royal Court as part of a season of her work in April 2001, Michael Billington's original verdict of 'naive tosh,'³ had now become (with some reservations still remaining about its structure), 'a humane, impassioned dramatic testament'.⁴

¹ Charles Spencer 'Awful Shock' *Daily Telegraph* (20 January 1995).

² Dominic Cavendish, *Independent* (15 August 1998).

³ Michael Billington, 'The Good Fairies Desert the Court's Theatre of the Absurd' *Guardian* (20 February 1995).

⁴ Michael Billington, *Guardian* (4 April 2001).

Since her death, Kane's impact and status as a dramatist has also been subject to extreme pronouncements, veering from outright acclamation to curt dismissal. For instance, Nicholas Wright and Richard Eyre's companion to their television series on twentieth century theatre *Changing Stages*, ended with a brief discussion of *Blasted*, implying according to dramatist Peter Morris, 'that her small body of work was indeed the climax to twentieth century theatre'.⁵ Edward Bond has called Kane, 'easily the most important writer to come out of the [Royal] Court in the last 20 years',⁶ and *Blasted*, 'the only contemporary play I wish I'd written',⁷ while Dan Rebellato observes, 'it increasingly seems clear that for many people British theatre in the 1990s hinges on that premiere'.⁸ Yet, dissenting voices also emerge: Mary Luckhurst has commented, 'I am not of the view that Kane was a great writer nor that her plays represented a defining moment',⁹ and implies that the success of her drama came primarily through the intervention of director James Macdonald, whose own interpretations, 'outclasses the writing'.¹⁰

To provoke such extreme responses often points to the fact that we are onto something important - but what exactly? Trying to critically assess Kane's theatrical legacy is difficult for several reasons. Firstly, as we have seen, the practice of critics (including myself) and theatre practitioners opinions about Kane's work at their worse slowly erase any original intent by placing it below their own agenda - something which has been all too easy to achieve now that

⁵Peter Morris 'The Brand of Kane,' *Arete*, 4 (Winter 2000), 142-152 (p. 142).

⁶Cited in, 'Brian Logan, 'The Savage Mark of Kane', *Independent on Sunday* (1 April 2001).

⁷Edward Bond, 'What were you Looking at?' *Guardian*, (16 December 2000).

⁸Dan Rebellato, 'Sarah Kane: An Appreciation', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 59 (Summer 1999), 280-1 (p. 280).

⁹Mary Luckhurst, 'An Embarrassment of Riches: Women Dramatists in 1990s Britain' in Bernhard Reitz and Mark Berninger, (eds.), *British Drama of the 1990s. Anglistik und Englischunterricht*, 64 (Heidelberg:Winter, 2002), p. 72.

Kane is no longer able to explain such intent. There is the controversial beginning to her career, which produces the tendency to mythologize, and its painful end, which generates idle biographical speculation. But perhaps more importantly, yet paradoxically it is the very frequency of international restagings and ready absorption into the academy that have hampered a serious evaluation and analysis of the plays since her death.¹¹

On one level this ready embrace by both theatre and academy should be taken as a mark of success. Kane's agent, Mel Kenyon, cites a last letter of instruction, stating, 'these are not museum pieces. I want these plays performed'.¹² Since 1995 at least one of her plays has been in professional repertoire continuously throughout Europe, and official translations been made into Italian, Portuguese, Norwegian, Danish and Slovak.¹³ A snapshot of known productions running in March 2002 includes *4.48 Psychosis* in Vienna (directed by James Macdonald, using the original Royal Court staging, and a Viennese cast); British productions of *Blasted* in Glasgow, and *Crave* in Scarborough (as part of the National Student Drama Festival); and in Germany *4.48 Psychosis* in Munich and *Crave* (together with *4.48 Psychosis*) in Berlin.¹⁴

¹⁰¹⁰John Lennard and Mary Luckhurst, *The Drama Handbook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 164. Ian Rickson is wrongly credited as director on these productions.

¹¹¹¹There have been exceptions, such as Aleks Sierz's chapter on Kane's work in his book *In-yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), pp. 90-121; David Greig's introduction to *Sarah Kane: The Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), pp. ix-xviii; Dan Rebellato, 'Sarah Kane: An Appreciation', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 59 (Summer 1999), pp. 280-1; Peter Morris, 'The Brand of Kane', *Arete*, 4 (Winter 2000), pp. 143-52, and Ken Urban, 'An Ethics of Catastrophe': The Theatre of Sarah Kane, *Performing Arts Journal*, 69 (Winter 2001), pp. 36-46.

¹²¹²Conversation with author, 13 November 2000.

¹³¹³The full text of *Cleansed* only. Thanks to Simon Kane for up to date information on official translations.

¹⁴¹⁴Information taken from the *Sarah Kane Web* site, <http://www.iainfisher.com>, 26 March 2002.

The plays' swift inclusion into the academy also shows no sign of abating. From a rough survey sent out to the SCUDD mailing list 19 respondents from theatre departments in British universities had started using Kane's work in their teaching between 1995-1999.¹⁵ By 2000 Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt's *Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, and the revised edition in 2001 of Michelene Wandor's influential book *Look back in Gender* had both made inclusions (albeit warily) on Kane's work. Part of this critical hesitancy to commit fully to questions of gender in Kane's work has been due to her own contentious position on the subject. It has been telling that with the exception of Caryl Churchill all of her cited influences as playwrights have been male. Statements such as 'I have no responsibility as a woman writer because I don't believe there's such a thing,'¹⁶ seem to both simultaneously reject issues of gender and sexuality operating in the work itself and abruptly cut Kane off from any 'tradition' or pattern for British women writing in the medium of theatre since the 1950s. The reasons for this denial are perhaps more intriguing than the statement itself, for it represents an evasion that points towards an important distinction between the female dramatist of the 1990s and precursors from the last three decades. This is an area of study which not only includes Kane's work, but goes beyond it and has important implications in the representation of gender in contemporary British drama.

Kane's shift from juvenile notoriety to a respected, yet epitome of the 'cool' avant-garde, culminated for me recently at a university 'Open Day' where I met two prospective students who were involved in a practical project for their A'Level Theatre Studies, based around the text of

¹⁵Standing Committee of University Drama Departments (SCUDD), <http://art.ntu.ac.uk/scudd>.

¹⁶Natasha Langridge and Heidi Stephenson, *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 134.

Crave. With this in mind, the mocking prophecy made by one journalist back in 1995 that *Blasted* ‘might yet find itself on the school syllabus’,¹⁷ could yet become a reality.

In attempting to assess Kane’s legacy as a dramatist I want to concentrate on some of the intentions that lie behind her drama; aims which up until now have only recently come to light. The other area for discussion is the extent to which the plays are an engagement with the outside world. It is generally seen that in the plays narrative that gradually breaks down into series of ‘bewildered fragments’,¹⁸ but I will hope to demonstrate that this observation is only partially true.

Sarah Kane possessed an honest and direct approach to theatre, and was forthcoming in public about her vision for the medium. On several occasions she made mention of a piece of drama that was to have an immense influence on her own work. This was Jeremy Weller’s *Mad* (1992):

This was a project that brought together professional and non-professional actors who all had some personal experience of mental illness. It was an unusual piece of theatre because it was totally experiential as opposed to speculative. As an audience member, I was taken to a place of extreme mental discomfort and distress and then popped out the other end. What I did not do was sit in the theatre considering as an intellectual conceit what it might be like to be mentally ill. It was a bit like being given a vaccine. I was mildly ill for a few days afterwards but the jab of sickness protected me from a far more serious illness later in life. *Mad* took me to hell, and the night I saw it I made a decision about the kind of theatre I wanted to make - experiential.¹⁹

Even the distancing effect from the video record of Weller’s Edinburgh production, makes uncomfortable viewing.²⁰ Partly this comes from the knowledge that some of the actors had

¹⁷¹⁷ Mary Braid, ‘Young Playwright Blasted for “Brutalist” Debut Work’, *Independent* (20 January 1995).

¹⁸¹⁸ Sarah Kane: *The Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 210. All quotations from the plays will use this source, citing the page number in brackets.

¹⁹¹⁹ Sarah Kane, Letter to Aleks Sierz, 4 January 1999.

²⁰²⁰ I am indebted to Katja Riek at Glasgow University’s Department of Theatre, Film and Television for this information. Copies of the performance video, which includes two short

experienced mental illness, and that the narratives they recounted or scenarios they acted out had probably taken place. Throughout there is also the discomfiting feeling that what we are seeing is not acting, but rather a repetition of personal trauma. Weller's methodology for structuring the play, whereby set speeches and incidents are mainly improvised, gives rise to a blurring between reality and performance. At one point, a young woman enacts the physical abuse she suffered at the hands of her boyfriend, except she now takes on the role of abuser against a passive male victim. The violence she inflicts seems all too real, and the audience are given a dilemma. Are they, in the words of one of the speakers in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on her Life* (1997), 'mere voyeurs in Bedlam',²¹ or the accusation character 'C' makes against themselves in *Crave*: 'I am an emotional plagiarist, stealing other people's pain, subsuming it into my own' (195)? Certainly, one audience member who experienced *Mad* expressed disquiet, both about the value of its emotional honesty and the role of the audience as passive spectators: 'I don't think it [*Mad*] is transformative. I think it's a release that has nothing more to say as a disclosure about pain - so I felt like a voyeur. I felt abused watching it without having anything to contribute'.

This obscuring in theatre between genuine and represented anguish has been a concern of several twentieth century practitioners: most notably was Artaud's call for a new theatre to galvanize and provoke its audience into a fresh assessment of what was taking place around them on-stage. Kane's analogy of *Mad* being like 'the jab..that protected me from a far more serious illness later in life', is reminiscent of his assertion that, 'The plague [theatre] is a superior

documentary features about *Mad*, from BBC2's *Newsnight* and *Channel Four*, are available upon application in writing.

²¹ Martin Crimp. *Attempts on her Life* (London: Methuen, 1997, p.50).

disease because it is an absolute crisis after which there is nothing left except death or drastic purification'.²²

Yet it is important to stress that before we declare Kane to be the new Artaud, her drama is only ever partly experiential. Despite there being plans at one point for a joint collaboration between Kane and Weller, stylistically their drama diverges in one crucial regard. While seemingly wanting to produce the confrontational and visceral immediacy of *The Grassmarket Project*, Kane equally wanted to exert a strict formal control through absolute fidelity to the *performance text* which Weller is prepared to abandon. This is an important distinction to make. Whereas the reaction of one audience member to *Mad* was that it resembled, 'almost a stream of consciousness - they were almost making it up as they went along', Claire Armitstead observed after an interview with Kane that, 'here is a writer who, like Pinter, knows the difference between a comma and a full stop and will stop at nothing to make sure others respect it'.²³

These conflicting sensibilities between the experiential and textual produces a fascinating tension in Kane's writing, whereby periods of 'calm' or lyricism are often followed by eruptions of physical, emotional or verbal violence. In *Cleansed*, Carl's throat is cut by Tinker immediately after making love to Rod (p.142); while in *4.48 Psychosis* (1999. Staged 2000), after a moving lament for lost love, the speaker disgorges a long torrent of rage and hurt - 'Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you for rejecting me by never being there...' (p.215).

However, the immediacy of Weller's style that so impressed Kane, has in turn been attributed to her own work, often at the expense of the literary. For instance, Peter Morris is of the opinion that if the British Punk movement of the late 1970s, 'was a kind of anti-music, Kane's own

²² Antonin Artaud, 'The Theatre and the Plague,' in *The Theatre and its Double* (London: Calder Publications Limited, 1999), p. 22.

stance was basically anti-literary drama'.²⁴ However, when one analyzes its form and content, Kane's work is far from being some theatrical equivalent of the three chord thrash: from allusions to Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) and Shakespeare's *King Lear* (c.1604-5) in *Blasted*, to the numerous quotations from T.S Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922) in *Crave*, a literary influence, pervades all of Kane's work - certainly dominating over any 'adolescent *anomie*'.²⁵ The dramatist David Greig also observes that, 'to read her [Kane's] plays, for all their pain, as raw, is it overlook the complex artfulness of their construction.'²⁶

Yet it is still *Mad*, rather than any specific literary precedent that remains the key dramatic bridge in coming towards a true understanding of what Kane's theatre set out to achieve. Essentially this was to change, or at the very least question, the interplay between acting technique and the relationship between audience and the actor. *Mad*'s mix of professional actors and people with experience of mental illness comes close to the envisaged 'scenario[s]...of the world beyond the theatre', in Crimp's *Attempts on her Life* where, 'we need to feel / what we're seeing is real / It isn't just acting / It's far more exacting than acting'.²⁷ This legacy from *Mad*, namely a 'rawness' in acting style that stimulates real emotional pain from the performer, has already produced a cliché regarding Kane's work. Dominic Dromgoole calls it,

²³²³ Claire Armitstead, 'No Pain, no Kane', *Guardian*, (29 April 1998).

²⁴²⁴ Morris, 'Brand of Kane', p.145. Using Morris' analogy of Kane's theatre embracing a punk sensibility rather than the literary, it is interesting to note that even John Lydon of *The Sex Pistols* revealed in the 1990s BBC series *Dancing in the Street* (to the disappointment of many old punks no doubt...), that the creation of his alter ego Johnny Rotten was forged by exposure to Shakespeare rather than urban alienation: 'My sources were film, theatre - and [Shakespeare's] *Richard III* really fitted into that brilliantly. [Lawrence] Olivier's performance was outrageously over the top'.

²⁵²⁵ Morris, p.146.

²⁶²⁶ Greig, Introduction, in *Kane, Complete Plays*, p.xv.

²⁷²⁷ Crimp, *Attempts on her Life*, p.19.

‘*sturm und drang* and... savagery’,²⁸ yet mainly through the work of director James Macdonald’s Royal Court productions, beginning with *Cleansed* in 1998, an approach was taken to uncover the ritual, imagery and symbolism that existed beneath its surface brutality. When given the opportunity to restage *Blasted* in 2001 Macdonald took care to accentuate its metaphysical qualities: ‘We did *Blasted* [in 1995] absolutely for real, whereas I now think there’s a way in which one could reach the theatrical language of it’.²⁹

The 2001 Sarah Kane season at the Royal Court also revealed something surprising in regard to the drama’s mutability within different sized theatre spaces. Moving *Blasted* from the Theatre Upstairs and onto the larger main stage accentuated what Ken Urban described as ‘an epic exploration of the social structures of violence’.³⁰ This was in stark contrast to Kenny Miller’s recent Glasgow Citizens production (March, 2002), where its setting in the hot, cramped Studio Theatre provoked entirely a different response from its audience - less measured and distanced, as if they too had become trapped inside the hotel room along with Ian and Cate.

A similar effect was at work when considering the 2000 and 2001 Royal Court productions of *4.48 Psychosis*. The first performances took place in the Theatre Upstairs. At the final line, ‘please open the curtains’ (245), the actors release the window shutters letting in light and sounds from the street outside. Paul Taylor commented that this simple action felt like, ‘watching the final release of a turbulent spirit’.³¹ This sense of something passing is important, for with the entry of the outside world (and perhaps exacerbated by the knowledge that Kane committed suicide after *4.48 Psychosis* was written), it becomes an exorcism of sorts for the audience.

²⁸Dominic Dromgoole, *The Full Room: An A-Z of Contemporary Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 2000), p.163.

²⁹Logan, *Independent on Sunday* (1 April, 2001).

³⁰Urban, ‘An Ethics of Catastrophe,’ p.44.

Contrast this to Weller's *Mad*, where constant exposure, without resolution, to heightened emotion, became a problem for one member of the audience: 'I felt it was very exploitative of the audience in particular. I think theatre is a place for healing, and for troubles to be changed in some way. I don't like to see by curtain call people [the 'actors'] in as much distress as when they started'.

Through the choice of ending Macdonald ensured that the intense emotions that have built up during the performance have somewhere to go. The same effect was used in the 2001 Royal Court production, with the doors of the Theatre Downstairs being opened to let in the sounds of the outside cafe, and while still an intense experience, this move to a larger space seemed (and based entirely on a personal awareness of having seen the play many times), to discourage a purely emotional response from the audience; rather it accentuated more of the rhythms and poetic imagery in the text. However, emotional intensity is undeniably integral to Kane's drama. Aleks Sierz recalls the emotional onslaught he experienced after seeing *Blasted* at the Royal Court in 1995, after which he observed, 'it does make you think, but only after you've got over the shock of seeing it.'³²

Nevertheless, it is also true to say that Kane's work can be tamed. An overly aestheticized approach to the choice of representation in stage images can however dilute the emotional intensity and experiential methodology that seems to underpin all the plays. Edward Bond recalls a 2000 production of *Blasted* at the Colline Theatre in Paris, where he felt style had lost contact with expression:

³¹Paul Taylor, 'A Suicide Note that is Extraordinarily Vital', *Independent* (30 June 2000).

³²Aleks Sierz, *In-yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p.99.

Blasted was stylish... But the story had been slowed down in order to bring it to our attention: this is Brechtian and the opposite of *Accident Time*. For example, the last ten minutes were cut into small snippets [Ian's time alone after being blinded] - half a minute long, surrounded by blackness. Each time the lights came on there was a new image - the man [Ian] in a new pose or doing something new. During the darkness there was a repeated phrase of brass music (it sounded like *Messiah* on a mountain top). The image was isolated and the music commented. Events seemed to happen in a desert that was already laid waste - the act of laying waste was not shown...The Girl [Cate] finished the story by wandering in with a bottle of alcohol as you might see a drunk on a railway station. So the play became a story about three people who had personal problems - probably drugs...Suppose the final images had been strung together, the blind man crawling through debris to find the corpse of the baby to eat some of it - because he was hungry for food or meaning? Then there would be purpose...The play became the story of the destruction of three people: in fact it is a story about the destruction of a world. The comment- supplied by the director: blackness, music, the slowness of action - was perhaps meant to articulate this - but instead limited and restricted it.³³

A similar distancing effect was at play in the 2002 Citizens production of *Blasted* where, somewhat inexplicably, a taped voice intervened from time to time in order to read out stage directions such as '[Ian] *eats the baby*' (p.60). In reference to such attempts to try and stylize actions from the entry of the Soldier, Kane has commented:

Directors frequently think the second half of *Blasted* is a metaphor, dream, nightmare, (that's the word Cate uses), and that it's somehow more abstract than the first half. In a production that works well, I think the first half should seem incredibly real and the second half even more real. Probably by the end we should be wondering if the first half was a dream.³⁴

³³³³ Edward Bond. Letter to Stuart Seide, 16 May 2000. The phrase 'Accident Time' finds its way into Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*: 'In accident time where there are no accidents' (p.230). The term comes from an important new strand in Edward Bond's thinking about theatre practice. Discussion of its implications would merit much further consideration, but briefly Bond describes it as a dramatic device to replace Brecht's 'Alienation Effect': '[Accident Time] is the state of extremity (usually but not necessarily tragic)...in a sense nothing happens in Accident Time - that is, Nothingness happens in it - that in it events are clotted by Nothingness (clotted by the 'fact' of the metaphor)...so we resolve meaning from them - and then we can know how to (begin) to make humanness out of the events of our lives' (Unpublished extract from notebook, 16 November 2000).

³⁴³⁴ Letter to Aleks Sierz, 4th January, 1999.

Just as the intention behind *Mad* is to force an emotional response from its audience, Kane's drama constantly defines its characters (and ultimately its audience) ability to connect and experience genuine human feeling with the world around them. In some cases this is never resolved, as in C's refrain in *Crave*, 'I feel nothing, nothing. I feel nothing.' However, in *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love* it is acts of violence, such as Ian's blinding and sodomy by the Soldier, and the act of Phaedra's suicide that galvanizes an evaluation of what it is to be human.

These actions oppose accusations that Kane's work is essentially nihilistic, fragmented and morbidly introspective. Edward Bond believes that these explorations of the characters' responses to the world carry a wider political dimension. This inability to feel is symptomatic of what Bond calls a *Posthumous* (rather than a Postmodern) *Society*:

I am now a dead person writing to a dead reader (yourself). *This is because we have ceased to create our humanness* [my italics] ...So we are like a bird swooping through the air - it appears to be flying but in fact is dead, and would soon become obvious. We are like people who are brain dead...The brain dead are kept alive by machines. It is, then, as if our species were kept alive by our vast technology. We might continue in some way but we would not be human and so not conscious of being dead.³⁵

One of the speakers in 4.48 *Psychosis* seems all too aware of the paradox between the choice of living in the Posthumous society and living at all: 'Okay, lets do it, let's do the drugs, let's do the chemical lobotomy, let's shut down the higher functions of my brain and perhaps I'll be a bit more fucking capable of living (p.221).

For Bond, the last lines of 4.48 *Psychosis*, 'Please open the curtains'(p.245), despite presaging the speaker's death, for an audience works in two ways: either as a 'sort of treatise about living consciously,³⁶ or a comment upon the Posthumous Society, in that once the curtains are

³⁵³⁵Letter to author, 9 November, 2000.

³⁶³⁶*Ibid*, 27 May 2000.

metaphorically pulled back they reveal the hollowness behind, 'the prosperity, innovation and progress'³⁷ of western capitalism: this is the knowledge which prompts the speaker to embrace Nothingness:

watch me vanish
watch me

vanish

watch me

watch me

watch (p.244).

Yet, this dissipation of self in *4.48 Psychosis* was the culmination of what some commentators felt had been steadily taking place in Kane's work from *Cleansed* onwards - that the plays were increasingly disregarding their audience, and becoming more like the 'private iconography' (p.183) 'M' speaks of in *Crave*. The dramatist Phyllis Nagy elaborates on what for her is an inherent weakness in the last two plays:

As we move through her work, however, we begin to find an absence of character, and sometimes characters are stripped of their identities - literally - and given 'letters' instead of names, for instance. These characters begin to speak into a void. This is what I find somewhat problematic. Because the technique tends to render an audience morally passive. One either cannot or is not required to respond to characters who float in a void. It might be argued, on the other hand, that this lack of specificity, the absence of definition, allows an audience to respond more personally - this could be 'you' or 'me', instead of 'A' or 'B'. However, I do feel that the increasing lack of reference to the world we mutually inhabit - rather than the world she exclusively inhabited - was not necessarily a strength. She was at her formidable best when she paid a great deal of attention to the specifics of place, of setting.³⁸

³⁷Edward Bond. Letter to Stuart Seide, 16 May 2000.

³⁸Interview with author, 17th July 2000.

David Greig summarizes this narrowing of focus as a move ‘from civil war, into the family, into the couple, into the individual and finally into the theatre of psychosis: the mind itself’.³⁹ However, I feel that these observations, while certainly valid overlook certain important ideas and experiments in dramatic form that show Kane to be very much still actively engaging in the real world even up to the seemingly closed off series of experiences we witness in *4.48*

Psychosis.

Kane herself points out that one of the key motivations behind all her drama was ‘to create something beautiful about despair, or out of a feeling of despair, [which is] for me the most hopeful, life-affirming thing a person can do. Because the expression of that despair is part of the struggle against it, the attempt to negate it.’⁴⁰ This battle against the passivity of despair is something that distinguishes Kane’s drama from the later work of Samuel Beckett - a playwright to which both structure and themes in *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* have been compared to.⁴¹ Yet, whereas in a play such as *Rockaby* (1980), the closing line ‘Fuck life’⁴² surrenders passively to the forces of negation Kane rages against them and refuses such an abandonment. Again, there is a tension in the writing between speakers utterances of despair such as in ‘I sing without hope on the boundary,’ (p.214) to outright resistance and anger with the repeated phrase, ‘I REFUSE, I REFUSE. LOOK AWAY FROM ME’ (p.227), and which suggests an ongoing battle against such hopelessness and inertia.

Another factor in the generally held belief that *4.48 Psychosis* represents a retreat into the mind is the knowledge that Kane was suffering from depression, and committed suicide shortly after

³⁹David Greig. Introduction, in *Kane: Complete Plays*, p.xvi.

⁴⁰Letter to Aleks Sierz, 4th January 1999.

⁴¹Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 15th August 1998.

⁴²Samuel Beckett: *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1990), p.442.

the writing it. However, the play is only ever partly introspective in its treatment of mental illness. For the most part it is an impassioned critique of the hospitalization and treatment of those with mental illness, in which the individual is questioned, diagnosed and treated with powerful combinations of antidepressants and anxiolytics as part of a process likened to being 'fattened up, shored up, shoved out,' (p.238). It is interesting in this regard to compare *4.48 Psychosis* to Joe Penhall's *Blue / Orange* which premiered at the National Theatre two months earlier, and despite the gulf in theatrical representation (and Penhall's interest in questions concerning race and power struggles for status and recognition in the profession of psychiatry) , both plays attempt to point out the shortcomings of psychiatric treatment on the individual subject. Here, Kane's use of the individual appeal through ungendered speakers works directly to show the damage inflicted by so called 'cures', whereas Christopher in *Blue / Orange* is used more as a go-between in a complex debate and power struggle over the subjectivity of diagnosis and scramble for academic recognition in the profession of psychiatry. Both plays ultimately speak to us about the treatment of mental illness, but the approach by which Kane is criticised - namely the introspection and disembodiment in her writing - allows the audience to move between the everyday world and also experience some of the intentions outlined in Weller's *Mad*, namely the ravages mental illness can inflict upon its sufferers.

The often cited nihilistic quality in Kane's work in which characters such as Hippolytus in *Phaedra's Love*, or the voices in *Crave* willingly and gratefully embrace death is also taken as another symptom of this tendency for the writing to seal itself off from engagement or offer the possibility for change. Yet, one cannot help but feel this to be an unfair assessment. In the film

Thelma and Louise (1991) the act of deliberate self -annihilation by the two eponymous women have been interpreted as liberating,⁴³ or say the ending of Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971).⁴⁴

David Greig, despite pointing out the closing in that seems to follow in the writing, in turn also seems to be suspicious of this neat interpretation of Kane's drama excluding the audience and reducing itself to a series of splintered fragments. He alternatively puts forward the case that, 'the play's open form allows the audience to enter and recognize themselves within'.⁴⁵ And while Ken Urban points out that *Crave*'s 'multiplicity also creates the uncanny sensation that the text is deeply monologic, the product of a singular, albeit divided self'; he observes that the experimental structure of *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*, where character and setting are made deliberately nebulous, allows the actor and director unlimited scope for performance, 'opening even further... new theatrical visions'.⁴⁶

Ultimately, it is perhaps Kane's willingness to experiment and subvert dramatic form that is her most impressive legacy. Whereas *Look back in Anger*, 'set off a land mine',⁴⁷ Kane went one better in *Blasted* and used to mortar-bomb to literally blow the stage apart. Up until then the play had mimicked a familiar form; namely the archetypal socio-realist Royal Court play passed on from Osborne. James Macdonald summarizes this tradition as, 'driven by a clear political

⁴³ See for instance Manohla Dargis.' *Thelma and Louise* and the Tradition of the Male Road Movie,' in Pam Cook and, Philip Dodd (eds.) *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*. (Philadelphia, Temple Press, 1993), pp 86-92; Lynda Hart,'Til Death do us Part: Impossible Spaces in *Thelma and Louise*.' *Journal Of The History Of Sexuality* 4 (1994), pp 430-46.

⁴⁴ As with *Saved* and *Early Morning* the final gesture of defiance against a mad destructive society seems at first a very small one... [but] *Lear* like *Len* and *Arthur* has learned a great deal and he has attempted to convey his knowledge to others. 'David Hirst, *Edward Bond* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1985), p.140.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.xvii.

⁴⁶ Urban. p.44.

⁴⁷ Alan Stiltoe, 'An Osborne Symposium,' in John Russell Taylor (ed.), *Look Back in Anger: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan Press, 1978), p.185.

agenda, kitted out with signposts indicating meaning, and generally featuring a hefty state-of-the-nation speech somewhere near the end'.⁴⁸ David Edgar, while generally applauding new writing in the 1990s for finding itself a broad idea to explore - namely a critique of masculinity - draws on the *Look Back in Anger* analogy to make a wry comment on the dramatic conservatism within many of these new young writers: 'Superficially, forty years after drama was dragged kicking and screaming from the drawing room into the kitchen, the new generation appears to be dragging it right on back again'.⁴⁹ Peter Morris goes further, and believes that Kane played a cruel trick on the Royal Court's target audience who weren't expecting the wrench into Expressionism during the second half but rather, 'the predictable pseudo-feminist drama that a girl of Sarah Kane's age was supposed to write in order to get staged'.⁵⁰

Whereas at times it seemed that the most onerous stylistic task for a director working on new plays in the 1990s was where to place the sofa or arrange the detritus of the urban squat, Kane's work seemed concern itself with breaking down theatrical boundaries. In a public event at Royal Holloway, University of London in 1998 she commented, 'I write about love almost all of the time. But driving with that there is always a desire to find a new form. To find exactly the right form for the particular story or particular theme'.⁵¹ At the same event she seemed keen to point out that the collapse of realism in *Blasted* had set a stylistic precedent, and also hoped that her current project, *4.48 Psychosis*, would continue the process:

Formally I'm beginning to collapse a few boundaries as well and to carry on with making the formal content one. That's proving extremely difficult, and I'm not going

⁵⁴⁸James Macdonald, 'They never got her.' *Observer* (28 February 1999).

⁶⁴⁹David Edgar, 'Provocative Acts: British Playwriting in the Post-war Era and Beyond', in *State of Play. Issue 1: Playwrights on Playwriting*, (ed.) David Edgar (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 29.

⁷⁵⁰Morris, p.144.

⁸⁵¹'Brief Encounter', Royal Holloway, University of London, 3 November 1998.

to tell any of you how I'm doing it, because if any of you get there first I shall be furious! Whatever I began with *Crave* its going a step further, and for me there's a very clear line from *Blasted*, to *Phaedra's Love*, to *Cleansed*, to *Crave*, and this one is going on through. Where it goes after that I'm not sure.⁵²

Sadly we weren't to know the outcome, but even Mary Luckhurst, who is sceptical about the rapid canonization of Kane's work, 'admire[d] her wilful refusal to be confined by the mundane practicalities of staging. Every play was a call into battle for the actors and a summons to the front-line for the director'. Luckhurst goes on to observe that the final scene in *Blasted* is, 'reminiscent of Artaud's theatre scenarios, themselves notoriously difficult to translate into stage performance', and while she sees this as, 'evidence of an almost ludicrously ambitious project',⁵³ I would argue that this is something to be applauded. While so much new writing in British theatre is content to flatter and reinforce already existing preconceptions about dramatic form, Kane takes up Artaud's call for a theatre that, 'must rebuild itself on a concept of drastic action pushed to the limit'.⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that her work is included in the London's Theatre Museum's Education pack, *Antonin Artaud and His Legacy*,⁵⁵ and a claim could be made (despite Kane's confession that she hadn't encountered Artaud's work until 1997), that certainly within the context of British theatre, her work has sustained and superseded Peter Brook's 1964 Theatre of Cruelty Season at the Royal Shakespeare Company. So far these experiments have been taken as some sort of defining 'benchmark', yet when looking back at the film Brook made of his celebrated production of Peter Weiss's *Marat Sade* (1967), it is easy to come away with

⁹⁵²*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵³Luckhurst, 'An Embarrassment of Riches,' p.73.

¹¹⁵⁴Artaud, *Theatre and its Double*, p.65.

¹²⁵⁵Mal Smith, *Antonin Artaud and his Legacy*: Theatre Museum Education Pack. Date unknown. Other practitioners cited as being influenced by Artaud include Peter Brook, The Living Theatre, Steven Berkoff, Peter Schaffer, Fernando Arrabal and Cultural Industry's *Shockheaded Peter* (1998).

the impression that he was ultimately only toying with the Theatre of Cruelty rather than actively engaging with it: that the grotesque tics and howls of the incarcerated lunatics are merely Artaudian conceits grafted onto what is essentially a Brechtian play.⁵⁶ In contrast, Kane's theatre, and the demands it makes upon emotional reserves and theatrical resources of representation, seems to come closer in feel and spirit to Artaud's manifestos.

Attempting to speculate about a continuing 'legacy' regarding Kane's work is a risky enterprise. Despite the 'tidy master-narrative',⁵⁷ of the plays themselves, whereby *Blasted* begins with two people entering a Leeds hotel room, and *4.48 Psychosis* ends with a ghostly exit, their critical afterlife is far more uncertain.

While Peter Morris somewhat facetiously believes Kane's enduing legacy 'was to convince unhappy twenty-year-olds that theatre wasn't as much a sham and spectacle as everything else the world offers them',⁵⁸ in terms of recent theatre history alone *Blasted* represented a notable landmark. While back in 1995 it certainly became a *reported* media event throughout the British press and a panel discussion on BBC's Newsnight programme, *Blasted* always stubbornly confined itself to being solely a *theatrical event*; truculently and resolutely maintaining its distance from other forms of mass media. John Russell Taylor points out that *Look Back in Anger* only started to attract mass audiences and become a mainstream *event* after an extract was broadcast on television⁵⁹, but it is a significant, and to some extent unique that Kane's reputation sustains itself exclusively within the realm of theatrical performance. While *Look Back in Anger*

13⁵⁶Clive Barker also expresses scepticism about Brook's enterprise. See, 'Tell me when it hurts.' *New Theatre Quarterly*, 46 (Spring 1996), pp.130-5.

14⁵⁷Morris, p.143.

15⁵⁸*Ibid*, p.151.

16⁵⁹ Taylor, *Look Back in Anger: A Casebook*, pp.17-18.

quickly underwent adaptation to become a feature film, Kane gave written instructions shortly before her death that none of her work could ever be adapted into another medium.

From the number of productions taking place abroad, her international reputation as a dramatist continues to grow and mature. In Britain, the recent critical success of Glasgow Citizens revival of *Blasted* in April 2002 promises to do the same, although there is a caveat when speaking about any lasting reputation in this country. While it is pleasing to note that we have been spared a rash of Kane impersonators being unleashed upon our stages, any influence her work might have exerted in actually challenging dramatic form seems to have been largely ignored since her death. The impact of the mortar bomb in *Blasted* was retrospectively more like a firework let off in a milk bottle - confined largely within the parameters of the play itself.

Indeed, much contemporary writing has continued to resemble Jorgen Tesman's slippers from *Hedda Gabler* (1890) - frayed around the edges but comfortable; pleasing to the recipient through their reassuring familiarity. Two recent examples come to mind: Gary Mitchell's *The Force of Change* (2000), and Charlotte Jones' *Humble Boy* (2001).

Both plays have been critical, and in the case of the latter significant commercial successes. Mitchell's play is a thoughtful look at policing in Northern Ireland, yet judging by the dramatic form he chooses - namely television interrogation room drama - one gets the impression that it is actually the forces of non-realism and innovative theatricality, rather than non-sectarian policing practice, that the Royal Ulster Constabulary so trenchantly resist. While Howard Barker evokes the warning in *Fortynine Asides for a Tragic Theatre* that, 'The baying of an audience in pursuit of unity is a sound of despair',⁶⁰ both these plays illustrate this compulsion for the modern

⁶⁰Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, 3rd edn (Manchester: University of Manchester Press 1997), p.17.

dramatist to flatter and confirm their audience's preconceptions: Mitchell, with his *dénouement* borrowed from the police thriller, or Jones' self-consciousness at being a 'well made play,' and *Hamlet*-by-numbers references more than seem to confirm this warning.

In what was possibly the last public discussion of her work in 1998, a member of the audience asked Sarah Kane how she would like to be remembered after her death:

In terms of what happens to my work after I die, it's really got nothing to do with me. I'm not going to be here. I hope people write better plays, I mean that's all I can hope. But I doubt if they will, I mean rubbish has always been produced through the ages; mediocrity has always been praised. That's simply what happens; most significant plays are only really liked in retrospect, with hindsight.⁶¹

While there is the possibility of the dramatist as saboteur, promising to actually bring down the roof (rather than promising it with the *spectacle* of a falling chandelier as in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera*), or the audience to storm the stage (as Kane did when she directed *Phaedra's Love* at the Gate Theatre in 1996), with an angry mob to disembowel turgid musicals or trite plays about people wrestling with their sexuality shows Kane's ability to 'rage correctly' against mediocrity. Surely this a trait to be admired, and ultimately must still provide hope for what Morris calls the, 'faintly irrelevant or faintly doomed enterprise'⁶² of theatre.

¹⁸⁶¹'Brief Encounter'.

¹⁹⁶²Morris, p.143.