

Chapter 8

The Body's Cruel Joke: The Comic Theatre of Sarah Kane

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Take as representative these three moments from the plays of Sarah Kane:

In *Blasted* (1995), a journalist named Ian undergoes atrocities to rival those found in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. In a bombed-out hotel room in Leeds, an unnamed soldier rapes Ian, then sucks out the journalist's eyes and eats them. Ian, blind and driven by hunger, unearths a baby's corpse from the floorboards and feasts on the remains. Having sated himself, he decides to take the baby's place in the ground. He lowers himself into the hole until only his head protrudes from the grave. Just when Ian hopes to die 'with relief', 'it starts to rain on him'. To this final indignation, Ian exclaims, 'Shit' (60).¹

In the chaotic crowd scene that ends *Phaedra's Love* (1996), Kane's adaptation of Seneca, Theseus unknowingly rapes and murders his stepdaughter Strophe, while an angry mob cuts off the penis of his son Hippolytus, who stands accused of raping his stepmother Phaedra. Oblivious to his own hypocrisy, Theseus joins the crowd in disembowelling his son Hippolytus, but then realizes the identity of the woman he murdered. Theseus asks God's forgiveness before slitting his throat. Hippolytus observes the carnage around him and just before a vulture descends to make a meal of him, he delivers the play's final line, 'If there could have been more moments like this' (103).

Tinker, the central character of *Cleansed* (1998), tortures Rod and Carl, a gay couple interned in a university-turned-prison. In an attempt

to test their love, Tinker forces Rod to watch his lover lose first his tongue, then his hands, and then finally his feet. But this is not enough for Tinker. His final act is to remove Carl's penis and then graft it onto a woman's body in a perverse sex-change operation. The beneficiary of this surgery wakes up only to be told by Tinker, 'I'm sorry. I'm not really a doctor' (146).

Acts such as these are barely imaginable, and picturing such incidents on the stage is perversely even more difficult, for they come close to exceeding what theatre is capable of representing. Such graphic moments are not merely a hallmark of Kane's work. Explicit violence is one of the common features of the new writing scene that emerged in London during the 1990s with playwrights such as Mark Ravenhill, Martin McDonagh and Anthony Neilson. Rather than an anomaly, the 1995 production of Kane's first play *Blasted* at the Royal Court retrospectively became *the* defining moment of a new aesthetic in British theatre. Though initially dubbed the 'New Brutalists' or 'Nihilists', Kane's generation would be best known as the purveyors of 'in-yer-face' theatre, thanks to Aleks Sierz, who championed their work.²

Kane's career was brief, her canon small: five plays and one screen-play; but since her suicide in 1999, many critics and artists claim that her work altered the landscape of British drama.³ Her work is never usually described as funny, and given the above descriptions, it is not hard to see why.⁴ While her final two plays (1998's *Crave* and 4.48 *Psychosis*, posthumously produced in 2000) are driven by language, not narrative or spectacle, the bleakness of their worldview is equally punishing, the violence residing in images created by the text. However, this chapter argues that the comic plays a central role in Kane's aesthetic project. One of her earliest pieces, *Comic Monologue* (first staged in Bristol and Edinburgh in 1991), was about a woman who is orally raped by her date, Kevin. Though Kane would dismiss these early monologues as 'juvenilia', *Comic Monologue's* juxtaposition of suffering and humour sets the tone for her plays.⁵

A moment of gallows humour follows a startling incident of rape or mutilation in Kane's work. In phenomenological terms, humour brackets the violence for the viewer, forcing a reassessment of that violence, not as a release from the intensity of the spectacle, but as a reinforcement of its spectacular power. In Kane's theatre, the laugh is as important as the gasp. Yet the laughter that a Kane play fosters, to quote one reviewer of *Cleansed*, leaves 'silent cracks in a battered

disfigured face' (Peter 1998). In other words, it is an experience that reminds us that laughing can hurt. Kane's brand of comedy demonstrates the relationship between comedy and the body, reaffirming the cruelty at the heart of the humour. But rather than dramatizing hopelessness or cynicism, as her detractors have claimed, Kane's plays stage the body's cruel joke, and in doing so, demonstrate the possibilities of an ethics grounded in materiality.

The 'Incongruity Theory of Humour'

Originating in the eighteenth century and elaborated in the writings of Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer and Søren Kierkegaard, the 'incongruity theory of humour' remains a pervasive account of what makes us laugh.⁶ This theory finds humour emerging from the disparity between our own expectations, our understanding of the world, and what the joke or gag forces us to imagine or consider. Comedy, therefore, is the art of defamiliarization. Defined by Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky as art's ability 'to create a special perception of [an] object', defamiliarization challenges our perception of the world (1965: 18). The technique of defamiliarization makes the known 'unfamiliar' and 'difficult', and this process allows us to see things in an unexpected way (1965: 12). Comedy thrives on unmooring assumptions. When we expect an air of solemnity, and instead get the stink of the fart; when we expect a light-hearted chat, and instead get a vivid description of a mass murder; when we expect serious investigative reporting, and instead hear a question about political hairstyles: frustrated expectations breed comedy.

You don't have to look far in Kane's work to find the humour of incongruity. The opening line of her first play features Ian walking into a 'very expensive hotel room in Leeds' and remarking to his companion Cate, 'I've shat in better places than this' (3). In *Phaedra's Love*, Strophe tells the portly Hippolytus that his stepmother Phaedra has accused him of rape. His response: 'A rapist. Better than a fat boy who fucks' (88). In *Cleansed*, when the tortured lover Carl has his hands cut off by the faux-doctor Tinker, the stage directions read: 'Carl tries to pick up his hands – he can't, he has no hands' (129). Even in her (arguably) bleakest play, 4.48 *Psychosis*, the depressive narrator relays a comic dream: 'I went to the doctor's and she gave me eight minutes to live. I'd been sitting in the fucking waiting room

half an hour' (221). These defamiliarizing moves create laughs even in the darkest of scenarios.

The Humour of the Illogical

Kane's plays demonstrate a fondness for the logic of the illogical. What appears to be a choice is not a choice at all; what appears to be common sense is completely nonsensical. Yet because of the characters' extreme circumstances, the statements appear completely rational to the speaker, but to the audience, the lines produce a smile, a chuckle, even a laugh. For instance, after the soldier violates him, the blind Ian tells Cate, '[If I] Don't shoot myself I'll starve to death' (54). Speaker A in *Crave*, a probable paedophile, tells the underage object of his affection, 'Only love can save me and love has destroyed me' (174). In *4.48 Psychosis*, the patient who seeks treatment for her depression concedes the absurdity of her mental state: 'I have become so depressed by the fact of my own mortality that I have decided to commit suicide' (207). These paradoxes of false choices and illogical logic are distilled in Grace's memorable line to her dead brother in *Cleansed*, 'Love me or kill me, Graham' (120).

The extreme situations of these characters – Ian's ravaged body, A's desire for a young girl, the patient's psychosis, Grace's need for her dead brother – force logic to an illogical end. For Ian, nothing can save him, so his choices are death by gunshot or starvation. For A, the means of his salvation bring destruction. For the patient, a fear of death culminates in a wish for death. And for Grace, her brother reciprocates with either love or death.

Kane's detractors may concede a humorous pithiness to her writing, but their principal criticism does not focus on her perceived lack of humour, but rather her lack of hope. In the face of catastrophe, Kane renders her characters devoid of options; they are doomed, critics contend, and this is especially true for her female characters. In the case of Grace, for instance, the object of her desire is an impossible one, and therefore, her sole option is destruction. If political theatre, following playwright David Greig's formulation, must present an audience with the possibility of change, Kane's critics find that by exploring such extreme states, her work denies any possibilities for change.⁷ That argument, however, fails to see Kane's use of humour as part of a larger authorial strategy that produces laughter in painful moments to do more than confound expectations. In these plays,

humour crucially emerges from physical cruelty; it is the body that it is at centre of Kane's comic tendencies.

The Body in Comedy

The body as a subject of humour has a long and illustrious history. From Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* to Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, from François Rabelais and his *Gargantua* to the creators of *South Park* and their cartoon creations, the abject body remains a source of amusement. Even Samuel Beckett, the writer most often named as Kane's significant literary precursor, enjoyed humour of the bodily variety. The title character of Beckett's 1951 novel *Molloy*, for example, consistently confuses a woman's vagina and anus. Of his mother, Molloy says, it is she 'who brought me into this world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct. First taste of the shit' (1955: 6). Here, birth becomes excretion and life a flavour most foul. Age, however, does not improve Molloy's understanding of the female anatomy. During intercourse with a woman who is named either Ruth or Edith, Molloy realizes she has 'a hole between her legs, oh not the bunghole [he] had always imagined, but a slit', and after a series of awkward fumbings, Molloy exclaims, 'Perhaps after all she put me in her rectum. [...] Perhaps she too is a man' (1955: 56–7). To Beckett's protagonist, a hole is a hole, and understanding the biological differences between male and female is, at best, unlikely, at worst, impossible.

What humour does in a moment like that of Beckett's novel is deflate the high with the low. It undermines the idealized domain of the intangible by juxtaposing it with the grotesque truths of the body. In *Molloy*, Beckett subverts his protagonist's elevated discourse with materiality, one's grand introduction conflated with 'shit', one's lover reduced to a confusing choice of orifices. Philosopher Simon Critchley calls this comic strategy 'the return of the physical into the metaphysical' and for him, 'humour functions by exploring the gap between *being* a body and *having* a body' (2002: 43). If material reality is the state of 'being a body', then 'having a body' is the projection of metaphysical or extra-physical qualities onto that body. Laughter, in Critchley's formulation, comes when 'the pretended tragical sublimity of the human collapses into a comic ridiculousness which is perhaps even more tragic' (2002: 43). In short, when the body's 'baseness' topples the 'deep' abstractions of metaphysics, tragic laughter erupts.

While some theorists see our love of laughing at the body as liberatory, most famously Mikhail Bakhtin in his concept of the carnivalesque, Critchley's formulation is more telling in that it reveals the comic's anti-metaphysical tendencies and its ethical implications. While metaphysics imagines an escape from the material world, comedy refutes that possibility; it returns us to the realm of the physical, reminding us that this is all there is. This is not to say humour quashes that desire to transcend, but that the comic bursts the bubble of that delusion, if only momentarily. That is the wisdom that humour brings: the 'body' that dreams of Spirit is really the body that shits.

Cruelty and the Comic

Lest we confuse the faecal with the radical, humour unseats metaphysics from its lofty perch through cruelty. Humour always has an object; a joke always has a butt. The humour of Beckett, Rabelais and Chaucer, and the humour of racists, xenophobes and homophobes, both share an obsession with the body. While the intentions might be vastly different, the means are the same: the cruel undermining of the target. Philosopher Henri Bergson, in his classic 1900 essay *Laughter*, defines humour as rigidity and repetition. A person transformed into a thing produces laughter. When the athlete becomes a human football, or when an office worker acts like a calculator with legs, we laugh. But comedy for Bergson, and this is an overlooked aspect of his argument, has as its methodological impulse cruelty. 'Comedy can only begin', Bergson writes, 'at the point where our neighbor's personality ceases to affect us. It begins, in fact, with what might be called a growing callousness to social life' (1999: 121). He argues that laughter intends 'to humiliate', to make 'a painful impression' on its target: 'It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness' (1999: 176). While laughter can be affirmative, serving as a 'corrective' for a social ill, his theory also illuminates that other kind of laughter, that of the powerful taking aim at the powerless: when white laughs at black, native mocks foreigner, straight demeans gay. In both types of laughter, comedy is born of cruelty.

Bergson's theory complements Critchley's notion of humour as 'the return of the physical' by illuminating laughter's unmasking of the metaphysical as cruel in its intention. Cruelty is typically understood as the wilful causing of pain. But Antonin Artaud's body of writings

demonstrates cruelty's potential as both an aesthetic and an ethic. Cruelty, for Artaud, is the force that violently awakens consciousness to a truth that has remained unseen or unspoken, or wilfully repressed. It is with Artaud and Bergson in mind that philosopher Clément Rosset argues that 'cruelty is in every case a mark of distinction', but only when 'we understand cruelty not as pleasure taken in cultivating suffering but as a refusal of complacency toward any object' (1993: 18).⁸ Cruelty, in this Artaudian sense, is rigour: the refusal to look away, no matter the pain that it causes to others or the self.

When humour returns the stink of the physical to the realm of the metaphysical, it produces a laugh and a sting. The object feels the wind being knocked from its sails, and this is true even when the tellers of the joke themselves are the intended targets. When the joke is on us, we are reminded, sometimes violently, that who we think we are and who we are is not the same thing. The joke's cruelty not only punctures our carefully maintained veneer; it makes us aware of the insurmountable gap between perception and reality. Regardless of humour's object, in returning the physical to the metaphysical, laughter diminishes us all, for materiality is finite, weak and ultimately failing. If the 'body' that dreams of Spirit is really the body that shits, then it is ultimately the body that ceases to be. The body's cruel joke, it appears, is on all of us.

Ethical Possibilities

The telling of the body's cruel joke – that reminder of life's finitude created when materiality levels metaphysics – is at the heart of Kane's comic theatre. Humour brackets moments of extreme violence, the onstage body in pain commingling with the laughing bodies of the audience, but it is a humour that allows no release. It does not relieve us of the pain, but rather intensifies it. This is the ethical turn in her work, which makes a space for change.

Ultimately, Kane's critics are correct: her work is not political (and by extension, not feminist) in any traditional sense. No programme is espoused; no solutions are proposed. Characters do not represent any clear divide between good and evil, victim and victimizer; there is no clear message, no commitment to a specific goal. A 'pure' political theatre – assuming there is such a thing – would be aligned with morality, while Kane's plays represent an ethical theatre. Ethics must

be understood as opposed to morality's interpretation of the world. Gilles Deleuze makes the distinction between the two concepts this way: 'The difference is that morality presents us with a series of constraining rules of a special sort, ones that judge actions and intentions by considering them in relation to transcendent values (this is good, that's bad . . .); ethics is a set of optional rules that assess what we do, what we say, in relation to the ways of existing involved' (Deleuze 1995: 100; see also Deleuze 1988). While morality is aligned with law, and actions are evaluated by a set of metaphysical ideals, ethics is contextual; its 'optional rules' assess actions in relation to the here and now, to the material set of circumstances in which we find ourselves.

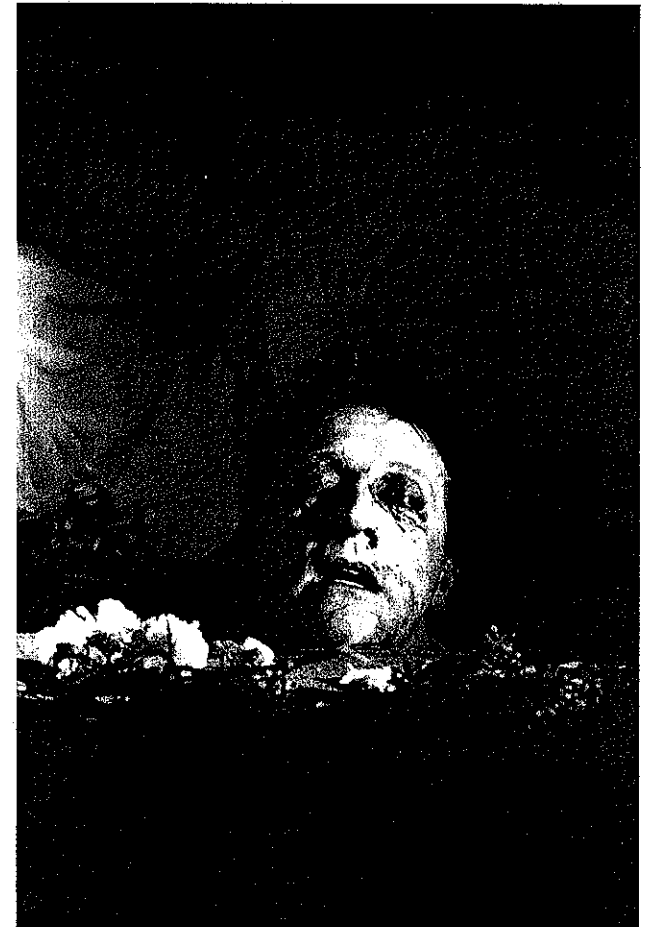
The political activist and philosopher Alain Badiou refines Deleuze's distinction by arguing forcefully that ethics can never be understood in universal terms. Instead, 'there is', he writes, 'only the ethic-of (of politics, of love, of science, of art)' (2001: 28). For Badiou, the maxim that best encapsulates ethics is, 'Do all that you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance', which he shortens to, 'Keep going!' (2001: 47, 52). It is a call that echoes Beckett's famous dictum, 'You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on' (1955: 414).

When understood in this light, the possibility of reading Kane's humour as ethical becomes clearer: In *Blasted* and *Cleansed*, the two plays that make up her abandoned trilogy,⁹ Kane's comedy forcefully asserts its ethical possibilities. Witnessing the body's cruel undermining of metaphysics in these two plays dramatizes an ethics in the face of catastrophe.

Blasted

The genesis and development of *Blasted* had three significant phases. First, it began as a play about a rape in Leeds. Ian takes a mentally troubled young girl, Cate, to a hotel. Ian and Cate's ongoing relationship is founded in abuse. During the first two scenes, Ian attempts, first by words and then by deeds, to force Cate into having sex with him. Ultimately, Ian rapes Cate, and the morning after, she flees the hotel.

During the early stages of writing the play, Kane watched the genocide in Bosnia unfold on the evening news and wanted the play to confront that horror.¹⁰ The play's domestic conflict, Kane decided, must take on an international hue. A Serbian soldier named Vladek breaks into the hotel room, taking Ian prisoner at gunpoint. In the 1993 drafts of the play, when the soldier enters, the hotel exists in



Neil Dudgeon as Ian in the 2001 revival of *Blasted* at the Royal Court Theatre

Photo: Courtesy of the Royal Court

two spaces concurrently: home (Leeds) and abroad (Serbia). Vladek derides Ian, 'This is a Serbian town now. Where is your passport? [. . .] You are an Englishman, a journalist, staying in a foreign hotel and you do not have a passport?'¹¹ To demonstrate his disgust for the English journalist, Vladek urinates on the bed, at which point a 'huge explosion' rocks the room.

However, when *Blasted* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in January 1995, the play had undergone a crucial change. The soldier is no longer called Vladek; in fact, he is never given a proper name. When he breaks into the hotel, instead of designating the nationality of the invading troops, he simply tells Ian, 'Our town now', and that 'our' is never defined except in so far that is definitively not 'English'. While descriptions of the violent conflict conjure images of the Bosnian genocide, Kane stripped all identifiable ethnic designations from the play. When the 'huge explosion' bombs the room out of existence, a force not defined by any nation or state has invaded Leeds. The play's setting is now a metaphorical third space, both Leeds and Serbia, while crucially neither. No longer domestic or international, *Blasted* becomes an allegory about masculinity and violence.

The play's transformation – from a defined location into an indefinite transitional space – affects how the audience views the events of the play both before and after the explosion. The play's first rape, when Ian forces Cate to acquiesce to sex, initially appears individuated: one man's cruel act against a woman. The soldier's rape of Ian, where he sodomizes Ian and then repeats the act using Ian's own revolver, is rendered symbolic, a representation of the violence occurring outside the hotel room. The soldier tells Ian what soldiers did to his girlfriend Col, and then re-enacts that violation on Ian's body. The repetition of rape – the description of Col's rape by soldiers, the staging of Ian's rape by the soldier, which is then repeated using the gun – transforms individual acts into allegorical symbols, Ian's rape standing in for all the genocidal events described by the soldier. Ian's violated body becomes the means by which the atrocities occurring outside become visible. The soldier teases Ian after his violation: 'Can't get tragic about your [own] arse' (50). What is tragic, however, is how the singular represents the multiple. The consequence of the metaphorization of Ian's rape is that Cate's rape earlier in the play retrospectively becomes symbolic: part and parcel of the same violent causal chain.

What *Blasted* does is articulate the coherence between individualized acts of rape and strategic programmes of war. Kane stated in an interview: 'What does a common rape in Leeds have to do with mass rape in Bosnia?' And the answer appears to be 'Quite a lot' (Stephenson and Langridge 1997: 131). And this is a statement that she extended elsewhere: 'The logical conclusion of the attitude that produces an isolated rape in England is the rape camps in Bosnia, and the logical

conclusion to the way society expects men to behave is war' (quoted in Sellar 1996: 34). In this view, violence is omnipresent and the play suggests that a culture that sanctions mass murder abroad inevitably allows crimes of rape to occur at home.

Humour punctuates the wounding of bodies in *Blasted*, for even in this nightmare, Cate and Ian still tell jokes. The soldier eats Ian's eyes and then kills himself. But Ian is not left alone. Cate returns to the remnants of the hotel room, carrying a crying baby that a woman gave her. The now-blind Ian begs Cate to give him the soldier's gun so he can finish the job that the soldier began. Cate, however, informs Ian, 'It's wrong to kill yourself' because 'God wouldn't like it.' Ian's reply: 'No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing' (55). To Ian, God is no more real than the fundamentalist fantasies of a C. S. Lewis novel. Cate and Ian's theological back-and-forth continues with Cate claiming God is necessary for life to have meaning, while Ian takes the Enlightenment high road, arguing that 'everything's got a scientific explanation' (56). It is the classic dispute between religion and science, but the body undercuts the solemnity of this 'Is There A God' debate.

In the 2001 revival of the play at the Royal Court, actor Neil Dudgeon's Ian made his case for science as his eye sockets bled, while Cate's plea for metaphysics was undercut by a hungry baby's loud cries, Kelly Reilly delivered her lines as she paced around the damaged hotel room, desperately looking for sustenance for the infant. Given the dire circumstances, how could God's existence even matter?

The audience's laughter came at the debate's conclusion. Cate gives in to Ian's request. Ian puts the gun in his mouth, but in a rare instance of good manners, he removes the gun and tells Cate, 'Don't stand behind me' (56). A beat. Then laughter. The tragedy of a man committing suicide is underscored by the bloody realities of blowing your head off. If Cate stood behind Ian, she would find herself getting very messy; the physical undermines the metaphysical. But there will be no blood, no gore. Ian pulls the trigger and it only clicks, empty of bullets. A satisfied Cate tells Ian, 'Fate, see. You're not meant to do it. God –' (57). But if metaphysics appears to have scored a victory, the audience is in on a joke that Ian literally can't see. Cate herself took the bullets out of the gun, her faith in God's plan not so steadfast. Upon hearing Cate invoke God, Ian hurls the gun and yells, 'The cunt' (57). Again, laughter. But just as the empty gun hits the floor, Cate realizes the baby has died in her arms. And in that moment, laughter ceases, giving way to tragedy. If the truth of the body reasserts

itself first to produce humour, it then serves as a reminder of the body's ultimate truth: its eventual demise.

Blasted does not end with the baby's death. There is still one final joke to tell. Cate buries the baby and leaves Ian in a quest for food. Now alone, Ian pursues a final solution to his pain. He devours the baby's corpse and then climbs into the grave. Ian's suffering is not yet complete:

*He dies with relief.
It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.
Eventually.
Ian: Shit. (60)*

Poor Ian can never find peace. The laughter here comes from the combination of the visual (rain disturbing Ian's repose) and the verbal (Ian's expletive). But it is an uncertain moment: is Ian dead? The stage direction reads: 'he dies with relief . . . eventually'. On the page, the rain appears to have interrupted that eventuality. In performance, Ian's status is even less clear. In the 2001 revival, Ian let out a final groan, as if he was finally passing on, but nothing in the physical reality of the space – the lighting, sound or set – connoted a transition from one world to another.

This lack of clarity in text and production suggests that it does not, in fact, matter whether Ian is alive or dead: 'Punish me or rescue me makes no difference', Ian earlier told Cate (54). If Cate is vindicated, and there is an afterlife, then Ian's discovery is that it is no better than this world. In death, people are still hungry; people still get wet. If he remains alive, his chance of finally dying 'with relief' has been thwarted by a simple act of nature. In either case, Ian's rain-soaked head uttering 'shit' produces laughs. Metaphysical comfort is again squashed by the reality of bodily discomfort.

Cleansed

Kane's next play for the Royal Court, 1998's *Cleansed*, exceeds the spectacular horrors of her first play. Set in a university which functions as a concentration camp, the play charts Tinker's violent subjugation of those interned within its perimeter fence. The hints of naturalism found in *Blasted* are abandoned completely. The characters of *Cleansed* use a language that is flint-like in its starkness, making

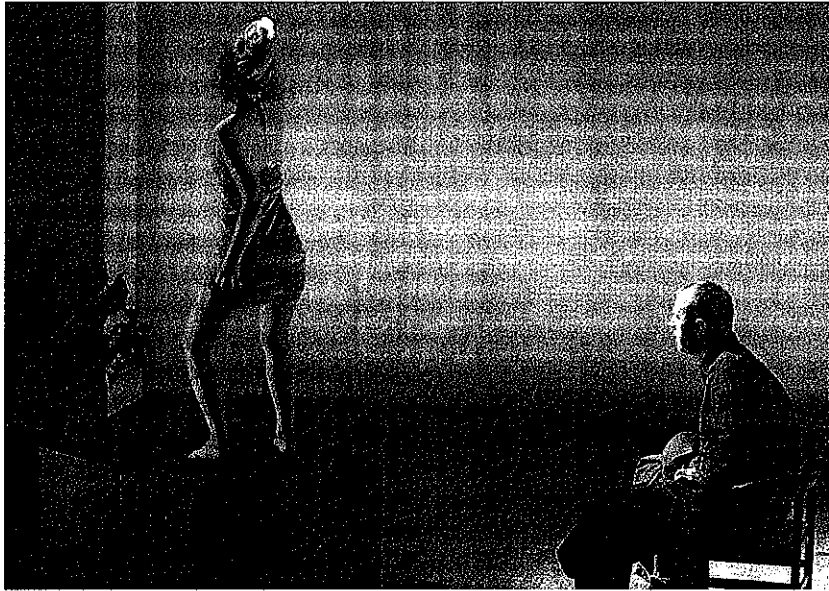


Richard Toth as Tinker and Scott Blumenthal as Carl in *Cleansed* directed by Ken Urban

Photo: Tom Nick Cocotos

individual lines open to endless interpretation and allowing for little verifiable back-story. Stage directions almost outnumber the lines of dialogue. One of the reviewers of James Macdonald's original production said, 'Half the time the play could be an installation in an art gallery' (Benedict 1998).

In the play's 20 scenes, Tinker takes over the role of university guardian following fellow inmate Graham's fatal overdose. He uses that newfound power on the inmates: Rod and Carl, two men who express their love for each other on the college greens; Grace, who has come to retrieve the belongings of her dead brother Graham; and a young boy, Robin, who can neither write nor read. In between administering bodily punishments to these four people, Tinker masturbates before a nameless stripper who performs for him in the university sports hall now converted into peep-show booths. Only in these moments can Tinker express any affection or compassion, and



Carrie Keranen as the Woman and Richard Toth as Tinker in *Cleansed*
 directed by Ken Urban
 Photo: Tom Nick Cocotos

given the circumstances, these scenes take on humorous tones. To the woman peddling her wares behind a partition, Tinker implores, 'I'll be anything you need. [. . .] Please. I won't let you down' (122), but when the audience last saw Tinker, he cut off the tongue of one of the inmates. The juxtaposition of brutality and cliché defamiliarizes Tinker, transforming him into the executioner who wants to be loved. Yet his sentimental longings reveal Tinker to be as trapped as the inmates that he tortures. Tinker's shifting roles in the institution suggest a degree of mobility. Throughout the play, he appears as a drug dealer, as the doctor in charge of the university sanatorium, and as the head torturer controlling an unseen death squad. But despite these positions of authority, the joke is on Tinker. He can take on any role at the university except the one he wants most: the lover whose love is reciprocated.

What Tinker *is* capable of doing is testing the limits of the inmates. In the case of Rod and Carl, Tinker witnesses the lovers exchanging rings as a sign of love. Carl tells Rod, 'I'll always love you', and

though Rod takes a more cynical view of relationships – 'Anyone you can think of, someone somewhere got bored with fucking them' – the pair seal the exchange with a kiss (110–12). Tinker tests the veracity of the lovers' bond through fanatical acts of torture. Carl, after being beaten and sodomized by a pole, betrays Rod, crying out for Tinker to kill Rod, not him. Tinker spares Rod, but cuts off Carl's tongue. Carl tries to apologize to Rod for his betrayal, but with every attempt, Tinker further mutilates Carl: when Carl writes a message to Rod in the mud, Tinker cuts off his hands; when Carl performs a dance of love for Rod, Tinker cuts off his feet. The piling up of Carl's body parts becomes almost comical, and in fact, the culmination of this bodily defilement is laughter, for when Carl's feet are cut off, Rod's response is to laugh. If Bergson locates laughter's origin in the humorist's 'growing callousness to social life', Kane suggests that laughter is born out of life's growing callousness. In the case of Rod, the sheer excess of bodily defilement pushes Rod out of his body and he is transformed into a 'cold' observer, looking down at the sheer ridiculousness of it all. He experiences what Bergson calls 'a momentary aesthesia of the heart' (1999: 11). Unable to stop the escalating violence, Rod can only laugh at it.

With Grace, Kane shows a different side of Tinker's violent megalomania. Tinker wants to honour Grace's desire for Graham, but in literalizing her wishes, he ravages her body as he does Carl's. Grace arrives at the university, demanding to see her dead brother's clothes, but after putting them on, she breaks down and tells Tinker that she is staying and that he should treat her as a patient. Grace desires her brother to such a degree that Graham appears to her as a spectral presence. She consummates her incestuous desire, but the metaphysical comfort that Grace finds in her male half is rendered abject when Tinker literalizes her wishes. Tinker perceives Grace's desire for her brother as a wish to be him physically. Tinker castrates Carl and grafts his penis onto Grace's body. As she 'touches her stitched-on genitals', Tinker tells Grace, 'Nice looking lad. Like your brother. I hope you – What you wanted. [. . .] I'm sorry I'm not really a doctor' (145–6). The brutal joke is not only the obviousness of Tinker's statement, for no sane doctor would behave as Tinker has, but also the sincerity of Tinker's apology. Kane pushes Tinker's twisted logic to its conclusion: Tinker gives Grace what she wanted, for she has become her brother. Only looking at Grace's mutilated body, listening to her struggle to spit out that she 'felt it', does Tinker realize he might have been wrong. Again there is laughter, which is then silenced when Carl awakes, emitting 'a silent scream' of pain.

Despite the physical tortures depicted in the storylines of Rod, Carl and Grace, the play's cruellest scene, in fact, perhaps, the cruellest scene of Kane's canon, is saved for the young boy Robin. Grace has been teaching Robin to write and count, and Robin has fallen in love with her. Tinker's jealousy and sexual frustration cause him to lash out at the boy. In scene 15, Tinker holds a knife to Robin's throat, demanding to know if Robin has succeeded where he has failed. 'You fuck her', he asks, 'Fuck her till her nose bleed?' But what gets the audience to laugh is Tinker's next line: 'I may be a cunt but I'm not a twat' (139). In colloquial British use, 'cunt' is a rough expression for 'asshole' or 'jerk', while 'twat' is a stronger form of 'idiot' or 'moron'. What Tinker is saying is, I might be a horrible bastard, but don't, Robin, think me a fool. However, the terms Tinker uses are both shocking slang terms for the female genitalia. That Tinker in a moment of extreme anger attempts such linguistic precision in his invective is funny, but humour also arises from the context. Robin cannot respond to Tinker's claim; there is a knife pressed to his throat.

The humour of this moment also serves as a mirror for Tinker's misogyny. The desire for Grace that pains Tinker to such violent extremes reveals itself as both an identification with, and a repulsion from, women: I am a cunt, Tinker proclaims, but then he undermines that identification by contrasting it with something altogether lower, a twat, seemingly indifferent that both terms represent an unflattering synecdoche for the female sex. Tinker's conundrum is that the thing he desires and the thing he wants to destroy are one and the same, and that internal conflict expresses itself as inhumane cruelty to others. But in this moment, that cruelty is rendered comical.

Yet, if Tinker's line invites laughter, it does so only to accentuate the cruelty that follows. Tinker discovers the box of chocolates that Robin has bought for Grace, and Tinker forces Robin to eat every single chocolate in the box. Tinker tosses the chocolates to Robin like a dog, and Robin obediently eats every piece, gulping down the sweets as he cries, distraught as his gift to Grace is turned into the means of his humiliation. In the original 1998 script, Kane specifies that Robin needs to eat 12 chocolates, but in the revision that she made to her play before her death, she included another laugh and a gasp: there is another layer of chocolates hidden underneath the first.

What makes the scene so difficult is that it is real and it is lengthy. Unlike the cutting off of the tongue, hands and feet, unlike the sex and masturbation, this act is actually occurring on stage. There is no way to 'fake it'.¹² As a director and occasional actor herself, Kane

was undoubtedly aware of this fact. Reading it on the page does not prepare you for the scene's duration. Methodically, Tinker dispenses the 24 chocolates until nothing remains of Robin's gift. He must eat them all so that there is no possibility of a generous act, so that literally nothing remains for Robin to give. Crucially this scene concludes with a joke. Forced to gorge himself on chocolate, Robin pisses himself. Tinker forces Robin's face in the mess and then instructs him to burn all the books that Grace was using to instruct him. When Grace enters and sees the fire, Robin smiles and explains the scene this way, 'Sorry. I was cold' (141). Robin reduces his torture to a simple bodily need for warmth. But humour again gives way to tragedy. Grace is oblivious to the irony of Robin's statement; she has just undergone electroshock therapy and bits of her brain have been burnt out.

The 'Dianoetic Laugh', or 'the Laugh of Laughs'

As I have argued, the comic is an integral component to Kane's work, humour and violence working in tandem to increase the play's impact on an audience. The laughter produced in an audience becomes a place where the larger ethical possibilities of her plays emerge. But Kane purposefully puts perhaps the cruellest, perhaps most liberating laughter in the mouths of her characters.

In *Blasted*, Cate is prone to fits. Early in the play, when Ian is aggressive with her, Cate stutters and, much to Ian's horror, blacks out. During these episodes, Cate 'bursts out laughing, unnaturally, hysterically, uncontrollably', eventually 'com[ing] around as if waking up in the morning' (9). This happens twice, but Cate has no memory of these moments, comparing the sensation to both an orgasm and what she imagines death feels like. When the baby dies in her arms near the play's end, her response is again to burst into laughter. Kane again describes the sound: 'unnatural', 'hysterical' and 'uncontrollable'. This outburst, like the eating of the chocolates, is lengthy, the stage direction reading, 'She laughs and laughs and laughs and laughs and laughs' (57). Again, in performance, it is about duration, the sheer volume and length of the laughter. Cate is fully awake, not as she was in the earlier spells; she has not fainted or had an episode. Here, she laughs knowing she is laughing. It is her response to the loss of the baby, indeed, to her situation in the world.

In *Cleansed*, when Rod watches Tinker remove Carl's feet, Rod responds with laughter. In performance, it is startling to see Rod's response since it first appears so cruel. But in context, given the extremity of the situation, it is impossible to imagine what other response Rod could have at this point.

The sound of Rod laughing as Carl lies helpless, another means of communication stripped from him; the sound of Cate laughing as she holds the dead baby, unable to stop herself: this is a specific kind of laughter. The laughs that Kane's work induces in an audience stick in the throat, no sooner uttered than silenced by shock. We laugh at Tinker's jokes to Grace and Robin, or Ian's frustration at being rained on, but we grow quiet in the violence that follows. Cate and Rod's laughter, by contrast, is uncontained. This is laughter laughing at the world's futility, laughter laughing at the revelation of life's finitude, laughter laughing at the cruellest of jokes; this is, in short, laughter laughing at laughter itself. Beckett calls this the 'dianoetic laugh'. 'It is the laugh of laughs', Beckett writes in his 1953 novel *Watt*, 'the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy' (1953: 48).¹³ In this 'laugh of laughs', laughter becomes the affirmation of nothingness. The audience, however, does not laugh at these moments; the incongruity of a man laughing at his lover's pain or a woman laughing at the dead baby in her arms does not make us smile. For the audience, these are the plays' most tragic moments, for these moments teach us that laughing is, in fact, a cruel matter. In those moments when we witness the laugh that laughs at unhappiness, comedy's cruel ethics is revealed to us in all its anti-metaphysical glory. The world is meaningless. The only response is to laugh. And, of course, to keep going.

Conclusion: Fuck Saint Sarah

Kane's suicide at the young age of 28 casts a long shadow on our understanding of her work. This painful fact coupled with her rapid introduction into the canon of 'important writers' has led to a somewhat monochromatic portrait of her plays, where her pain authenticates or validates her work. Her early death leaves just a canon of five plays and one screenplay. That work can easily ossify under the burden of an 'accepted' reading, particularly when that locates profundity in relationship to biography (Iball 2005; Luckhurst 2005).

I fear transforming Sarah into a saint. Saints are precious, their words, holy; they are venerated to the point of being untouchable,

imprisoned in halos that cut them off from the rest of the living and the dead. But what is most odious about saints is their lack of humour. If there is anything funny about saints, it is that they are too earnest to find anything funny. Sarah was not, is not, and should never be a saint. Works for the stage must be grappled with, fought with and reimagined; they cannot be directed or interpreted with the reverence once reserved for scripture. Perhaps by considering the comic elements of her plays, we can return a sense of humour to our image of a writer who is sadly no longer alive to remind us of it herself. 'Perhaps I know best', Nietzsche wrote in a note from 1855, 'why man alone laughs; he alone suffers so deeply that he *had* to invent laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy of animals is, as fitting, the most cheerful' (1968: 91). Nietzsche's statement, I think, is one with which Kane would cheerfully agree.

Notes

- 1 All quotations from Sarah Kane's plays are taken from *Complete Plays* (2001).
- 2 See Sierz (2000). For an alternative reading of 1990s British theatre and culture, see Urban (2004).
- 3 For examples of positive appraisals of Kane's work, see Ravenhill (2005), Rebellato (1999), Saunders (2002, 2003) and Urban (2001).
- 4 In production sometimes, there can be humour, but it is often of the unintentional variety, coming from a more literal-minded execution of Kane's nearly impossible stage directions, the most infamous perhaps being the rats in *Cleansed* which are supposed to eat a severed hand and carry away feet. Rats, as German director Peter Zadek learned, cannot be trained to carry out such feats.
- 5 Mel Kenyon, Kane's agent, told Graham Saunders that Kane saw the 'very early monologues' as 'juvenilia', and following Kane's wishes, the estate has been steadfast that these monologues (*Comic Monologue, Starved, What She Said*) not be performed or published. See 'Conversation with Mel Kenyon' in Saunders (2002: 143–53).
- 6 See Morreall (1987) and Critchley (2002: esp. 2–6).
- 7 For David Greig's assertion about political theatre, see Edgar (1999: 66). For examples of this criticism of Kane's work, see 'Conversation with Phyllis Nagy' in Saunders (2002: 154–62) and Wandor (2001: 232–7).
- 8 While Rosset never mentions Artaud by name – a reading of Nietzsche is his prime concern – his understanding of cruelty owes a sizeable debt to Artaud's writings. See Artaud (1958).

- 9 The third play of the trilogy focused on nuclear war and had the working title of *Viva Death*. Kane finished a first draft of the play, but then abandoned it.
- 10 In Kane's words: 'I'd been doing it [working on *Blasted*] for a few days and I switched on the news one night while I was having a break from writing, and there was a very old woman's face in Srebrenica just weeping and looking into the camera and saying – "please, please, somebody help us, because we need the UN to come here and help us". I thought this is absolutely terrible and I'm writing this ridiculous play about two people in a room. What's the point of carrying on?' Quoted in Saunders (2002: 38–9).
- 11 Kane began *Blasted* during her year on the MA in playwriting at Birmingham University and the play's first two scenes were given a workshop presentation at the end of the course. There are two 1993 drafts of the play: one draft was used for the rehearsals and the workshop performance, while the other one contains a number of corrections in Kane's handwriting. While there are differences between the two, in both versions, the soldier is named Vladek and he refers to Leeds as a 'Serbian town'. My thanks to Graham Saunders for making these materials available to me.
- 12 It could be argued that an actor could hide the chocolates in some way, and that the scene could occur without the actor actually eating them, but that, I would argue, defeats the power of the scene. This moment is about the physical ingesting of the chocolates – the audience's witnessing of both Robin and the actor playing Robin eating the sweets – and the duration of that event. When I directed the play, we attempted to stage the moment in a way that Victor Villar-Hauser, the actor playing Robin, didn't need to eat all the chocolates. But we quickly learned the scene did not work if we 'cheated'. Just as 'body art' or radical performance art requires the performer to undergo the experience on stage, so it is for the actor playing Robin in *Cleansed*. The power of this scene on stage was brought home to us when an audience member fainted during the eating of the chocolates.
- 13 Critchley (2002) makes much of Beckett's notion of laughter.

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Chapter 9

Physical Theatre: Complicite and the Question of Authority

Helen Freshwater

'Physical theatre' is a notoriously problematic term, and resistance to its application has grown despite – or perhaps because of – its frequent use by critics, commentators and practitioners, and its regular appearances in programmes, listings, reviews and critical commentary in the media since the mid-1980s. Even companies such as DV8 (whose director, Lloyd Newson, claimed that they were 'one of the first groups in Britain to call their work physical theatre') have distanced themselves from the phrase, declaring that overuse has rendered it meaningless (Giannachi and Luckhurst 1999: 109). Others argue that it has been reduced to a marketing tool (Murray 2003: 34). This ubiquity is not matched by similarly extensive coverage in published academic analysis, though there is a slowly growing field of scholarly engagement with the form. As a result there are many questions left to answer about its development in Britain and its relationship to continental European, American and eastern traditions; the influence of contemporary international practices and training; and the links between the numerous companies whose work has been labelled physical theatre.¹ This chapter aims to explore some of the issues which are raised by the critical response to these practices through a reading of the work of Théâtre de Complicité, or Complicite, as they are now known. First, however, it is necessary to examine what we do know about this kind of work, and to assess some of the challenges which attend its analysis.