



Power and Mental Illness in the Works of Sarah Kane

A thesis submitted by

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*For Sarah,
“O, lift one thought in prayer for S. T. C.;
That he who many a year with toil of breath
Found death in life, may here find life in death!”
Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

Preface

Sarah Kane was one of the most well-known figures in English theatre in the 1990s. She was born in 1971 in Essex, UK. While she studied drama at Bristol University, she wrote three unpublished monologues collectively entitled *Sick*; *Comic Monologue*, *Starved* and *What She Said*. Her first play, *Blasted* debuted at the Royal Court Theatre in 1995 to an uproar of criticism and media furor because of its depiction of violence in the context of war. In 1996, she wrote *Phaedra's Love* and directed its premiere and in 1997 she wrote the script of her only film, *Skin*. Her play *Cleansed* premiered in Royal Court Theatre in 1998 at the same time *Crave* came out at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. She chose to use the pseudonym Marie Kelvedon for *Crave* in an attempt to come out of the shadow of the enfant terrible she was known for since *Blasted*. Her last play, *4.48 Psychosis*, was performed posthumously in 2000. Sarah Kane killed herself in 1999 after struggling with depression.

Kane has been considered a representative of the 1990s in-her-face theatre wave owing to her portrayal of scenes of violence including cannibalism and rape. Though she rejected this categorisation, she is featured in Aleks Sierz' book and website about in-her-face theatre (*In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* 2000, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*). Sierz' work marks the earliest literary criticism of Kane. He puts her plays among the provocative plays which garnered controversy throughout the 20th century. It focuses on productions of her first three plays, critical reactions to them and Kane's subsequent

commentary. He examines Kane's language, and her use of symbolism. He also sheds light on how the form delivers meaning just like the content.

The second major criticism of Kane is Graham Saunders' *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*. The work provides background information on the state of British Drama in the 1990s and places Kane among writers of her generation who portrayed extreme violence and shocking material and language. Saunders also sheds light on Sarah Kane's influences whether personal, literary, musical or journalistic. He describes the structure and unique imagery of the plays and includes conversations with directors and actors who were involved in Kane's work. They give first-hand information on how some theatrical props were put to use and their effect on the audience.

Helen Iball dedicates her book *Sarah Kane's Blasted* to Kane's first and most controversial play. Iball first gives a social, economic and political background to Kane's play. She points out that the Balkan wars and the rise and fall of Margaret Thatcher are pivotal economic and political backdrops to the play. On the social and cultural arena, Iball explains how *Blasted* is a major representative of the in-yr-face style of theatre. She states that by 2008, the in-yr-face culture had receded.

Iball also analyses the characters, the themes and influences on the play. She pays as much attention to form as to content, stating that stage directions are not merely for the purpose of punctuation. For example, the numerous blackouts that occur throughout the play reveal that a matter of major influence

happened in between the scenes. Iball then gives an account of the production history of the play on the British stage, citing interviews she made with directors and actors. She explains how new meanings have been delivered in various performances. For example, *Blasted* was once performed by handicapped actors, and the actor who played the role of the Soldier had no legs, but still had power over the physically capable Ian. Moreover, Iball states that Kane's play is prophetic, given the changing political conditions in Britain and USA. Audiences who saw the play performed in 2005 were less shocked and tended to relate it to the September 11 attacks and the July 2005 London underground blasts. Lastly, the book gives directions to students who would like to stage the play. Iball urges them to consider the tone of some of the key statements of the play, and whether some actions can be acted or even mimed.

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In his article "An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane", playwright and critic Ken Urban explains that Sarah Kane as well as her generation of the 1990s playwrights adopted the theories of Howard Barker on a 'theatre of catastrophe'. In his *Arguments for a Theatre*, Barker urges playwrights to abandon 'journalistic' theatre which is characterised by rational debate and to focus instead on pain and human catastrophe.

Urban presents brief reviews of Kane's plays. He argues that good and evil in their absolute senses are not clear cut and that there is no definite moral standing. All characters are simultaneously victims and perpetrators, and Kane deliberately challenges many binary oppositions. Even as they commit

gruesome acts, the perpetrators are then shown to have a soft side. As for the structural aspects of the play, Urban points out how Kane presents the first part of *Blasted* in a realistic form, then suddenly she blasts the theatre as well as the audience's expectations. He also quotes Kane saying that form is crucial in the delivery of meaning, and it is precisely this aspect of her work that outraged the critics. In *Cleansed*, he describes how the stage directions are almost as many as the dramatic lines. This gives a wide space to invent forms of presentation. He also notes that the powerful actions presented in Kane's plays turn to imagery in *Crave* where it is also made evident how difficult it is to label the characters as good or evil based on lines they say or on images.

The four works are similar in how they analyse different methods of performances of Kane's works. The relations of power, violence and mental illness are briefly referred to but not in relation to one another. As in Iball's book, she examines how featuring actors with physical disabilities was significant in demonstrating the relations of power but not mental illness. This is the gap that this thesis aims to fulfill. Power and mental illness have been dealt with separately and briefly in previous literature but not in relation to one another.

Sarah Kane employs a multitude of theatrical devices. She delivers the meaning using not only speech but also various actions. Theatre critic Ruby Cohn notes that "Sarah Kane's five plays ... divide into two radically different theatre styles, which imply two different architectures. *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love*

and *Cleansed* come under the first type of structure, with extremes of cruelty, while *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* are built upon verbal devices of all kind” (“Architect of Drama”). Sarah Kane deploys visual and acoustic signs, gesture, movement, facial expression, metaphor, symbol, ambiguous characters, linguistic signs and above all extreme forms of violence to deliver meaning. So far, literature review on Kane has focused on the brutality and explicit content in her work and the subsequent critical acclaim or attack. This thesis instead places violence, verbal and physical, among the wider context of theatrical signs used to delineate both an attempt to exercise power and a sign of being mentally ill. Therefore, the semiotic approach is the method used to analyse her plays.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter I: Political Theatre and the Rise of In-Yer-Face Theatre highlights the political plays in contemporary British theatre. Of particular importance is the emergence of ‘in-yer-face theatre’. The 1990s was a decade of opportunities and marked liberty after years of Thatcherism. This liberty was reflected on the British theatre as young playwrights used provocative methods in their plays.

Chapter II: ““Gun was born here and won’t die”: Power in the Plays of Sarah Kane’ depicts how power relations are presented in the plays. Michel Foucault’s writings on power serve as the ideological background of this chapter. Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and his essay “The Subject and Power” (*Power* 326) provide a framework for analysing power relations. For example, Panopticism which Foucault argues is employed

as a disciplinary method in various institutions is used in *Cleansed* as a means of exercising power.

Chapter III: ““My bones had been removed”: Mental Illness and violence in the Plays of Sarah Kane’ highlights the recurrent signs which show mental illness, whether stated or not. Textbooks on abnormal psychology and scholarly articles, periodicals and websites are used as the theoretical framework. Violence is examined in this chapter as an abnormal behaviour. Finally, the conclusion shows a cause and effect relation between the relations of power and mental illness, especially whether mental illness puts the characters in the position of victim or perpetrator.

Chapter I: Political Theatre and the Rise of In-Yer-Face Theatre

Sarah Kane explored political as well as personal themes in her plays using extreme theatrical images and language. However, she was not the first playwright in Britain to cause major controversy. Many playwrights voiced dissent through the theatre and used it as a medium for political criticism. This introductory chapter traces the main concerns of British political theatre in modern and contemporary times. Furthermore, it highlights the representation of violence and taboos in 20th century British drama.

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Although Sarah Kane's *Blasted* has been particularly referred to as representative of a new wave of confrontational plays in the 1990s, Aleks Sierz argues that provocation has deeper roots. He chronicles the "history of provocation" throughout the 20th century and contemporary British drama. Key figures who challenged Victorian and early modern mores and were in opposition to the past included George Bernard Shaw. Shaw is most renowned for his plays but he was also a dedicated Socialist and egalitarian. According to Christopher Innes, his lecture "The Quintessence of Ibsenism", where he uses the works of Henrik Ibsen to criticise British Society, "marks a watershed between traditionalism and new politicized forms of drama" (3). Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912), aroused controversy. Eliza Doolittle's language amused audiences but angered puritanical, Victorian-minded reviewers, to the extent where some bishops urged that the play should be banned (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 13).

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In addition to Sierz, Amelia-Howe Kritzer provides an overview of political theatre in Britain throughout the 20th century. What she considers political theatre is a theatre which raises political awareness and represents social phenomena which are considered to be political. It is a theatre whose subjects and forms challenge political power and open the door for its reinterpretation.

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Kritzer states that the rise of modernism in the late 19th century was marked by the production of some notable political plays in Europe, such as Gerhard Hauptmann's *The Weavers* (1892) which exposed the poor working conditions in a German district and the subsequent revolt of the workers. The play set the momentum for what critic Neil Blackadder termed "the theatre of opposition". He stated that this theatre sought to entice the spectators into reacting by confronting them with then-taboo subjects and techniques including mild nudity and explicit language (Kritzer 14).

Opposition was often voiced in political plays and it aroused controversy in many ways. According to the Licensing Act of 1737, all plays should be reviewed by the Lord Chamberlain before being staged. However, both playwrights and theatre producers continuously came up with methods to get round the Lord Chamberlain's strict rules, which included banning of swearwords, nudity, religious blasphemy or unfavourable references to the royal family. As a reaction to the Lord Chamberlain's inhibitions, some theatres were turned to private clubs where tickets were only sold to a select audience.